CHAPTER V

THE BEAU

Throttle-Ha'penny worked fitfully through the winter, and in the spring broke down. By this time James Houghton had a pathetic, childish look which touched the hearts of Alvina and Miss Pinnegar. They began to treat him with a certain feminine indulgence, as he fluttered round, agitated and bewildered. He was like a bird that has flown into a room and is exhausted, enfeebled by its attempts to fly through the false freedom of the window-glass. Sometimes he would sit moping in a corner, with his head under his wing. But Miss Pinnegar chased him forth, like the stealthy cat she was, chased him up to the work-room to consider some detail of work, chased him into the shop to turn over the old débris of the stock. At one time he showed the alarming symptom of brooding over his wife's death. Miss Pinnegar was thoroughly scared. But she was not inventive. It was left to Alvina to suggest: "Why doesn't father let the shop, and some of the house?"

Let the shop! Let the last inch of frontage on the street! James thought of it. Let the shop! Permit the name of Houghton to disappear from the list of tradesmen? Withdraw? Disappear? Become a nameless nobody, occupying obscure premises?

He thought about it. And thinking about it, became so indignant at the thought that he pulled his scattered energies together within his frail frame. And then he came out with the most original of all his schemes. Manchester House was to be fitted up as a boarding-house for the better classes, and was to make a fortune catering for the needs of these gentry, who had now nowhere to go. Yes, Manchester House should be fitted up as a sort of quiet family hotel for the better classes. The shop should be turned into an elegant hall-entrance, carpeted, with a hall-porter and a wide plate-glass door, round-arched, in the round arch of which the words: "Manchester House" should appear large and distinguished, making an arch also, whilst underneath, more refined and smaller, should show the words: "Private Hotel." James was to be proprietor and secretary, keeping the books and attending to correspondence: Miss Pinnegar was to be manageress, superintending the servants and directing the house, whilst Alvina was to occupy the equivocal position of "hostess." She was to shake hands with the guests: she was to play the piano, and she was to nurse the sick. For in the prospectus James would include: "Trained nurse always on the premises."

"Why!" cried Miss Pinnegar, for once brutally and angrily hostile to him: "You'll make it sound like a private lunatic asylum."

"Will you explain why?" answered James tartly.

For himself, he was enraptured with the scheme. He began to tot up

ideas and expenses. There would be the handsome entrance and hall: there would be an extension of the kitchen and scullery: there would be an installing of new hot-water and sanitary arrangements: there would be a light lift-arrangment from the kitchen: there would be a

handsome glazed balcony or loggia or terrace on the first floor at the back, over the whole length of the back-yard. This loggia would give a wonderful outlook to the south-west and the west. In the immediate foreground, to be sure, would be the yard of the livery-stables and the rather slummy dwellings of the colliers, sloping downhill. But these could be easily overlooked, for the eye would instinctively wander across the green and shallow valley, to the long upslope opposite, showing the Manor set in its clump of trees, and farms and haystacks pleasantly dotted, and moderately far off coal-mines with twinkling headstocks and narrow railwaylines crossing the arable fields, and heaps of burning slag. The balcony or covered terrace--James settled down at last to the word terrace--was to be one of the features of the house: the feature. It was to be fitted up as a sort of elegant lounging restaurant. Elegant teas, at two-and-six per head, and elegant suppers, at five shillings without wine, were to be served here.

As a teetotaller and a man of ascetic views, James, in his first shallow moments, before he thought about it, assumed that his house should be entirely non-alcoholic. A temperance house! Already he winced. We all know what a provincial Temperance Hotel is. Besides,

there is magic in the sound of wine. Wines Served. The legend attracted him immensely--as a teetotaller, it had a mysterious, hypnotic influence. He must have wines. He knew nothing about them. But Alfred Swayn, from the Liquor Vaults, would put him in the running in five minutes.

It was most curious to see Miss Pinnegar turtle up at the mention of this scheme. When first it was disclosed to her, her colour came up like a turkey's in a flush of indignant anger.

"It's ridiculous. It's just ridiculous!" she blurted, bridling and ducking her head and turning aside, like an indignant turkey.

"Ridiculous! Why? Will you explain why!" retorted James, turtling also.

"It's absolutely ridiculous!" she repeated, unable to do more than splutter.

"Well, we'll see," said James, rising to superiority.

And again he began to dart absorbedly about, like a bird building a nest. Miss Pinnegar watched him with a sort of sullen fury. She went to the shop door to peep out after him. She saw him slip into the Liquor Vaults, and she came back to announce to Alvina:

"He's taken to drink!"

"Drink?" said Alvina.

"That's what it is," said Miss Pinnegar vindictively. "Drink!"

Alvina sank down and laughed till she was weak. It all seemed really too funny to her--too funny.

"I can't see what it is to laugh at," said Miss Pinnegar. "Disgraceful--it's disgraceful! But I'm not going to stop to be made a fool of. I shall be no manageress, I tell you. It's absolutely ridiculous. Who does he think will come to the place? He's out of his mind--and it's drink; that's what it is! Going into the Liquor Vaults at ten o'clock in the morning! That's where he gets his ideas--out of whiskey--or brandy! But he's not going to make a fool of me--"

"Oh dear!" sighed Alvina, laughing herself into composure and a little weariness. "I know it's perfectly ridiculous. We shall have to stop him."

"I've said all I can say," blurted Miss Pinnegar.

As soon as James came in to a meal, the two women attacked him.

"But father," said Alvina, "there'll be nobody to come."

"Plenty of people--plenty of people," said her father. "Look at The Shakespeare's Head, in Knarborough."

"Knarborough! Is this Knarborough!" blurted Miss Pinnegar. "Where are the business men here? Where are the foreigners coming here for business, where's our lace-trade and our stocking-trade?"

"There are business men," said James. "And there are ladies."

"Who," retorted Miss Pinnegar, "is going to give half-a-crown for a tea? They expect tea and bread-and-butter for fourpence, and cake for sixpence, and apricots or pineapple for ninepence, and ham-and-tongue for a shilling, and fried ham and eggs and jam and cake as much as they can eat for one-and-two. If they expect a knife-and-fork tea for a shilling, what are you going to give them for half-a-crown?"

"I know what I shall offer," said James. "And we may make it two shillings." Through his mind flitted the idea of 1/11-1/2--but he rejected it. "You don't realize that I'm catering for a higher class of custom--"

"But there isn't any higher class in Woodhouse, father," said Alvina, unable to restrain a laugh.

"If you create a supply you create a demand," he retorted.

"But how can you create a supply of better class people?" asked Alvina mockingly.

James took on his refined, abstracted look, as if he were preoccupied on higher planes. It was the look of an obstinate little boy who poses on the side of the angels--or so the women saw it.

Miss Pinnegar was prepared to combat him now by sheer weight of opposition. She would pitch her dead negative will obstinately against him. She would not speak to him, she would not observe his presence, she was stone deaf and stone blind: there was no James. This nettled him. And she miscalculated him. He merely took another circuit, and rose another flight higher on the spiral of his spiritual egotism. He believed himself finely and sacredly in the right, that he was frustrated by lower beings, above whom it was his duty to rise, to soar. So he soared to serene heights, and his Private Hotel seemed a celestial injunction, an erection on a higher plane.

He saw the architect: and then, with his plans and schemes, he saw the builder and contractor. The builder gave an estimate of six or seven hundred--but James had better see the plumber and fitter who was going to instal the new hot water and sanitary system. James was

a little dashed. He had calculated much less. Having only a few hundred pounds in possession after Throttle-Ha'penny, he was prepared to mortgage Manchester House if he could keep in hand a sufficent sum of money for the running of his establishment for a year. He knew he would have to sacrifice Miss Pinnegar's work-room. He knew, and he feared Miss Pinnegar's violent and unmitigated hostility. Still--his obstinate spirit rose--he was quite prepared to risk everything on this last throw.

Miss Allsop, daughter of the builder, called to see Alvina. The Allsops were great Chapel people, and Cassie Allsop was one of the old maids. She was thin and nipped and wistful looking, about forty-two years old. In private, she was tyrannously exacting with the servants, and spiteful, rather mean with her motherless nieces. But in public she had this nipped, wistful look.

Alvina was surprised by this visit. When she found Miss Allsop at the back door, all her inherent hostility awoke.

"Oh, is it you, Miss Allsop! Will you come in."

They sat in the middle room, the common living room of the house.

"I called," said Miss Allsop, coming to the point at once, and speaking in her Sunday-school-teacher voice, "to ask you if you know about this Private Hotel scheme of your father's?"

"Yes," said Alvina.

"Oh, you do! Well, we wondered. Mr. Houghton came to father about the building alterations yesterday. They'll be awfully expensive."

"Will they?" said Alvina, making big, mocking eyes.

"Yes, very. What do you think of the scheme?"

"I?--well--!" Alvina hesitated, then broke into a laugh. "To tell the truth I haven't thought much about it at all."

"Well I think you should," said Miss Allsop severely. "Father's sure it won't pay--and it will cost I don't know how much. It is bound to be a dead loss. And your father's getting on. You'll be left stranded in the world without a penny to bless yourself with. I think it's an awful outlook for you."

"Do you?" said Alvina.

Here she was, with a bang, planked upon the shelf among the old maids.

"Oh, I do. Sincerely! I should do all I could to prevent him, if I were you."

Miss Allsop took her departure. Alvina felt herself jolted in her mood. An old maid along with Cassie Allsop!--and James Houghton fooling about with the last bit of money, mortgaging Manchester House up to the hilt. Alvina sank in a kind of weary mortification, in which her peculiar obstinacy persisted devilishly and spitefully. "Oh well, so be it," said her spirit vindictively. "Let the meagre, mean, despicable fate fulfil itself." Her old anger against her father arose again.

Arthur Witham, the plumber, came in with James Houghton to examine the house. Arthur Witham was also one of the Chapel men--as had been his common, interfering, uneducated father before him. The father had left each of his sons a fair little sum of money, which Arthur, the eldest, had already increased ten-fold. He was sly and slow and uneducated also, and spoke with a broad accent. But he was not bad-looking, a tight fellow with big blue eyes, who aspired to keep his "h's" in the right place, and would have been a gentleman if he could.

Against her usual habit, Alvina joined the plumber and her father in the scullery. Arthur Witham saluted her with some respect. She liked his blue eyes and tight figure. He was keen and sly in business, very watchful, and slow to commit himself. Now he poked and peered and crept under the sink. Alvina watched him half disappear--she handed him a candle--and she laughed to herself seeing his tight,

well-shaped hind-quarters protruding from under the sink like the wrong end of a dog from a kennel. He was keen after money, was Arthur--and bossy, creeping slyly after his own self-importance and power. He wanted power--and he would creep quietly after it till he got it: as much as he was capable of. His "h's" were a barbed-wire fence and entanglement, preventing his unlimited progress.

He emerged from under the sink, and they went to the kitchen and afterwards upstairs. Alvina followed them persistently, but a little aloof, and silent. When the tour of inspection was almost over, she said innocently:

"Won't it cost a great deal?"

Arthur Witham slowly shook his head. Then he looked at her. She smiled rather archly into his eyes.

"It won't be done for nothing," he said, looking at her again.

"We can go into that later," said James, leading off the plumber.

"Good morning, Miss Houghton," said Arthur Witham.

"Good morning, Mr. Witham," replied Alvina brightly.

But she lingered in the background, and as Arthur Witham was going

she heard him say: "Well, I'll work it out, Mr. Houghton. I'll work it out, and let you know tonight. I'll get the figures by tonight."

The younger man's tone was a little off-hand, just a little supercilious with her father, she thought. James's star was setting.

In the afternoon, directly after dinner, Alvina went out. She entered the shop, where sheets of lead and tins of paint and putty stood about, varied by sheets of glass and fancy paper. Lottie Witham, Arthur's wife, appeared. She was a woman of thirty-five, a bit of a shrew, with social ambitions and no children.

"Is Mr. Witham in?" said Alvina.

Mrs. Witham eyed her.

"I'll see," she answered, and she left the shop.

Presently Arthur entered, in his shirt-sleeves: rather attractive-looking.

"I don't know what you'll think of me, and what I've come for," said Alvina, with hurried amiability. Arthur lifted his blue eyes to her, and Mrs. Witham appeared in the background, in the inner doorway.

"Why, what is it?" said Arthur stolidly.

"Make it as dear as you can, for father," said Alvina, laughing nervously.

Arthur's blue eyes rested on her face. Mrs. Witham advanced into the shop.

"Why? What's that for?" asked Lottie Witham shrewdly.

Alvina turned to the woman.

"Don't say anything," she said. "But we don't want father to go on with this scheme. It's bound to fail. And Miss Pinnegar and I can't have anything to do with it anyway. I shall go away."

"It's bound to fail," said Arthur Witham stolidly.

"And father has no money, I'm sure," said Alvina.

Lottie Witham eyed the thin, nervous face of Alvina. For some reason, she liked her. And of course, Alvina was considered a lady in Woodhouse. That was what it had come to, with James's declining fortunes: she was merely considered a lady. The consideration was no longer indisputable.

"Shall you come in a minute?" said Lottie Witham, lifting the flap

of the counter. It was a rare and bold stroke on Mrs. Witham's part. Alvina's immediate instinct was to refuse. But she liked Arthur Witham, in his shirt sleeves.

"Well--I must be back in a minute," she said, as she entered the embrasure of the counter. She felt as if she were really venturing on new ground. She was led into the new drawing-room, done in new peacock-and-bronze brocade furniture, with gilt and brass and white walls. This was the Withams' new house, and Lottie was proud of it. The two women had a short confidential chat. Arthur lingered in the doorway a while, then went away.

Alvina did not really like Lottie Witham. Yet the other woman was sharp and shrewd in the uptake, and for some reason she fancied Alvina. So she was invited to tea at Manchester House.

After this, so many difficulties rose up in James Houghton's way that he was worried almost out of his life. His two women left him alone. Outside difficulties multiplied on him till he abandoned his scheme--he was simply driven out of it by untoward circumstances.

Lottie Witham came to tea, and was shown over Manchester House. She had no opinion at all of Manchester House--wouldn't hang a cat in such a gloomy hole. Still, she was rather impressed by the sense of superiority.

"Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed as she stood in Alvina's bedroom, and looked at the enormous furniture, the lofty tableland of the bed.

"Oh my goodness! I wouldn't sleep in that for a trifle, by myself! Aren't you frightened out of your life? Even if I had Arthur at one side of me, I should be that frightened on the other side I shouldn't know what to do. Do you sleep here by yourself?"

"Yes," said Alvina laughing. "I haven't got an Arthur, even for one side."

"Oh, my word, you'd want a husband on both sides, in that bed," said Lottie Witham.

Alvina was asked back to tea--on Wednesday afternoon, closing day. Arthur was there to tea--very ill at ease and feeling as if his hands were swollen. Alvina got on better with his wife, who watched closely to learn from her guest the secret of repose. The indefinable repose and inevitability of a lady--even of a lady who is nervous and agitated--this was the problem which occupied Lottie's shrewd and active, but lower-class mind. She even did not resent Alvina's laughing attempts to draw out the clumsy Arthur: because Alvina was a lady, and her tactics must be studied.

Alvina really liked Arthur, and thought a good deal about

him--heaven knows why. He and Lottie were quite happy together, and he was absorbed in his petty ambitions. In his limited way, he was invincibly ambitious. He would end by making a sufficient fortune, and by being a town councillor and a J.P. But beyond Woodhouse he did not exist. Why then should Alvina be attracted by him? Perhaps because of his "closeness," and his secret determinedness.

When she met him in the street she would stop him--though he was always busy--and make him exchange a few words with her. And when she had tea at his house, she would try to rouse his attention. But though he looked at her, steadily, with his blue eyes, from under his long lashes, still, she knew, he looked at her objectively. He never conceived any connection with her whatsoever.

It was Lottie who had a scheming mind. In the family of three brothers there was one--not black sheep, but white. There was one who was climbing out, to be a gentleman. This was Albert, the second brother. He had been a school-teacher in Woodhouse: had gone out to South Africa and occupied a post in a sort of Grammar School in one of the cities of Cape Colony. He had accumulated some money, to add to his patrimony. Now he was in England, at Oxford, where he would take his belated degree. When he had got his degree, he would return to South Africa to become head of his school, at seven hundred a year.

Albert was thirty-two years old, and unmarried. Lottie was

determined he should take back to the Cape a suitable wife: presumably Alvina. He spent his vacations in Woodhouse--and he was only in his first year at Oxford. Well now, what could be more suitable--a young man at Oxford, a young lady in Woodhouse. Lottie told Alvina all about him, and Alvina was quite excited to meet him. She imagined him a taller, more fascinating, educated Arthur.

For the fear of being an old maid, the fear of her own virginity was really gaining on Alvina. There was a terrible sombre futility, nothingness, in Manchester House. She was twenty-six years old. Her life was utterly barren now Miss Frost had gone. She was shabby and penniless, a mere household drudge: for James begrudged even a girl to help in the kitchen. She was looking faded and worn. Panic, the terrible and deadly panic which overcomes so many unmarried women at about the age of thirty, was beginning to overcome her. She would not care about marriage, if even she had a lover. But some sort of terror hunted her to the search of a lover. She would become loose, she would become a prostitute, she said to herself, rather than die off like Cassie Allsop and the rest, wither slowly and ignominiously and hideously on the tree. She would rather kill herself.

But it needs a certain natural gift to become a loose woman or a prostitute. If you haven't got the qualities which attract loose men, what are you to do? Supposing it isn't in your nature to attract loose and promiscuous men! Why, then you can't be a

prostitute, if you try your head off: nor even a loose woman. Since willing won't do it. It requires a second party to come to an agreement.

Therefore all Alvina's desperate and profligate schemes and ideas fell to nought before the inexorable in her nature. And the inexorable in her nature was highly exclusive and selective, an inevitable negation of looseness or prostitution. Hence men were afraid of her--of her power, once they had committed themselves. She would involve and lead a man on, she would destroy him rather than not get of him what she wanted. And what she wanted was something serious and risky. Not mere marriage--oh dear no! But a profound and dangerous inter-relationship. As well ask the paddlers in the small surf of passion to plunge themselves into the heaving gulf of mid-ocean. Bah, with their trousers turned up to their knees it was enough for them to wet their toes in the dangerous sea. They were having nothing to do with such desperate nereids as Alvina.

She had cast her mind on Arthur. Truly ridiculous. But there was something compact and energetic and wilful about him that she magnified ten-fold and so obtained, imaginatively, an attractive lover. She brooded her days shabbily away in Manchester House, busy with housework drudgery. Since the collapse of Throttle-Ha'penny, James Houghton had become so stingy that it was like an inflammation in him. A silver sixpence had a pale and celestial radiance which he could not forego, a nebulous whiteness which made him feel he had

heaven in his hold. How then could he let it go. Even a brown penny seemed alive and pulsing with mysterious blood, potent, magical. He loved the flock of his busy pennies, in the shop, as if they had been divine bees bringing him sustenance from the infinite. But the pennies he saw dribbling away in household expenses troubled him acutely, as if they were live things leaving his fold. It was a constant struggle to get from him enough money for necessities.

And so the household diet became meagre in the extreme, the coal was eked out inch by inch, and when Alvina must have her boots mended she must draw on her own little stock of money. For James Houghton had the impudence to make her an allowance of two shillings a week. She was very angry. Yet her anger was of that dangerous, half-ironical sort which wears away its subject and has no outward effect. A feeling of half-bitter mockery kept her going. In the ponderous, rather sordid nullity of Manchester House she became shadowy and absorbed, absorbed in nothing in particular, yet absorbed. She was always more or less busy: and certainly there was always something to be done, whether she did it or not.

The shop was opened once a week, on Friday evenings. James Houghton prowled round the warehouses in Knarborough and picked up job lots of stuff, with which he replenished his shabby window. But his heart was not in the business. Mere tenacity made him hover on with it.

In midsummer Albert Witham came to Woodhouse, and Alvina was invited

to tea. She was very much excited. All the time imagining Albert a taller, finer Arthur, she had abstained from actually fixing her mind upon this latter little man. Picture her disappointment when she found Albert quite unattractive. He was tall and thin and brittle, with a pale, rather dry, flattish face, and with curious pale eyes. His impression was one of uncanny flatness, something like a lemon sole. Curiously flat and fish-like he was, one might have imagined his backbone to be spread like the backbone of a sole or a plaice. His teeth were sound, but rather large and yellowish and flat. A most curious person.

He spoke in a slightly mouthing way, not well bred in spite of Oxford. There was a distinct Woodhouse twang. He would never be a gentleman if he lived for ever. Yet he was not ordinary. Really an odd fish: quite interesting, if one could get over the feeling that one was looking at him through the glass wall of an aquarium: that most horrifying of all boundaries between two worlds. In an aquarium fish seem to come smiling broadly to the doorway, and there to stand talking to one, in a mouthing fashion, awful to behold. For one hears no sound from all their mouthing and staring conversation. Now although Albert Witham had a good strong voice, which rang like water among rocks in her ear, still she seemed never to hear a word he was saying. He smiled down at her and fixed her and swayed his head, and said quite original things, really. For he was a genuine odd fish. And yet she seemed to hear no sound, no word from him: nothing came to her. Perhaps as a matter of fact fish do actually

pronounce streams of watery words, to which we, with our aerial-resonant ears, are deaf for ever.

The odd thing was that this odd fish seemed from the very first to imagine she had accepted him as a follower. And he was quite prepared to follow. Nay, from the very first moment he was smiling on her with a sort of complacent delight--compassionate, one might almost say--as if there was a full understanding between them. If only she could have got into the right state of mind, she would really rather have liked him. He smiled at her, and said really interesting things between his big teeth. There was something rather nice about him. But, we must repeat, it was as if the glass wall of an aquarium divided them.

Alvina looked at Arthur. Arthur was short and dark-haired and nicely coloured. But, now his brother was there, he too seemed to have a dumb, aqueous silence, fish-like and aloof, about him. He seemed to swim like a fish in his own little element. Strange it all was, like Alice in Wonderland. Alvina understood now Lottie's strained sort of thinness, a haggard, sinewy, sea-weedy look. The poor thing was all the time swimming for her life.

For Alvina it was a most curious tea-party. She listened and smiled and made vague answers to Albert, who leaned his broad, thin, brittle shoulders towards her. Lottie seemed rather shadowily to preside. But it was Arthur who came out into communication. And now,

uttering his rather broad-mouthed speeches, she seemed to hear in him a quieter, subtler edition of his father. His father had been a little, terrifically loud-voiced, hard-skinned man, amazingly uneducated and amazingly bullying, who had tyrannized for many years over the Sunday School children during morning service. He had been an odd-looking creature with round grey whiskers: to Alvina, always a creature, never a man: an atrocious leprechaun from under the Chapel floor. And how he used to dig the children in the back with his horrible iron thumb, if the poor things happened to whisper or nod in chapel!

These were his children--most curious chips of the old block. Who ever would have believed she would have been taking tea with them.

"Why don't you have a bicycle, and go out on it?" Arthur was saying.

"But I can't ride," said Alvina.

"You'd learn in a couple of lessons. There's nothing in riding a bicycle."

"I don't believe I ever should," laughed Alvina.

"You don't mean to say you're nervous?" said Arthur rudely and sneeringly.

"I am," she persisted.

"You needn't be nervous with me," smiled Albert broadly, with his odd, genuine gallantry. "I'll hold you on."

"But I haven't got a bicycle," said Alvina, feeling she was slowly colouring to a deep, uneasy blush.

"You can have mine to learn on," said Lottie. "Albert will look after it."

"There's your chance," said Arthur rudely. "Take it while you've got it."

Now Alvina did not want to learn to ride a bicycle. The two Miss Carlins, two more old maids, had made themselves ridiculous for ever by becoming twin cycle fiends. And the horrible energetic strain of peddling a bicycle over miles and miles of high-way did not attract Alvina at all. She was completely indifferent to sight-seeing and scouring about. She liked taking a walk, in her lingering indifferent fashion. But rushing about in any way was hateful to her. And then, to be taught to ride a bicycle by Albert Witham! Her very soul stood still.

"Yes," said Albert, beaming down at her from his strange pale eyes. "Come on. When will you have your first lesson?"

"Oh," cried Alvina in confusion. "I can't promise. I haven't time, really."

"Time!" exclaimed Arthur rudely. "But what do you do wi' yourself all day?"

"I have to keep house," she said, looking at him archly.

"House! You can put a chain round its neck, and tie it up," he retorted.

Albert laughed, showing all his teeth.

"I'm sure you find plenty to do, with everything on your hands," said Lottie to Alvina.

"I do!" said Alvina. "By evening I'm quite tired--though you mayn't believe it, since you say I do nothing," she added, laughing confusedly to Arthur.

But he, hard-headed little fortune-maker, replied:

"You have a girl to help you, don't you!"

Albert, however, was beaming at her sympathetically.

"You have too much to do indoors," he said. "It would do you good to get a bit of exercise out of doors. Come down to the Coach Road tomorrow afternoon, and let me give you a lesson. Go on--"

Now the coach-road was a level drive between beautiful park-like grass-stretches, down in the valley. It was a delightful place for learning to ride a bicycle, but open in full view of all the world. Alvina would have died of shame. She began to laugh nervously and hurriedly at the very thought.

"No, I can't. I really can't. Thanks, awfully," she said.

"Can't you really!" said Albert. "Oh well, we'll say another day, shall we?"

"When I feel I can," she said.

"Yes, when you feel like it," replied Albert.

"That's more it," said Arthur. "It's not the time. It's the nervousness." Again Albert beamed at her sympathetically, and said:

"Oh, I'll hold you. You needn't be afraid."

"But I'm not afraid," she said.

"You won't say you are," interposed Arthur. "Women's faults mustn't be owned up to."

Alvina was beginning to feel quite dazed. Their mechanical, overbearing way was something she was unaccustomed to. It was like the jaws of a pair of insentient iron pincers. She rose, saying she must go.

Albert rose also, and reached for his straw hat, with its coloured band.

"I'll stroll up with you, if you don't mind," he said. And he took his place at her side along the Knarborough Road, where everybody turned to look. For, of course, he had a sort of fame in Woodhouse. She went with him laughing and chatting. But she did not feel at all comfortable. He seemed so pleased. Only he was not pleased with her. He was pleased with himself on her account: inordinately pleased with himself. In his world, as in a fish's, there was but his own swimming self: and if he chanced to have something swimming alongside and doing him credit, why, so much the more complacently he smiled.

He walked stiff and erect, with his head pressed rather back, so that he always seemed to be advancing from the head and shoulders, in a flat kind of advance, horizontal. He did not seem to be walking

with his whole body. His manner was oddly gallant, with a gallantry that completely missed the individual in the woman, circled round her and flew home gratified to his own hive. The way he raised his hat, the way he inclined and smiled flatly, even rather excitedly, as he talked, was all a little discomforting and comical.

He left her at the shop door, saying:

"I shall see you again, I hope."

"Oh, yes," she replied, rattling the door anxiously, for it was locked. She heard her father's step at last tripping down the shop.

"Good-evening, Mr. Houghton," said Albert suavely and with a certain confidence, as James peered out.

"Oh, good-evening!" said James, letting Alvina pass, and shutting the door in Albert's face.

"Who was that?" he asked her sharply.

"Albert Witham," she replied.

"What has he got to do with you?" said James shrewishly.

"Nothing, I hope."

She fled into the obscurity of Manchester House, out of the grey summer evening. The Withams threw her off her pivot, and made her feel she was not herself. She felt she didn't know, she couldn't feel, she was just scattered and decentralized. And she was rather afraid of the Witham brothers. She might be their victim. She intended to avoid them.

The following days she saw Albert, in his Norfolk jacket and flannel trousers and his straw hat, strolling past several times and looking in through the shop door and up at the upper windows. But she hid herself thoroughly. When she went out, it was by the back way. So she avoided him.

But on Sunday evening, there he sat, rather stiff and brittle in the old Withams' pew, his head pressed a little back, so that his face and neck seemed slightly flattened. He wore very low, turn-down starched collars that showed all his neck. And he kept looking up at her during the service--she sat in the choir-loft--gazing up at her with apparently love-lorn eyes and a faint, intimate smile--the sort of je-sais-tout look of a private swain. Arthur also occasionally cast a judicious eye on her, as if she were a chimney that needed repairing, and he must estimate the cost, and whether it was worth it.

Sure enough, as she came out through the narrow choir gate into

Knarborough Road, there was Albert stepping forward like a policeman, and saluting her and smiling down on her.

"I don't know if I'm presuming--" he said, in a mock deferential way that showed he didn't imagine he could presume.

"Oh, not at all," said Alvina airily. He smiled with assurance.

"You haven't got any engagement, then, for this evening?" he said.

"No," she replied simply.

"We might take a walk. What do you think?" he said, glancing down the road in either direction.

What, after all, was she to think? All the girls were pairing off with the boys for the after-chapel stroll and spoon.

"I don't mind," she said. "But I can't go far. I've got to be in at nine."

"Which way shall we go?" he said.

He steered off, turned downhill through the common gardens, and proposed to take her the not-very-original walk up Flint's Lane, and along the railway line--the colliery railway, that is--then back up

the Marlpool Road: a sort of circle. She agreed.

They did not find a great deal to talk about. She questioned him about his plans, and about the Cape. But save for bare outlines, which he gave readily enough, he was rather close.

"What do you do on Sunday nights as a rule?" he asked her.

"Oh, I have a walk with Lucy Grainger--or I go down to Hallam's--or go home," she answered.

"You don't go walks with the fellows, then?"

"Father would never have it," she replied.

"What will he say now?" he asked, with self-satisfaction.

"Goodness knows!" she laughed.

"Goodness usually does," he answered archly.

When they came to the rather stumbly railway, he said:

"Won't you take my arm?"--offering her the said member.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. "Thanks."

"Go on," he said, pressing a little nearer to her, and offering his arm. "There's nothing against it, is there?"

"Oh, it's not that," she said.

And feeling in a false position, she took his arm, rather unwillingly. He drew a little nearer to her, and walked with a slight prance.

"We get on better, don't we?" he said, giving her hand the tiniest squeeze with his arm against his side.

"Much!" she replied, with a laugh.

Then he lowered his voice oddly.

"It's many a day since I was on this railroad," he said.

"Is this one of your old walks?" she asked, malicious.

"Yes, I've been it once or twice--with girls that are all married now."

"Didn't you want to marry?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. I may have done. But it never came off, somehow. I've sometimes thought it never would come off."

"Why?"

"I don't know, exactly. It didn't seem to, you know. Perhaps neither of us was properly inclined."

"I should think so," she said.

"And yet," he admitted slyly, "I should like to marry--" To this she did not answer.

"Shouldn't you?" he continued.

"When I meet the right man," she laughed.

"That's it," he said. "There, that's just it! And you haven't met him?" His voice seemed smiling with a sort of triumph, as if he had caught her out.

"Well--once I thought I had--when I was engaged to Alexander."

"But you found you were mistaken?" he insisted.

"No. Mother was so ill at the time--"

"There's always something to consider," he said.

She kept on wondering what she should do if he wanted to kiss her. The mere incongruity of such a desire on his part formed a problem. Luckily, for this evening he formulated no desire, but left her in the shop-door soon after nine, with the request:

"I shall see you in the week, shan't I?"

"I'm not sure. I can't promise now," she said hurriedly.
"Good-night."

What she felt chiefly about him was a decentralized perplexity, very much akin to no feeling at all.

"Who do you think took me for a walk, Miss Pinnegar?" she said, laughing, to her confidante.

"I can't imagine," replied Miss Pinnegar, eyeing her.

"You never would imagine," said Alvina. "Albert Witham."

"Albert Witham!" exclaimed Miss Pinnegar, standing quite motionless.

"It may well take your breath away," said Alvina.

"No, it's not that!" hurriedly expostulated Miss Pinnegar. "Well--! Well, I declare!--" and then, on a new note: "Well, he's very eligible, I think."

"Most eligible!" replied Alvina.

"Yes, he is," insisted Miss Pinnegar. "I think it's very good."

"What's very good?" asked Alvina.

Miss Pinnegar hesitated. She looked at Alvina. She reconsidered.

"Of course he's not the man I should have imagined for you, but--"

"You think he'll do?" said Alvina.

"Why not?" said Miss Pinnegar. "Why shouldn't he do--if you like him."

"Ah--!" cried Alvina, sinking on the sofa with a laugh. "That's it."

"Of course you couldn't have anything to do with him if you don't care for him," pronounced Miss Pinnegar.

Albert continued to hang around. He did not make any direct attack

for a few days. Suddenly one evening he appeared at the back door with a bunch of white stocks in his hand. His face lit up with a sudden, odd smile when she opened the door--a broad, pale-gleaming, remarkable smile.

"Lottie wanted to know if you'd come to tea tomorrow," he said straight out, looking at her with the pale light in his eyes, that smiled palely right into her eyes, but did not see her at all. He was waiting on the doorstep to come in.

"Will you come in?" said Alvina. "Father is in."

"Yes, I don't mind," he said, pleased. He mounted the steps, still holding his bunch of white stocks.

James Houghton screwed round in his chair and peered over his spectacles to see who was coming.

"Father," said Alvina, "you know Mr. Witham, don't you?"

James Houghton half rose. He still peered over his glasses at the intruder.

"Well--I do by sight. How do you do?"

He held out his frail hand.

Albert held back, with the flowers in his own hand, and giving his broad, pleased, pale-gleaming smile from father to daughter, he said:

"What am I to do with these? Will you accept them, Miss Houghton?" He stared at her with shining, pallid smiling eyes.

"Are they for me?" she said, with false brightness. "Thank you."

James Houghton looked over the top of his spectacles, searchingly, at the flowers, as if they had been a bunch of white and sharp-toothed ferrets. Then he looked as suspiciously at the hand which Albert at last extended to him. He shook it slightly, and said:

"Take a seat."

"I'm afraid I'm disturbing you in your reading," said Albert, still having the drawn, excited smile on his face.

"Well--" said James Houghton. "The light is fading."

Alvina came in with the flowers in a jar. She set them on the table.

"Haven't they a lovely scent?" she said.

"Do you think so?" he replied, again with the excited smile. There was a pause. Albert, rather embarrassed, reached forward, saying:

"May I see what you're reading!" And he turned over the book. "'Tommy and Grizel!' Oh yes! What do you think of it?"

"Well," said James, "I am only in the beginning."

"I think it's interesting, myself," said Albert, "as a study of a man who can't get away from himself. You meet a lot of people like that. What I wonder is why they find it such a drawback."

"Find what a drawback?" asked James.

"Not being able to get away from themselves. That self-consciousness. It hampers them, and interferes with their power of action. Now I wonder why self-consciousness should hinder a man in his action? Why does it cause misgiving? I think I'm self-conscious, but I don't think I have so many misgivings. I don't see that they're necessary."

"Certainly I think Tommy is a weak character. I believe he's a despicable character," said James.

"No, I don't know so much about that," said Albert. "I shouldn't say

weak, exactly. He's only weak in one direction. No, what I wonder is why he feels guilty. If you feel self-conscious, there's no need to feel guilty about it, is there?"

He stared with his strange, smiling stare at James.

"I shouldn't say so," replied James. "But if a man never knows his own mind, he certainly can't be much of a man."

"I don't see it," replied Albert. "What's the matter is that he feels guilty for not knowing his own mind. That's the unnecessary part. The guilty feeling--"

Albert seemed insistent on this point, which had no particular interest for James.

"Where we've got to make a change," said Albert, "is in the feeling that other people have a right to tell us what we ought to feel and do. Nobody knows what another man ought to feel. Every man has his own special feelings, and his own right to them. That's where it is with education. You ought not to want all your children to feel alike. Their natures are all different, and so they should all feel different, about practically everything."

"There would be no end to the confusion," said James.

"There needn't be any confusion to speak of. You agree to a number of rules and conventions and laws, for social purposes. But in private you feel just as you do feel, without occasion for trying to feel something else."

"I don't know," said James. "There are certain feelings common to humanity, such as love, and honour, and truth."

"Would you call them feelings?" said Albert. "I should say what is common is the idea. The idea is common to humanity, once you've put it into words. But the feeling varies with every man. The same idea represents a different kind of feeling in every different individual. It seems to me that's what we've got to recognize if we're going to do anything with education. We don't want to produce mass feelings. Don't you agree?"

Poor James was too bewildered to know whether to agree or not to agree.

"Shall we have a light, Alvina?" he said to his daughter.

Alvina lit the incandescent gas-jet that hung in the middle of the room. The hard white light showed her somewhat haggard-looking as she reached up to it. But Albert watched her, smiling abstractedly. It seemed as if his words came off him without affecting him at all. He did not think about what he was feeling, and he did not feel what

he was thinking about. And therefore she hardly heard what he said. Yet she believed he was clever.

It was evident Albert was quite blissfully happy, in his own way, sitting there at the end of the sofa not far from the fire, and talking animatedly. The uncomfortable thing was that though he talked in the direction of his interlocutor, he did not speak to him: merely said his words towards him. James, however, was such an airy feather himself he did not remark this, but only felt a little self-important at sustaining such a subtle conversation with a man from Oxford. Alvina, who never expected to be interested in clever conversations, after a long experience of her father, found her expectation justified again. She was not interested.

The man was quite nicely dressed, in the regulation tweed jacket and flannel trousers and brown shoes. He was even rather smart, judging from his yellow socks and yellow-and-brown tie. Miss Pinnegar eyed him with approval when she came in.

"Good-evening!" she said, just a trifle condescendingly, as she shook hands. "How do you find Woodhouse, after being away so long?" Her way of speaking was so quiet, as if she hardly spoke aloud.

"Well," he answered. "I find it the same in many ways."

"You wouldn't like to settle here again?"

"I don't think I should. It feels a little cramped, you know, after a new country. But it has its attractions." Here he smiled meaningful.

"Yes," said Miss Pinnegar. "I suppose the old connections count for something."

"They do. Oh decidedly they do. There's no associations like the old ones." He smiled flatly as he looked towards Alvina.

"You find it so, do you!" returned Miss Pinnegar. "You don't find that the new connections make up for the old?"

"Not altogether, they don't. There's something missing--" Again he looked towards Alvina. But she did not answer his look.

"Well," said Miss Pinnegar. "I'm glad we still count for something, in spite of the greater attractions. How long have you in England?"

"Another year. Just a year. This time next year I expect I shall be sailing back to the Cape." He smiled as if in anticipation. Yet it was hard to believe that it mattered to him--or that anything mattered.

"And is Oxford agreeable to you?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. I keep myself busy."

"What are your subjects?" asked James.

"English and History. But I do mental science for my own interest."

Alvina had taken up a piece of sewing. She sat under the light, brooding a little. What had all this to do with her. The man talked on, and beamed in her direction. And she felt a little important. But moved or touched?--not the least in the world.

She wondered if any one would ask him to supper--bread and cheese and currant-loaf, and water, was all that offered. No one asked him, and at last he rose.

"Show Mr. Witham out through the shop, Alvina," said Miss Pinnegar.

Alvina piloted the man through the long, dark, encumbered way of the shop. At the door he said:

"You've never said whether you're coming to tea on Thursday."

"I don't think I can," said Alvina.

He seemed rather taken aback.

"Why?" he said. "What stops you?"

"I've so much to do."

He smiled slowly and satirically.

"Won't it keep?" he said.

"No, really. I can't come on Thursday--thank you so much. Good-night!" She gave him her hand and turned quickly into the shop, closing the door. He remained standing in the porch, staring at the closed door. Then, lifting his lip, he turned away.

"Well," said Miss Pinnegar decidedly, as Alvina re-entered. "You can say what you like--but I think he's very pleasant, very pleasant."

"Extremely intelligent," said James Houghton, shifting in his chair.

"I was awfully bored," said Alvina.

They both looked at her, irritated.

After this she really did what she could to avoid him. When she saw him sauntering down the street in all his leisure, a sort of anger

possessed her. On Sunday, she slipped down from the choir into the Chapel, and out through the main entrance, whilst he awaited her at the small exit. And by good luck, when he called one evening in the week, she was out. She returned down the yard. And there, through the uncurtained window, she saw him sitting awaiting her. Without a thought, she turned on her heel and fled away. She did not come in till he had gone.

"How late you are!" said Miss Pinnegar. "Mr. Witham was here till ten minutes ago."

"Yes," laughed Alvina. "I came down the yard and saw him. So I went back till he'd gone."

Miss Pinnegar looked at her in displeasure:

"I suppose you know your own mind," she said.

"How do you explain such behaviour?" said her father pettishly.

"I didn't want to meet him," she said.

The next evening was Saturday. Alvina had inherited Miss Frost's task of attending to the Chapel flowers once a quarter. She had been round the gardens of her friends, and gathered the scarlet and hot yellow and purple flowers of August, asters, red stocks, tall

Japanese sunflowers, coreopsis, geraniums. With these in her basket she slipped out towards evening, to the Chapel. She knew Mr. Calladine, the caretaker would not lock up till she had been.

The moment she got inside the Chapel--it was a big, airy, pleasant building--she heard hammering from the organ-loft, and saw the flicker of a candle. Some workman busy before Sunday. She shut the baize door behind her, and hurried across to the vestry, for vases, then out to the tap, for water. All was warm and still.

It was full early evening. The yellow light streamed through the side windows, the big stained-glass window at the end was deep and full of glowing colour, in which the yellows and reds were richest. Above in the organ-loft the hammering continued. She arranged her flowers in many vases, till the communion table was like the window, a tangle of strong yellow, and crimson, and purple, and bronze-green. She tried to keep the effect light and kaleidoscopic, an interplay of tossed pieces of strong, hot colour, vibrating and lightly intermingled. It was very gorgeous, for a communion table. But the day of white lilies was over.

Suddenly there was a terrific crash and bang and tumble, up in the organ-loft, followed by a cursing.

"Are you hurt?" called Alvina, looking up into space. The candle had disappeared.

But there was no reply. Feeling curious, she went out of the Chapel to the stairs in the side porch, and ran up to the organ. She went round the side--and there she saw a man in his shirt-sleeves sitting crouched in the obscurity on the floor between the organ and the wall of the back, while a collapsed pair of steps lay between her and him. It was too dark to see who it was.

"That rotten pair of steps came down with me," said the infuriated voice of Arthur Witham, "and about broke my leg."

Alvina advanced towards him, picking her way over the steps. He was sitting nursing his leg.

"Is it bad?" she asked, stooping towards him.

In the shadow he lifted up his face. It was pale, and his eyes were savage with anger. Her face was near his.

"It is bad," he said furious because of the shock. The shock had thrown him off his balance.

"Let me see," she said.

He removed his hands from clasping his shin, some distance above the ankle. She put her fingers over the bone, over his stocking, to feel

if there was any fracture. Immediately her fingers were wet with blood. Then he did a curious thing. With both his hands he pressed her hand down over his wounded leg, pressed it with all his might, as if her hand were a plaster. For some moments he sat pressing her hand over his broken shin, completely oblivious, as some people are when they have had a shock and a hurt, intense on one point of consciousness only, and for the rest unconscious.

Then he began to come to himself. The pain modified itself. He could not bear the sudden acute hurt to his shin. That was one of his sensitive, unbearable parts.

"The bone isn't broken," she said professionally. "But you'd better get the stocking out of it."

Without a thought, he pulled his trouser-leg higher and rolled down his stocking, extremely gingerly, and sick with pain.

"Can you show a light?" he said.

She found the candle. And she knew where matches always rested, on a little ledge of the organ. So she brought him a light, whilst he examined his broken shin. The blood was flowing, but not so much. It was a nasty cut bruise, swelling and looking very painful. He sat looking at it absorbedly, bent over it in the candle-light.

"It's not so very bad, when the pain goes off," she said, noticing the black hairs of his shin. "We'd better tie it up. Have you got a handkerchief?"

"It's in my jacket," he said.

She looked round for his jacket. He annoyed her a little, by being completely oblivious of her. She got his handkerchief and wiped her fingers on it. Then of her own kerchief she made a pad for the wound.

"Shall I tie it up, then?" she said.

But he did not answer. He sat still nursing his leg, looking at his hurt, while the blood slowly trickled down the wet hairs towards his ankle. There was nothing to do but wait for him.

"Shall I tie it up, then?" she repeated at length, a little impatient. So he put his leg a little forward.

She looked at the wound, and wiped it a little. Then she folded the pad of her own handkerchief, and laid it over the hurt. And again he did the same thing, he took her hand as if it were a plaster, and applied it to his wound, pressing it cautiously but firmly down. She was rather angry. He took no notice of her at all. And she, waiting, seemed to go into a dream, a sleep, her arm trembled a little,

stretched out and fixed. She seemed to lose count, under the firm compression he imposed on her. It was as if the pressure on her hand pressed her into oblivion.

"Tie it up," he said briskly.

And she, obedient, began to tie the bandage with numb fingers. He seemed to have taken the use out of her.

When she had finished, he scrambled to his feet, looked at the organ which he was repairing, and looked at the collapsed pair of steps.

"A rotten pair of things to have, to put a man's life in danger," he said, towards the steps. Then stubbornly, he rigged them up again, and stared again at his interrupted job.

"You won't go on, will you?" she asked.

"It's got to be done, Sunday tomorrow," he said. "If you'd hold them steps a minute! There isn't more than a minute's fixing to do. It's all done, but fixing."

"Hadn't you better leave it," she said.

"Would you mind holding the steps, so that they don't let me down again," he said. Then he took the candle, and hobbled stubbornly and

angrily up again, with spanner and hammer. For some minutes he worked, tapping and readjusting, whilst she held the ricketty steps and stared at him from below, the shapeless bulk of his trousers. Strange the difference--she could not help thinking it--between the vulnerable hairy, and somehow childish leg of the real man, and the shapeless form of these workmen's trousers. The kernel, the man himself--seemed so tender--the covering so stiff and insentient.

And was he not going to speak to her--not one human word of recognition? Men are the most curious and unreal creatures. After all he had made use of her. Think how he had pressed her hand gently but firmly down, down over his bruise, how he had taken the virtue out of her, till she felt all weak and dim. And after that was he going to relapse into his tough and ugly workman's hide, and treat her as if she were a pair of steps, which might let him down or hold him up, as might be.

As she stood clinging to the steps she felt weak and a little hysterical. She wanted to summon her strength, to have her own back from him. After all he had taken the virtue from her, he might have the grace to say thank you, and treat her as if she were a human being.

At last he left off tinkering, and looked round.

"Have you finished?" she said.

"Yes," he answered crossly.

And taking the candle he began to clamber down. When he got to the bottom he crouched over his leg and felt the bandage.

"That gives you what for," he said, as if it were her fault.

"Is the bandage holding?" she said.

"I think so," he answered churlishly.

"Aren't you going to make sure?" she said.

"Oh, it's all right," he said, turning aside and taking up his tools. "I'll make my way home."

"So will I," she answered.

She took the candle and went a little in front. He hurried into his coat and gathered his tools, anxious to get away. She faced him, holding the candle.

"Look at my hand," she said, holding it out. It was smeared with blood, as was the cuff of her dress--a black-and-white striped cotton dress.

"Is it hurt?" he said.

"No, but look at it. Look here!" She showed the bloodstains on her dress.

"It'll wash out," he said, frightened of her.

"Yes, so it will. But for the present it's there. Don't you think you ought to thank me?"

He recoiled a little.

"Yes," he said. "I'm very much obliged."

"You ought to be more than that," she said.

He did not answer, but looked her up and down.

"We'll be going down," he said. "We s'll have folks talking."

Suddenly she began to laugh. It seemed so comical. What a position! The candle shook as she laughed. What a man, answering her like a little automaton! Seriously, quite seriously he said it to her--"We s'll have folks talking!" She laughed in a breathless, hurried way, as they tramped downstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs Calladine, the caretaker, met them. He was a tall thin man with a black moustache--about fifty years old.

"Have you done for tonight, all of you?" he said, grinning in echo to Alvina's still fluttering laughter.

"That's a nice rotten pair of steps you've got up there for a death-trap," said Arthur angrily. "Come down on top of me, and I'm lucky I haven't got my leg broken. It is near enough."

"Come down with you, did they?" said Calladine good-humouredly. "I never knowed 'em come down wi' me."

"You ought to, then. My leg's as near broke as it can be."

"What, have you hurt yourself?"

"I should think I have. Look here--" And he began to pull up his trouser leg. But Alvina had given the candle to Calladine, and fled. She had a last view of Arthur stooping over his precious leg, while Calladine stooped his length and held down the candle.

When she got home she took off her dress and washed herself hard and washed the stained sleeve, thoroughly, thoroughly, and threw away the wash water and rinsed the wash-bowls with fresh water,

scrupulously. Then she dressed herself in her black dress once more, did her hair, and went downstairs.

But she could not sew--and she could not settle down. It was Saturday evening, and her father had opened the shop, Miss Pinnegar had gone to Knarborough. She would be back at nine o'clock. Alvina set about to make a mock woodcock, or a mock something or other, with cheese and an egg and bits of toast. Her eyes were dilated and as if amused, mocking, her face quivered a little with irony that was not all enjoyable.

"I'm glad you've come," said Alvina, as Miss Pinnegar entered. "The supper's just done. I'll ask father if he'll close the shop."

Of course James would not close the shop, though he was merely wasting light. He nipped in to eat his supper, and started out again with a mouthful the moment he heard the ping of the bell. He kept his customers chatting as long as he could. His love for conversation had degenerated into a spasmodic passion for chatter.

Alvina looked across at Miss Pinnegar, as the two sat at the meagre supper-table. Her eyes were dilated and arched with a mocking, almost satanic look.

"I've made up my mind about Albert Witham," said Alvina. Miss Pinnegar looked at her.

"Which way?" she asked, demurely, but a little sharp.

"It's all off," said Alvina, breaking into a nervous laugh.

"Why? What has happened?"

"Nothing has happened. I can't stand him."

"Why?--suddenly--" said Miss Pinnegar.

"It's not sudden," laughed Alvina. "Not at all. I can't stand him. I never could. And I won't try. There! Isn't that plain?" And she went off into her hurried laugh, partly at herself, partly at Arthur, partly at Albert, partly at Miss Pinnegar.

"Oh, well, if you're so sure--" said Miss Pinnegar rather bitingly.

"I am quite sure--" said Alvina. "I'm quite certain."

"Cock-sure people are often most mistaken," said Miss Pinnegar.

"I'd rather have my own mistakes than somebody else's rights," said Alvina.

"Then don't expect anybody to pay for your mistakes," said Miss

Pinnegar.

"It would be all the same if I did," said Alvina.

When she lay in bed, she stared at the light of the street-lamp on the wall. She was thinking busily: but heaven knows what she was thinking. She had sharpened the edge of her temper. She was waiting till tomorrow. She was waiting till she saw Albert Witham. She wanted to finish off with him. She was keen to cut clean through any correspondence with him. She stared for many hours at the light of the street-lamp, and there was a narrowed look in her eyes.

The next day she did not go to Morning Service, but stayed at home to cook the dinner. In the evening she sat in her place in the choir. In the Withams' pew sat Lottie and Albert--no Arthur. Albert kept glancing up. Alvina could not bear the sight of him--she simply could not bear the sight of him. Yet in her low, sweet voice she sang the alto to the hymns, right to the vesper:

"Lord keep us safe this night
Secure from all our fears,
May angels guard us while we sleep
Till morning light appears--"

As she sang her alto, and as the soft and emotional harmony of the vesper swelled luxuriously through the chapel, she was peeping over

her folded hands at Lottie's hat. She could not bear Lottie's hats. There was something aggressive and vulgar about them. And she simply detested the look of the back of Albert's head, as he too stooped to the vesper prayer. It looked mean and rather common. She remembered Arthur had the same look, bending to prayer. There!--why had she not seen it before! That petty, vulgar little look! How could she have thought twice of Arthur. She had made a fool of herself, as usual. Him and his little leg. She grimaced round the chapel, waiting for people to bob up their heads and take their departure.

At the gate Albert was waiting for her. He came forward lifting his hat with a smiling and familiar "Good evening!"

"Good evening," she murmured.

"It's ages since I've seen you," he said. "And I've looked out for you everywhere."

It was raining a little. She put up her umbrella.

"You'll take a little stroll. The rain isn't much," he said.

"No, thank you," she said. "I must go home."

"Why, what's your hurry! Walk as far as Beeby Bridge. Go on."

"No, thank you."

"How's that? What makes you refuse?"

"I don't want to."

He paused and looked down at her. The cold and supercilious look of anger, a little spiteful, came into his face.

"Do you mean because of the rain?" he said.

"No. I hope you don't mind. But I don't want to take any more walks. I don't mean anything by them."

"Oh, as for that," he said, taking the words out of her mouth. "Why should you mean anything by them!" He smiled down on her.

She looked him straight in the face.

"But I'd rather not take any more walks, thank you--none at all," she said, looking him full in the eyes.

"You wouldn't!" he replied, stiffening.

"Yes. I'm quite sure," she said.

"As sure as all that, are you!" he said, with a sneering grimace. He stood eyeing her insolently up and down.

"Good-night," she said. His sneering made her furious. Putting her umbrella between him and her, she walked off.

"Good-night then," he replied, unseen by her. But his voice was sneering and impotent.

She went home quivering. But her soul was burning with satisfaction. She had shaken them off.

Later she wondered if she had been unkind to him. But it was done--and done for ever. Vogue la galère.