CHAPTER VI

HOUGHTON'S LAST ENDEAVOUR

The trouble with her ship was that it would not sail. It rode water-logged in the rotting port of home. All very well to have wild, reckless moods of irony and independence, if you have to pay for them by withering dustily on the shelf.

Alvina fell again into humility and fear: she began to show symptoms of her mother's heart trouble. For day followed day, month followed month, season after season went by, and she grubbed away like a housemaid in Manchester House, she hurried round doing the shopping, she sang in the choir on Sundays, she attended the various chapel events, she went out to visit friends, and laughed and talked and played games. But all the time, what was there actually in her life? Not much. She was withering towards old-maiddom. Already in her twenty-eighth year, she spent her days grubbing in the house, whilst her father became an elderly, frail man still too lively in mind and spirit. Miss Pinnegar began to grow grey and elderly too, money became scarcer and scarcer, there was a black day ahead when her father would die and the home be broken up, and she would have to tackle life as a worker.

There lay the only alternative: in work. She might slave her days

away teaching the piano, as Miss Frost had done: she might find a subordinate post as nurse: she might sit in the cash-desk of some shop. Some work of some sort would be found for her. And she would sink into the routine of her job, as did so many women, and grow old and die, chattering and fluttering. She would have what is called her independence. But, seriously faced with that treasure, and without the option of refusing it, strange how hideous she found it.

Work!--a job! More even than she rebelled against the Withams did she rebel against a job. Albert Witham was distasteful to her--or rather, he was not exactly distasteful, he was chiefly incongruous. She could never get over the feeling that he was mouthing and smiling at her through the glass wall of an aquarium, he being on the watery side. Whether she would ever be able to take to his strange and dishuman element, who knows? Anyway it would be some sort of an adventure: better than a job. She rebelled with all her backbone against the word job. Even the substitutes, employment or work, were detestable, unbearable. Emphatically, she did not want to work for a wage. It was too humiliating. Could anything be more infra dig than the performing of a set of special actions day in day out, for a life-time, in order to receive some shillings every seventh day. Shameful! A condition of shame. The most vulgar, sordid and humiliating of all forms of slavery: so mechanical. Far better be a slave outright, in contact with all the whims and impulses of a human being, than serve some mechanical routine of modern work.

She trembled with anger, impotence, and fear. For months, the thought of Albert was a torment to her. She might have married him. He would have been strange, a strange fish. But were it not better to take the strange leap, over into his element, than to condemn oneself to the routine of a job? He would have been curious and dishuman. But after all, it would have been an experience. In a way, she liked him. There was something odd and integral about him, which she liked. He was not a liar. In his own line, he was honest and direct. Then he would take her to South Africa: a whole new milieu. And perhaps she would have children. She shivered a little. No, not his children! He seemed so curiously cold-blooded. And yet, why not? Why not his curious, pale, half cold-blooded children, like little fishes of her own? Why not? Everything was possible: and even desirable, once one could see the strangeness of it. Once she could plunge through the wall of the aquarium! Once she could kiss him!

Therefore Miss Pinnegar's quiet harping on the string was unbearable.

"I can't understand that you disliked Mr. Witham so much?" said Miss Pinnegar.

"We never can understand those things," said Alvina. "I can't understand why I dislike tapioca and arrowroot--but I do."

"That's different," said Miss Pinnegar shortly.

"It's no more easy to understand," said Alvina.

"Because there's no need to understand it," said Miss Pinnegar.

"And is there need to understand the other?"

"Certainly. I can see nothing wrong with him," said Miss Pinnegar.

Alvina went away in silence. This was in the first months after she had given Albert his dismissal. He was at Oxford again--would not return to Woodhouse till Christmas. Between her and the Woodhouse Withams there was a decided coldness. They never looked at her now--nor she at them.

None the less, as Christmas drew near Alvina worked up her feelings. Perhaps she would be reconciled to him. She would slip across and smile to him. She would take the plunge, once and for all--and kiss him and marry him and bear the little half-fishes, his children. She worked herself into quite a fever of anticipation.

But when she saw him, the first evening, sitting stiff and staring flatly in front of him in Chapel, staring away from everything in the world, at heaven knows what--just as fishes stare--then his

dishumanness came over her again like an arrest, and arrested all her flights of fancy. He stared flatly in front of him, and flatly set a wall of oblivion between him and her. She trembled and let be.

After Christmas, however, she had nothing at all to think forward to. And it was then she seemed to shrink: she seemed positively to shrink.

"You never spoke to Mr. Witham?" Miss Pinnegar asked.

"He never spoke to me," replied Alvina.

"He raised his hat to me."

"You ought to have married him, Miss Pinnegar," said Alvina. "He would have been right for you." And she laughed rather mockingly.

"There is no need to make provision for me," said Miss Pinnegar.

And after this, she was a long time before she forgave Alvina, and was really friendly again. Perhaps she would never have forgiven her if she had not found her weeping rather bitterly in her mother's abandoned sitting-room.

Now so far, the story of Alvina is commonplace enough. It is more or less the story of thousands of girls. They all find work. It is the

ordinary solution of everything. And if we were dealing with an ordinary girl we should have to carry on mildly and dully down the long years of employment; or, at the best, marriage with some dull school-teacher or office-clerk.

But we protest that Alvina is not ordinary. Ordinary people, ordinary fates. But extraordinary people, extraordinary fates. Or else no fate at all. The all-to-one-pattern modern system is too much for most extraordinary individuals. It just kills them off or throws them disused aside.

There have been enough stories about ordinary people. I should think the Duke of Clarence must even have found malmsey nauseating, when he choked and went purple and was really asphyxiated in a butt of it. And ordinary people are no malmsey. Just ordinary tap-water. And we have been drenched and deluged and so nearly drowned in perpetual floods of ordinariness, that tap-water tends to become a really hateful fluid to us. We loathe its out-of-the-tap tastelessness. We detest ordinary people. We are in peril of our lives from them: and in peril of our souls too, for they would damn us one and all to the ordinary. Every individual should, by nature, have his extraordinary points. But nowadays you may look for them with a microscope, they are so worn-down by the regular machine-friction of our average and mechanical days.

There was no hope for Alvina in the ordinary. If help came, it would

have to come from the extraordinary. Hence the extreme peril of her case. Hence the bitter fear and humiliation she felt as she drudged shabbily on in Manchester House, hiding herself as much as possible from public view. Men can suck the heady juice of exalted self-importance from the bitter weed of failure--failures are usually the most conceited of men: even as was James Houghton. But to a woman, failure is another matter. For her it means failure to live, failure to establish her own life on the face of the earth. And this is humiliating, the ultimate humiliation.

And so the slow years crept round, and the completed coil of each one was a further heavy, strangling noose. Alvina had passed her twenty-sixth, twenty-seventh, twenty-eighth and even her twenty-ninth year. She was in her thirtieth. It ought to be a laughing matter. But it isn't.

Ach, schon zwanzig
Ach, schon zwanzig
Immer noch durch's Leben tanz' ich

Jeder, Jeder will mich küssen
Mir das Leben zu versüssen.

Ach, schon dreissig
Ach, schon dreissig
Immer Mädchen, Mädchen heiss' ich.

In dem Zopf schon graue Härchen
Ach, wie schnell vergehn die Jährchen.

Ach, schon vierzig
Ach, schon vierzig
Und noch immer Keiner find 'sich.
Im gesicht schon graue Flecken
Ach, das muss im Spiegel stecken.

Ach, schon fünfzig
Ach, schon fünfzig
Und noch immer Keiner will 'mich;
Soll ich mich mit Bänden zieren
Soll ich einen Schleier führen?
Dann heisst's, die Alte putzt sich,
Sie ist fu'fzig, sie ist fu'fzig.

True enough, in Alvina's pig-tail of soft brown the grey hairs were already showing. True enough, she still preferred to be thought of as a girl. And the slow-footed years, so heavy in passing, were so imperceptibly numerous in their accumulation.

But we are not going to follow our song to its fatal and dreary conclusion. Presumably, the ordinary old-maid heroine nowadays is destined to die in her fifties, she is not allowed to be the long-liver of the by-gone novels. Let the song suffice her.

James Houghton had still another kick in him. He had one last scheme up his sleeve. Looking out on a changing world, it was the popular novelties which had the last fascination for him. The Skating Rink, like another Charybdis, had all but entangled him in its swirl as he pushed painfully off from the rocks of Throttle-Ha'penny. But he had escaped, and for almost three years had lain obscurely in port, like a frail and finished bark, selling the last of his bits and bobs, and making little splashes in warehouse-oddments. Miss Pinnegar thought he had really gone quiet.

But alas, at that degenerated and shabby, down-at-heel club he met another tempter: a plump man who had been in the music-hall line as a sort of agent. This man had catered for the little shows of little towns. He had been in America, out West, doing shows there. He had trailed his way back to England, where he had left his wife and daughter. But he did not resume his family life. Wherever he was, his wife was a hundred miles away. Now he found himself more or less stranded in Woodhouse. He had nearly fixed himself up with a music-hall in the Potteries--as manager: he had all-but got such another place at Ickley, in Derbyshire: he had forced his way through the industrial and mining townlets, prospecting for any sort of music-hall or show from which he could get a picking. And now, in very low water, he found himself at Woodhouse.

Woodhouse had a cinema already: a famous Empire run-up by Jordan,

the sly builder and decorator who had got on so surprisingly. In James's younger days, Jordan was an obscure and illiterate nobody. And now he had a motor car, and looked at the tottering James with sardonic contempt, from under his heavy, heavy-lidded dark eyes. He was rather stout, frail in health, but silent and insuperable, was A. W. Jordan.

"I missed a chance there," said James, fluttering. "I missed a rare chance there. I ought to have been first with a cinema."

He admitted as much to Mr. May, the stranger who was looking for some sort of "managing" job. Mr. May, who also was plump and who could hold his tongue, but whose pink, fat face and light-blue eyes had a loud look, for all that, put the speech in his pipe and smoked it. Not that he smoked a pipe: always cigarettes. But he seized on James's admission, as something to be made the most of.

Now Mr. May's mind, though quick, was pedestrian, not winged. He had come to Woodhouse not to look at Jordan's "Empire," but at the temporary wooden structure that stood in the old Cattle Market--"Wright's Cinematograph and Variety Theatre." Wright's was not a superior show, like the Woodhouse Empire. Yet it was always packed with colliers and work-lasses. But unfortunately there was no chance of Mr. May's getting a finger in the Cattle Market pie. Wright's was a family affair. Mr. and Mrs. Wright and a son and two daughters with their husbands: a tight old lock-up family concern.

Yet it was the kind of show that appealed to Mr. May: pictures between the turns. The cinematograph was but an item in the program, amidst the more thrilling incidents--to Mr. May--of conjurors, popular songs, five-minute farces, performing birds, and comics. Mr. May was too human to believe that a show should consist entirely of the dithering eye-ache of a film.

He was becoming really depressed by his failure to find any opening. He had his family to keep--and though his honesty was of the variety sort, he had a heavy conscience in the direction of his wife and daughter. Having been so long in America, he had acquired American qualities, one of which was this heavy sort of private innocence, coupled with complacent and natural unscrupulousness in "matters of business." A man of some odd sensitiveness in material things, he liked to have his clothes neat and spick, his linen immaculate, his face clean-shaved like a cherub. But alas, his clothes were now old-fashioned, so that their rather expensive smartness was detrimental to his chances, in spite of their scrupulous look of having come almost new out of the bandbox that morning. His rather small felt hats still curved jauntily over his full pink face. But his eyes looked lugubrious, as if he felt he had not deserved so much bad luck, and there were bilious lines beneath them.

So Mr. May, in his room in the Moon and Stars, which was the best inn in Woodhouse--he must have a good hôtel--lugubriously considered his position. Woodhouse offered little or nothing. He must go to Alfreton.

And would he find anything there? Ah, where, where in this hateful world was there refuge for a man saddled with responsibilities, who wanted to do his best and was given no opportunity? Mr. May had travelled in his Pullman car and gone straight to the best hotel in the town, like any other American with money--in America. He had done it smart, too. And now, in this grubby penny-picking England, he saw his boots being worn-down at the heel, and was afraid of being stranded without cash even for a railway ticket. If he had to clear out without paying his hotel bill--well, that was the world's fault. He had to live. But he must perforce keep enough in hand for a ticket to Birmingham. He always said his wife was in London. And he always walked down to Lumley to post his letters. He was full of evasions.

So again he walked down to Lumley to post his letters. And he looked at Lumley. And he found it a damn god-forsaken hell of a hole. It was a long straggle of a dusty road down in the valley, with a pale-grey dust and spatter from the pottery, and big chimneys bellying forth black smoke right by the road. Then there was a short cross-way, up which one saw the iron foundry, a black and rusty place. A little further on was the railway junction, and beyond that, more houses stretching to Hathersedge, where the stocking factories were busy. Compared with Lumley, Woodhouse, whose church could be seen sticking up proudly and vulgarly on an eminence, above trees and meadow-slopes, was an idyllic heaven.

Mr. May turned in to the Derby Hotel to have a small whiskey. And of

course he entered into conversation.

"You seem somewhat quiet at Lumley," he said, in his odd, refined-showman's voice. "Have you nothing at all in the way of amusement?"

"They all go up to Woodhouse, else to Hathersedge."

"But couldn't you support some place of your own--some rival to Wright's Variety?"

"Ay--'appen--if somebody started it."

And so it was that James was inoculated with the idea of starting a cinema on the virgin soil of Lumley. To the women he said not a word. But on the very first morning that Mr. May broached the subject, he became a new man. He fluttered like a boy, he fluttered as if he had just grown wings.

"Let us go down," said Mr. May, "and look at a site. You pledge yourself to nothing--you don't compromise yourself. You merely have a site in your mind."

And so it came to pass that, next morning, this oddly assorted couple went down to Lumley together. James was very shabby, in his black coat and dark grey trousers, and his cheap grey cap. He bent

forward as he walked, and still nipped along hurriedly, as if pursued by fate. His face was thin and still handsome. Odd that his cheap cap, by incongruity, made him look more a gentleman. But it did. As he walked he glanced alertly hither and thither, and saluted everybody.

By his side, somewhat tight and tubby, with his chest out and his head back, went the prim figure of Mr. May, reminding one of a consequential bird of the smaller species. His plumbago-grey suit fitted exactly--save that it was perhaps a little tight. The jacket and waistcoat were bound with silk braid of exactly the same shade as the cloth. His soft collar, immaculately fresh, had a dark stripe like his shirt. His boots were black, with grey suède uppers: but a little down at heel. His dark-grey hat was jaunty. Altogether he looked very spruce, though a little behind the fashions: very pink faced, though his blue eyes were bilious beneath: very much on the spot, although the spot was the wrong one.

They discoursed amiably as they went, James bending forward, Mr. May bending back. Mr. May took the refined man-of-the-world tone.

"Of course," he said--he used the two words very often, and pronounced the second, rather mincingly, to rhyme with sauce: "Of course," said Mr. May, "it's a disgusting place--disgusting! I never was in a worse, in all the cauce of my travels. But then--that isn't the point--"

He spread his plump hands from his immaculate shirt-cuffs.

"No, it isn't. Decidedly it isn't. That's beside the point altogether. What we want--" began James.

"Is an audience--of cauce--! And we have it--! Virgin soil--!

"Yes, decidedly. Untouched! An unspoiled market."

"An unspoiled market!" reiterated Mr. May, in full confirmation, though with a faint flicker of a smile. "How very fortunate for us."

"Properly handled," said James. "Properly handled."

"Why yes--of cauce! Why shouldn't we handle it properly!"

"Oh, we shall manage that, we shall manage that," came the quick, slightly husky voice of James.

"Of cauce we shall! Why bless my life, if we can't manage an audience in Lumley, what can we do."

"We have a guide in the matter of their taste," said James. "We can see what Wright's are doing--and Jordan's--and we can go to

Hathersedge and Knarborough and Alfreton--beforehand, that is--"

"Why certainly--if you think it's necessary. I'll do all that for you. And I'll interview the managers and the performers themselves--as if I were a journalist, don't you see. I've done a fair amount of journalism, and nothing easier than to get cards from various newspapers."

"Yes, that's a good suggestion," said James. "As if you were going to write an account in the newspapers--excellent."

"And so simple! You pick up just all the information you require."

"Decidedly--decidedly!" said James.

And so behold our two heroes sniffing round the sordid backs and wasted meadows and marshy places of Lumley. They found one barren patch where two caravans were standing. A woman was peeling potatoes, sitting on the bottom step of her caravan. A half-caste girl came up with a large pale-blue enamelled jug of water. In the background were two booths covered up with coloured canvas. Hammering was heard inside.

"Good-morning!" said Mr. May, stopping before the woman. "'Tisn't fair time, is it?"

"No, it's no fair," said the woman.

"I see. You're just on your own. Getting on all right?"

"Fair," said the woman.

"Only fair! Sorry. Good-morning."

Mr. May's quick eye, roving round, had seen a negro stoop from under the canvas that covered one booth. The negro was thin, and looked young but rather frail, and limped. His face was very like that of the young negro in Watteau's drawing--pathetic, wistful, north-bitten. In an instant Mr. May had taken all in: the man was the woman's husband--they were acclimatized in these regions: the booth where he had been hammering was a Hoop-La. The other would be a cocoanut-shy. Feeling the instant American dislike for the presence of a negro, Mr. May moved off with James.

They found out that the woman was a Lumley woman, that she had two children, that the negro was a most quiet and respectable chap, but that the family kept to itself, and didn't mix up with Lumley.

"I should think so," said Mr. May, a little disgusted even at the suggestion.

Then he proceeded to find out how long they had stood on this

ground--three months--how long they would remain--only another week, then they were moving off to Alfreton fair--who was the owner of the pitch--Mr. Bows, the butcher. Ah! And what was the ground used for? Oh, it was building land. But the foundation wasn't very good.

"The very thing! Aren't we fortunate!" cried Mr. May, perking up the moment they were in the street. But this cheerfulness and brisk perkiness was a great strain on him. He missed his eleven o'clock whiskey terribly--terribly--his pick-me-up! And he daren't confess it to James, who, he knew, was T-T. So he dragged his weary and hollow way up to Woodhouse, and sank with a long "Oh!" of nervous exhaustion in the private bar of the Moon and Stars. He wrinkled his short nose. The smell of the place was distasteful to him. The disgusting beer that the colliers drank. Oh!--he was so tired.
He sank back with his whiskey and stared blankly, dismally in front of him. Beneath his eyes he looked more bilious still. He felt thoroughly out of luck, and petulant.

None the less he sallied out with all his old bright perkiness, the next time he had to meet James. He hadn't yet broached the question of costs. When would he be able to get an advance from James? He must hurry the matter forward. He brushed his crisp, curly brown hair carefully before the mirror. How grey he was at the temples! No wonder, dear me, with such a life! He was in his shirt-sleeves. His waistcoat, with its grey satin back, fitted him tightly. He had filled out--but he hadn't developed a corporation. Not at all. He

looked at himself sideways, and feared dismally he was thinner. He was one of those men who carry themselves in a birdie fashion, so that their tail sticks out a little behind, jauntily. How wonderfully the satin of his waistcoat had worn! He looked at his shirt-cuffs. They were going. Luckily, when he had had the shirts made he had secured enough material for the renewing of cuffs and neckbands. He put on his coat, from which he had flicked the faintest suspicion of dust, and again settled himself to go out and meet James on the question of an advance. He simply must have an advance.

He didn't get it that day, none the less. The next morning he was ringing for his tea at six o'clock. And before ten he had already flitted to Lumley and back, he had already had a word with Mr. Bows, about that pitch, and, overcoming all his repugnance, a word with the quiet, frail, sad negro, about Alfreton fair, and the chance of buying some sort of collapsible building, for his cinematograph.

With all this news he met James--not at the shabby club, but in the deserted reading-room of the so-called Artizans Hall--where never an artizan entered, but only men of James's class. Here they took the chessboard and pretended to start a game. But their conversation was rapid and secretive.

Mr. May disclosed all his discoveries. And then he said, tentatively:

"Hadn't we better think about the financial part now? If we're going to look round for an erection"--curious that he always called it an erection--"we shall have to know what we are going to spend."

"Yes--yes. Well--" said James vaguely, nervously, giving a glance at Mr. May. Whilst Mr. May abstractedly fingered his black knight.

"You see at the moment," said Mr. May, "I have no funds that I can represent in cash. I have no doubt a little later--if we need it--I can find a few hundreds. Many things are due--numbers of things. But it is so difficult to collect one's dues, particularly from America." He lifted his blue eyes to James Houghton. "Of course we can delay for some time, until I get my supplies. Or I can act just as your manager--you can employ me--"

He watched James's face. James looked down at the chessboard. He was fluttering with excitement. He did not want a partner. He wanted to be in this all by himself. He hated partners.

"You will agree to be manager, at a fixed salary?" said James hurriedly and huskily, his fine fingers slowly rubbing each other, along the sides.

"Why yes, willingly, if you'll give me the option of becoming your partner upon terms of mutual agreement, later on."

James did not quite like this.

"What terms are you thinking of?" he asked.

"Well, it doesn't matter for the moment. Suppose for the moment I enter an engagement as your manager, at a salary, let us say, of--of what, do you think?"

"So much a week?" said James pointedly.

"Hadn't we better make it monthly?"

The two men looked at one another.

"With a month's notice on either hand?" continued Mr. May.

"How much?" said James, avaricious.

Mr. May studied his own nicely kept hands.

"Well, I don't see how I can do it under twenty pounds a month. Of course it's ridiculously low. In America I never accepted less than three hundred dollars a month, and that was my poorest and lowest. But of cauce, England's not America--more's the pity."

But James was shaking his head in a vibrating movement.

"Impossible!" he replied shrewdly. "Impossible! Twenty pounds a month? Impossible. I couldn't do it. I couldn't think of it."

"Then name a figure. Say what you can think of," retorted Mr. May, rather annoyed by this shrewd, shaking head of a doddering provincial, and by his own sudden collapse into mean subordination.

"I can't make it more than ten pounds a month," said James sharply.

"What!" screamed Mr. May. "What am I to live on? What is my wife to live on?"

"I've got to make it pay," said James. "If I've got to make it pay, I must keep down expenses at the beginning."

"No,--on the contrary. You must be prepared to spend something at the beginning. If you go in a pinch-and-scrape fashion in the beginning, you will get nowhere at all. Ten pounds a month! Why it's impossible! Ten pounds a month! But how am I to live?"

James's head still vibrated in a negative fashion. And the two men came to no agreement that morning. Mr. May went home more sick and weary than ever, and took his whiskey more biliously. But James was lit with the light of battle.

Poor Mr. May had to gather together his wits and his sprightliness for his next meeting. He had decided he must make a percentage in other ways. He schemed in all known ways. He would accept the ten pounds--but really, did ever you hear of anything so ridiculous in your life, ten pounds!--dirty old screw, dirty, screwing old woman! He would accept the ten pounds; but he would get his own back.

He flitted down once more to the negro, to ask him of a certain wooden show-house, with section sides and roof, an old travelling theatre which stood closed on Selverhay Common, and might probably be sold. He pressed across once more to Mr. Bows. He wrote various letters and drew up certain notes. And the next morning, by eight o'clock, he was on his way to Selverhay: walking, poor man, the long and uninteresting seven miles on his small and rather tight-shod feet, through country that had been once beautiful but was now scrubbled all over with mining villages, on and on up heavy hills and down others, asking his way from uncouth clowns, till at last he came to the Common, which wasn't a Common at all, but a sort of village more depressing than usual: naked, high, exposed to heaven and to full barren view.

There he saw the theatre-booth. It was old and sordid-looking, painted dark-red and dishevelled with narrow, tattered announcements. The grass was growing high up the wooden sides. If only it wasn't rotten?

He crouched and probed and pierced with his pen-knife, till a country-policeman in a high helmet like a jug saw him, got off his bicycle and came stealthily across the grass wheeling the same bicycle, and startled poor Mr. May almost into apoplexy by demanding behind him, in a loud voice:

"What're you after?"

Mr. May rose up with flushed face and swollen neck-veins, holding his pen-knife in his hand.

"Oh," he said, "good-morning." He settled his waistcoat and glanced over the tall, lanky constable and the glittering bicycle. "I was taking a look at this old erection, with a view to buying it. I'm afraid it's going rotten from the bottom."

"Shouldn't wonder," said the policeman suspiciously, watching Mr. May shut the pocket knife.

"I'm afraid that makes it useless for my purpose," said Mr. May.

The policeman did not deign to answer.

"Could you tell me where I can find out about it, anyway?" Mr. May used his most affable, man of the world manner. But the policeman continued to stare him up and down, as if he were some marvellous

specimen unknown on the normal, honest earth.

"What, find out?" said the constable.

"About being able to buy it," said Mr. May, a little testily. It was with great difficulty he preserved his man-to-man openness and brightness.

"They aren't here," said the constable.

"Oh indeed! Where are they? And who are they?"

The policeman eyed him more suspiciously than ever.

"Cowlard's their name. An' they live in Offerton when they aren't travelling."

"Cowlard--thank you." Mr. May took out his pocket-book. "C-o-w-l-a-r-d--is that right? And the address, please?"

"I dunno th' street. But you can find out from the Three Bells. That's Missis' sister."

"The Three Bells--thank you. Offerton did you say?"

"Yes."

"Offerton!--where's that?"

"About eight mile."

"Really--and how do you get there?"

"You can walk--or go by train."

"Oh, there is a station?"

"Station!" The policeman looked at him as if he were either a criminal or a fool.

"Yes. There is a station there?"

"Ay--biggest next to Chesterfield--"

Suddenly it dawned on Mr. May.

"Oh-h!" he said. "You mean Alfreton--"

"Alfreton, yes." The policeman was now convinced the man was a wrong-'un. But fortunately he was not a pushing constable, he did not want to rise in the police-scale: thought himself safest at the bottom.

"And which is the way to the station here?" asked Mr. May.

"Do yer want Pinxon or Bull'ill?"

"Pinxon or Bull'ill?"

"There's two," said the policeman.

"For Selverhay?" asked Mr. May.

"Yes, them's the two."

"And which is the best?"

"Depends what trains is runnin'. Sometimes yer have to wait an hour or two--"

"You don't know the trains, do you--?"

"There's one in th' afternoon--but I don't know if it'd be gone by the time you get down."

"To where?"

"Bull'ill."

"Oh Bull'ill! Well, perhaps I'll try. Could you tell me the way?"

When, after an hour's painful walk, Mr. May came to Bullwell Station and found there was no train till six in the evening, he felt he was earning every penny he would ever get from Mr. Houghton.

The first intelligence which Miss Pinnegar and Alvina gathered of the coming adventure was given them when James announced that he had let the shop to Marsden, the grocer next door. Marsden had agreed to take over James's premises at the same rent as that of the premises he already occupied, and moreover to do all alterations and put in all fixtures himself. This was a grand scoop for James: not a penny was it going to cost him, and the rent was clear profit.

"But when?" cried Miss Pinnegar.

"He takes possession on the first of October."

"Well--it's a good idea. The shop isn't worth while," said Miss Pinnegar.

"Certainly it isn't," said James, rubbing his hands: a sign that he was rarely excited and pleased.

"And you'll just retire, and live quietly," said Miss Pinnegar.

"I shall see," said James. And with those fatal words he wafted away to find Mr. May.

James was now nearly seventy years old. Yet he nipped about like a leaf in the wind. Only, it was a frail leaf.

"Father's got something going," said Alvina, in a warning voice.

"I believe he has," said Miss Pinnegar pensively. "I wonder what it is, now."

"I can't imagine," laughed Alvina. "But I'll bet it's something awful--else he'd have told us."

"Yes," said Miss Pinnegar slowly. "Most likely he would. I wonder what it can be."

"I haven't an idea," said Alvina.

Both women were so retired, they had heard nothing of James's little trips down to Lumley. So they watched like cats for their man's return, at dinner-time.

Miss Pinnegar saw him coming along talking excitedly to Mr. May, who, all in grey, with his chest perkily stuck out like a robin, was

looking rather pinker than usual. Having come to an agreement, he had ventured on whiskey and soda in honour, and James had actually taken a glass of port.

"Alvina!" Miss Pinnegar called discreetly down the shop. "Alvina! Quick!"

Alvina flew down to peep round the corner of the shop window. There stood the two men, Mr. May like a perky, pink-faced grey bird standing cocking his head in attention to James Houghton, and occasionally catching James by the lapel of his coat, in a vain desire to get a word in, whilst James's head nodded and his face simply wagged with excited speech, as he skipped from foot to foot, and shifted round his listener.

"Who ever can that common-looking man be?" said Miss Pinnegar, her heart going down to her boots.

"I can't imagine," said Alvina, laughing at the comic sight.

"Don't you think he's dreadful?" said the poor elderly woman.

"Perfectly impossible. Did ever you see such a pink face?"

"And the braid binding!" said Miss Pinnegar in indignation.

"Father might almost have sold him the suit," said Alvina.

"Let us hope he hasn't sold your father, that's all," said Miss Pinnegar.

The two men had moved a few steps further towards home, and the women prepared to flee indoors. Of course it was frightfully wrong to be standing peeping in the high street at all. But who could consider the proprieties now?

"They've stopped again," said Miss Pinnegar, recalling Alvina.

The two men were having a few more excited words, their voices just audible.

"I do wonder who he can be," murmured Miss Pinnegar miserably.

"In the theatrical line, I'm sure," declared Alvina.

"Do you think so?" said Miss Pinnegar. "Can't be! Can't be!"

"He couldn't be anything else, don't you think?"

"Oh I can't believe it, I can't."

But now Mr. May had laid his detaining hand on James's arm. And now

he was shaking his employer by the hand. And now James, in his cheap little cap, was smiling a formal farewell. And Mr. May, with a graceful wave of his grey-suède-gloved hand, was turning back to the Moon and Stars, strutting, whilst James was running home on tip-toe, in his natural hurry.

Alvina hastily retreated, but Miss Pinnegar stood it out. James started as he nipped into the shop entrance, and found her confronting him.

"Oh--Miss Pinnegar!" he said, and made to slip by her.

"Who was that man?" she asked sharply, as if James were a child whom she could endure no more.

"Eh? I beg your pardon?" said James, starting back.

"Who was that man?"

"Eh? Which man?"

James was a little deaf, and a little husky.

"The man--" Miss Pinnegar turned to the door. "There! That man!"

James also came to the door, and peered out as if he expected to see

a sight. The sight of Mr. May's tight and perky back, the jaunty little hat and the grey suède hands retreating quite surprised him. He was angry at being introduced to the sight.

"Oh," he said. "That's my manager." And he turned hastily down the shop, asking for his dinner.

Miss Pinnegar stood for some moments in pure oblivion in the shop entrance. Her consciousness left her. When she recovered, she felt she was on the brink of hysteria and collapse. But she hardened herself once more, though the effort cost her a year of her life. She had never collapsed, she had never fallen into hysteria.

She gathered herself together, though bent a little as from a blow, and, closing the shop door, followed James to the living room, like the inevitable. He was eating his dinner, and seemed oblivious of her entry. There was a smell of Irish stew.

"What manager?" said Miss Pinnegar, short, silent, and inevitable in the doorway.

But James was in one of his abstractions, his trances.

"What manager?" persisted Miss Pinnegar.

But he still bent unknowing over his plate and gobbled his Irish

stew.

"Mr. Houghton!" said Miss Pinnegar, in a sudden changed voice. She had gone a livid yellow colour. And she gave a queer, sharp little rap on the table with her hand.

James started. He looked up bewildered, as one startled out of sleep.

"Eh?" he said, gaping. "Eh?"

"Answer me," said Miss Pinnegar. "What manager?"

"Manager? Eh? Manager? What manager?"

She advanced a little nearer, menacing in her black dress. James shrank.

"What manager?" he re-echoed. "My manager. The manager of my cinema."

Miss Pinnegar looked at him, and looked at him, and did not speak. In that moment all the anger which was due to him from all womanhood was silently discharged at him, like a black bolt of silent electricity. But Miss Pinnegar, the engine of wrath, felt she would burst.

"Cinema! Cinema! Do you mean to tell me--" but she was really suffocated, the vessels of her heart and breast were bursting. She had to lean her hand on the table.

It was a terrible moment. She looked ghastly and terrible, with her mask-like face and her stony eyes and her bluish lips. Some fearful thunderbolt seemed to fall. James withered, and was still. There was silence for minutes, a suspension.

And in those minutes, she finished with him. She finished with him for ever. When she had sufficiently recovered, she went to her chair, and sat down before her plate. And in a while she began to eat, as if she were alone.

Poor Alvina, for whom this had been a dreadful and uncalled-for moment, had looked from one to another, and had also dropped her head to her plate. James too, with bent head, had forgotten to eat. Miss Pinnegar ate very slowly, alone.

"Don't you want your dinner, Alvina?" she said at length.

"Not as much as I did," said Alvina.

"Why not?" said Miss Pinnegar. She sounded short, almost like Miss Frost. Oddly like Miss Frost.

Alvina took up her fork and began to eat automatically.

"I always think," said Miss Pinnegar, "Irish stew is more tasty with a bit of Swede in it."

"So do I, really," said Alvina. "But Swedes aren't come yet."

"Oh! Didn't we have some on Tuesday?"

"No, they were yellow turnips--but they weren't Swedes."

"Well then, yellow turnip. I like a little yellow turnip," said Miss Pinnegar.

"I might have put some in, if I'd known," said Alvina.

"Yes. We will another time," said Miss Pinnegar.

Not another word about the cinema: not another breath. As soon as James had eaten his plum tart, he ran away.

"What can he have been doing?" said Alvina when he had gone.

"Buying a cinema show--and that man we saw is his manager. It's quite simple."

"But what are we going to do with a cinema show?" said Alvina.

"It's what is he going to do. It doesn't concern me. It's no concern of mine. I shall not lend him anything, I shall not think about it, it will be the same to me as if there were no cinema. Which is all I have to say," announced Miss Pinnegar.

"But he's gone and done it," said Alvina.

"Then let him go through with it. It's no affair of mine. After all, your father's affairs don't concern me. It would be impertinent of me to introduce myself into them."

"They don't concern me very much," said Alvina.

"You're different. You're his daughter. He's no connection of mine, I'm glad to say. I pity your mother."

"Oh, but he was always alike," said Alvina.

"That's where it is," said Miss Pinnegar.

There was something fatal about her feelings. Once they had gone cold, they would never warm up again. As well try to warm up a frozen mouse. It only putrifies.

But poor Miss Pinnegar after this looked older, and seemed to get a little round-backed. And the things she said reminded Alvina so often of Miss Frost.

James fluttered into conversation with his daughter the next evening, after Miss Pinnegar had retired.

"I told you I had bought a cinematograph building," said James. "We are negotiating for the machinery now: the dynamo and so on."

"But where is it to be?" asked Alvina.

"Down at Lumley. I'll take you and show you the site tomorrow. The building--it is a frame-section travelling theatre--will arrive on Thursday--next Thursday."

"But who is in with you, father?"

"I am quite alone--quite alone," said James Houghton. "I have found an excellent manager, who knows the whole business thoroughly--a Mr. May. Very nice man. Very nice man."

"Rather short and dressed in grey?"

"Yes. And I have been thinking--if Miss Pinnegar will take the cash

and issue tickets: if she will take over the ticket-office: and you will play the piano: and if Mr. May learns the control of the machine--he is having lessons now--: and if I am the indoors attendant, we shan't need any more staff."

"Miss Pinnegar won't take the cash, father."

"Why not? Why not?"

"I can't say why not. But she won't do anything--and if I were you I wouldn't ask her."

There was a pause.

"Oh, well," said James, huffy. "She isn't indispensable."

And Alvina was to play the piano! Here was a blow for her! She hurried off to her bedroom to laugh and cry at once. She just saw herself at that piano, banging off the Merry Widow Waltz, and, in tender moments, The Rosary. Time after time, The Rosary. While the pictures flickered and the audience gave shouts and some grubby boy called "Chot-let, penny a bar! Chot-let, penny a bar! Chot-let, penny a bar!" away she banged at another tune.

What a sight for the gods! She burst out laughing. And at the same time, she thought of her mother and Miss Frost, and she cried as if

her heart would break. And then all kinds of comic and incongruous tunes came into her head. She imagined herself dressing up with most priceless variations. Linger Longer Lucy, for example. She began to spin imaginary harmonies and variations in her head, upon the theme of Linger Longer Lucy.

"Linger longer Lucy, linger longer Loo.
How I love to linger longer linger long o' you.
Listen while I sing, love, promise you'll be true,
And linger longer longer linger linger longer Loo."

All the tunes that used to make Miss Frost so angry. All the Dream Waltzes and Maiden's Prayers, and the awful songs.

"For in Spooney-ooney Island
Is there any one cares for me?
In Spooney-ooney Island
Why surely there ought to be--"

Poor Miss Frost! Alvina imagined herself leading a chorus of collier louts, in a bad atmosphere of "Woodbines" and oranges, during the intervals when the pictures had collapsed.

"How'd you like to spoon with me?
How'd you like to spoon with me?
(Why ra-ther!)

Underneath the oak-tree nice and shady
Calling me your tootsey-wootsey lady?
How'd you like to hug and squeeze,
(Just try me!)

Dandle me upon your knee,
Calling me your little lovey-dovey--
How'd you like to spoon with me?
(Oh-h--Go on!)"

Alvina worked herself into quite a fever, with her imaginings.

In the morning she told Miss Pinnegar.

"Yes," said Miss Pinnegar, "you see me issuing tickets, don't you? Yes--well. I'm afraid he will have to do that part himself. And you're going to play the piano. It's a disgrace! It's a disgrace! It's a disgrace! It's a mercy Miss Frost and your mother are dead. He's lost every bit of shame--every bit--if he ever had any--which I doubt very much. Well, all I can say, I'm glad I am not concerned. And I'm sorry for you, for being his daughter. I'm heart sorry for you, I am. Well, well--no sense of shame--no sense of shame--"

And Miss Pinnegar padded out of the room.

Alvina walked down to Lumley and was shown the site and was introduced to Mr. May. He bowed to her in his best American fashion, and treated her with admirable American deference.

"Don't you think," he said to her, "it's an admirable scheme?"

"Wonderful," she replied.

"Of cauce," he said, "the erection will be a merely temporary one. Of cauce it won't be anything to look at: just an old wooden travelling theatre. But then--all we need is to make a start."

"And you are going to work the film?" she asked.

"Yes," he said with pride, "I spend every evening with the operator at Marsh's in Knarborough. Very interesting I find it--very interesting indeed. And you are going to play the piano?" he said, perking his head on one side and looking at her archly.

"So father says," she answered.

"But what do you say?" queried Mr. May.

"I suppose I don't have any say."

"Oh but surely. Surely you won't do it if you don't wish to. That

would never do. Can't we hire some young fellow--?" And he turned to Mr. Houghton with a note of query.

"Alvina can play as well as anybody in Woodhouse," said James. "We mustn't add to our expenses. And wages in particular--"

"But surely Miss Houghton will have her wage. The labourer is worthy of his hire. Surely! Even of her hire, to put it in the feminine.
And for the same wage you could get some unimportant fellow with strong wrists. I'm afraid it will tire Miss Houghton to death--"

"I don't think so," said James. "I don't think so. Many of the turns she will not need to accompany--"

"Well, if it comes to that," said Mr. May, "I can accompany some of them myself, when I'm not operating the film. I'm not an expert pianist--but I can play a little, you know--" And he trilled his fingers up and down an imaginary keyboard in front of Alvina, cocking his eye at her smiling a little archly.

"I'm sure," he continued, "I can accompany anything except a man juggling dinner-plates--and then I'd be afraid of making him drop the plates. But songs--oh, songs! Con molto espressione!"

And again he trilled the imaginary keyboard, and smiled his rather fat cheeks at Alvina.

She began to like him. There was something a little dainty about him, when you knew him better--really rather fastidious. A showman, true enough! Blatant too. But fastidiously so.

He came fairly frequently to Manchester House after this. Miss Pinnegar was rather stiff with him and he did not like her. But he was very happy sitting chatting tête-à-tête with Alvina.

"Where is your wife?" said Alvina to him.

"My wife! Oh, don't speak of her," he said comically. "She's in London."

"Why not speak of her?" asked Alvina.

"Oh, every reason for not speaking of her. We don't get on at all well, she and I."

"What a pity," said Alvina.

"Dreadful pity! But what are you to do?" He laughed comically. Then he became grave. "No," he said. "She's an impossible person."

"I see," said Alvina.

"I'm sure you don't see," said Mr. May. "Don't--" and here he laid his hand on Alvina's arm--"don't run away with the idea that she's immoral! You'd never make a greater mistake. Oh dear me, no. Morality's her strongest point. Live on three lettuce leaves, and give the rest to the char. That's her. Oh, dreadful times we had in those first years. We only lived together for three years. But dear me! how awful it was!"

"Why?"

"There was no pleasing the woman. She wouldn't eat. If I said to her 'What shall we have for supper, Grace?' as sure as anything she'd answer 'Oh, I shall take a bath when I go to bed--that will be my supper.' She was one of these advanced vegetarian women, don't you know."

"How extraordinary!" said Alvina.

"Extraordinary! I should think so. Extraordinary hard lines on me. And she wouldn't let me eat either. She followed me to the kitchen in a fury while I cooked for myself. Why imagine! I prepared a dish of champignons: oh, most beautiful champignons, beautiful--and I put them on the stove to fry in butter: beautiful young champignons. I'm hanged if she didn't go into the kitchen while my back was turned, and pour a pint of old carrot-water into the pan. I was furious. Imagine!--beautiful fresh young champignons--"

"Fresh mushrooms," said Alvina.

"Mushrooms--most beautiful things in the world. Oh! don't you think so?" And he rolled his eyes oddly to heaven.

"They are good," said Alvina.

"I should say so. And swamped--swamped with her dirty old carrot water. Oh I was so angry. And all she could say was, 'Well, I didn't want to waste it!' Didn't want to waste her old carrot water, and so ruined my champignons. Can you imagine such a person?"

"It must have been trying."

"I should think it was. I lost weight. I lost I don't know how many pounds, the first year I was married to that woman. She hated me to eat. Why, one of her great accusations against me, at the last, was when she said: 'I've looked round the larder,' she said to me, 'and seen it was quite empty, and I thought to myself: Now he can't cook a supper! And then you did!' There! What do you think of that? The spite of it! 'And then you did!'"

"What did she expect you to live on?" asked Alvina.

"Nibble a lettuce leaf with her, and drink water from the tap--and

then elevate myself with a Bernard Shaw pamphlet. That was the sort of woman she was. All it gave me was gas in the stomach."

"So overbearing!" said Alvina.

"Oh!" he turned his eyes to heaven, and spread his hands. "I didn't believe my senses. I didn't know such people existed. And her friends! Oh the dreadful friends she had--these Fabians! Oh, their eugenics. They wanted to examine my private morals, for eugenic reasons. Oh, you can't imagine such a state. Worse than the Spanish Inquisition. And I stood it for three years. How I stood it, I don't know--"

"Now don't you see her?"

"Never! I never let her know where I am! But I support her, of cauce."

"And your daughter?"

"Oh, she's the dearest child in the world. I saw her at a friend's when I came back from America. Dearest little thing in the world. But of cauce suspicious of me. Treats me as if she didn't know me--"

"What a pity!"

"Oh--unbearable!" He spread his plump, manicured hands, on one finger of which was a green intaglio ring.

"How old is your daughter?"

"Fourteen."

"What is her name?"

"Gemma. She was born in Rome, where I was managing for Miss Maud Callum, the danseuse."

Curious the intimacy Mr. May established with Alvina at once. But it was all purely verbal, descriptive. He made no physical advances. On the contrary, he was like a dove-grey, disconsolate bird pecking the crumbs of Alvina's sympathy, and cocking his eye all the time to watch that she did not advance one step towards him. If he had seen the least sign of coming-on-ness in her, he would have fluttered off in a great dither. Nothing horrified him more than a woman who was coming-on towards him. It horrified him, it exasperated him, it made him hate the whole tribe of women: horrific two-legged cats without whiskers. If he had been a bird, his innate horror of a cat would have been such. He liked the angel, and particularly the angel-mother in woman. Oh!--that he worshipped. But coming-on-ness!

So he never wanted to be seen out-of-doors with Alvina; if he met her in the street he bowed and passed on: bowed very deep and reverential, indeed, but passed on, with his little back a little more strutty and assertive than ever. Decidedly he turned his back on her in public.

But Miss Pinnegar, a regular old, grey, dangerous she-puss, eyed him from the corner of her pale eye, as he turned tail.

"So unmanly!" she murmured. "In his dress, in his way, in everything--so unmanly."

"If I was you, Alvina," she said, "I shouldn't see so much of Mr. May, in the drawing-room. People will talk."

"I should almost feel flattered," laughed Alvina.

"What do you mean?" snapped Miss Pinnegar.

None the less, Mr. May was dependable in matters of business. He was up at half-past five in the morning, and by seven was well on his way. He sailed like a stiff little ship before a steady breeze, hither and thither, out of Woodhouse and back again, and across from side to side. Sharp and snappy, he was, on the spot. He trussed himself up, when he was angry or displeased, and sharp, snip-snap came his words, rather like scissors.

"But how is it--" he attacked Arthur Witham--"that the gas isn't connected with the main yet? It was to be ready yesterday."

"We've had to wait for the fixings for them brackets," said Arthur.

"Had to wait for fixings! But didn't you know a fortnight ago that you'd want the fixings?"

"I thought we should have some as would do."

"Oh! you thought so! Really! Kind of you to think so. And have you just thought about those that are coming, or have you made sure?"

Arthur looked at him sullenly. He hated him. But Mr. May's sharp touch was not to be foiled.

"I hope you'll go further than thinking," said Mr. May. "Thinking seems such a slow process. And when do you expect the fittings--?"

"Tomorrow."

"What! Another day! Another day still! But you're strangely indifferent to time, in your line of business. Oh! Tomorrow! Imagine it! Two days late already, and then tomorrow! Well I hope by tomorrow you mean Wednesday, and not tomorrow's tomorrow, or

some other absurd and fanciful date that you've just thought about. But now, do have the thing finished by tomorrow--" here he laid his hand cajoling on Arthur's arm. "You promise me it will all be ready by tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yes, I'll do it if anybody could do it."

"Don't say 'if anybody could do it.' Say it shall be done."

"It shall if I can possibly manage it--"

"Oh--very well then. Mind you manage it--and thank you very much. I shall be most obliged, if it is done."

Arthur was annoyed, but he was kept to the scratch. And so, early in October the place was ready, and Woodhouse was plastered with placards announcing "Houghton's Pleasure Palace." Poor Mr. May could not but see an irony in the Palace part of the phrase. "We can guarantee the pleasure," he said. "But personally, I feel I can't take the responsibility for the palace."

But James, to use the vulgar expression, was in his eye-holes.

"Oh, father's in his eye-holes," said Alvina to Mr. May.

"Oh!" said Mr. May, puzzled and concerned.

But it merely meant that James was having the time of his life. He was drawing out announcements. First was a batch of vermilion strips, with the mystic script, in big black letters: Houghton's Picture Palace, underneath which, quite small: Opens at Lumley on October 7th, at 6:30 P.M. Everywhere you went, these vermilion and black bars sprang from the wall at you. Then there were other notices, in delicate pale-blue and pale red, like a genuine theatre notice, giving full programs. And beneath these a broad-letter notice announced, in green letters on a yellow ground: "Final and Ultimate Clearance Sale at Houghton's, Knarborough Road, on Friday, September 30th. Come and Buy Without Price."

James was in his eye-holes. He collected all his odds and ends from every corner of Manchester House. He sorted them in heaps, and marked the heaps in his own mind. And then he let go. He pasted up notices all over the window and all over the shop: "Take what you want and Pay what you Like."

He and Miss Pinnegar kept shop. The women flocked in. They turned things over. It nearly killed James to take the prices they offered. But take them he did. But he exacted that they should buy one article at a time. "One piece at a time, if you don't mind," he said, when they came up with their three-a-penny handfuls. It was not till later in the evening that he relaxed this rule.

Well, by eleven o'clock he had cleared out a good deal--really, a very great deal--and many women had bought what they didn't want, at their own figure. Feverish but content, James shut the shop for the last time. Next day, by eleven, he had removed all his belongings, the door that connected the house with the shop was screwed up fast, the grocer strolled in and looked round his bare extension, took the key from James, and immediately set his boy to paste a new notice in the window, tearing down all James's announcements. Poor James had to run round, down Knarborough Road, and down Wellington Street as far as the Livery Stable, then down long narrow passages, before he could get into his own house, from his own shop.

But he did not mind. Every hour brought the first performance of his Pleasure Palace nearer. He was satisfied with Mr. May: he had to admit that he was satisfied with Mr. May. The Palace stood firm at last--oh, it was so ricketty when it arrived!--and it glowed with a new coat, all over, of dark-red paint, like ox-blood. It was tittivated up with a touch of lavender and yellow round the door and round the decorated wooden eaving. It had a new wooden slope up to the doors--and inside, a new wooden floor, with red-velvet seats in front, before the curtain, and old chapel-pews behind. The collier youths recognized the pews.

"Hey! These 'ere's the pews out of the old Primitive Chapel."

"Sorry ah! We'n come ter hear t' parson."

Theme for endless jokes. And the Pleasure Palace was christened, in some lucky stroke, Houghton's Endeavour, a reference to that particular Chapel effort called the Christian Endeavour, where Alvina and Miss Pinnegar both figured.

"Wheer art off, Sorry?"

"Lumley."

"Houghton's Endeavour?"

"Ah."

"Rotten."

So, when one laconic young collier accosted another. But we anticipate.

Mr. May had worked hard to get a program for the first week. His pictures were: "The Human Bird," which turned out to be a ski-ing film from Norway, purely descriptive; "The Pancake," a humorous film: and then his grand serial: "The Silent Grip." And then, for Turns, his first item was Miss Poppy Traherne, a lady in innumerable petticoats, who could whirl herself into anything you like, from an arum lily in green stockings to a rainbow and a Catherine wheel and

a cup-and-saucer: marvellous, was Miss Poppy Traherne. The next turn was The Baxter Brothers, who ran up and down each other's backs and up and down each other's front, and stood on each other's heads and on their own heads, and perched for a moment on each other's shoulders, as if each of them was a flight of stairs with a landing, and the three of them were three flights, three storeys up, the top flight continually running down and becoming the bottom flight, while the middle flight collapsed and became a horizontal corridor.

Alvina had to open the performance by playing an overture called "Welcome All": a ridiculous piece. She was excited and unhappy. On the Monday morning there was a rehearsal, Mr. May conducting. She played "Welcome All," and then took the thumbed sheets which Miss Poppy Traherne carried with her. Miss Poppy was rather exacting. As she whirled her skirts she kept saying: "A little faster, please"--"A little slower"--in a rather haughty, official voice that was somewhat muffled by the swim of her drapery. "Can you give it expression?" she cried, as she got the arum lily in full blow, and there was a sound of real ecstasy in her tones. But why she should have called "Stronger! Stronger!" as she came into being as a cup and saucer, Alvina could not imagine: unless Miss Poppy was fancying herself a strong cup of tea.

However, she subsided into her mere self, panted frantically, and then, in a hoarse voice, demanded if she was in the bare front of the show. She scorned to count "Welcome All." Mr. May said Yes. She

was the first item. Whereupon she began to raise a dust. Mr. Houghton said, hurriedly interposing, that he meant to make a little opening speech. Miss Poppy eyed him as if he were a cuckoo-clock, and she had to wait till he'd finished cuckooing. Then she said:

"That's not every night. There's six nights to a week." James was properly snubbed. It ended by Mr. May metamorphizing himself into a pug dog: he said he had got the "costoom" in his bag: and doing a lump-of-sugar scene with one of the Baxter Brothers, as a brief first item. Miss Poppy's professional virginity was thus saved from outrage.

At the back of the stage there was half-a-yard of curtain screening the two dressing-rooms, ladies and gents. In her spare time Alvina sat in the ladies' dressing room, or in its lower doorway, for there was not room right inside. She watched the ladies making up--she gave some slight assistance. She saw the men's feet, in their shabby pumps, on the other side of the curtain, and she heard the men's gruff voices. Often a slangy conversation was carried on through the curtain--for most of the turns were acquainted with each other: very affable before each other's faces, very sniffy behind each other's backs.

Poor Alvina was in a state of bewilderment. She was extremely nice--oh, much too nice with the female turns. They treated her with a sort of off-hand friendliness, and they snubbed and patronized her

and were a little spiteful with her because Mr. May treated her with attention and deference. She felt bewildered, a little excited, and as if she was not herself.

The first evening actually came. Her father had produced a pink crêpe de Chine blouse and a back-comb massed with brilliants--both of which she refused to wear. She stuck to her black blouse and black shirt, and her simple hair-dressing. Mr. May said "Of cauce! She wasn't intended to attract attention to herself." Miss Pinnegar actually walked down the hill with her, and began to cry when she saw the ox-blood red erection, with its gas-flares in front. It was the first time she had seen it. She went on with Alvina to the little stage door at the back, and up the steps into the scrap of dressing-room. But she fled out again from the sight of Miss Poppy in her yellow hair and green knickers with green-lace frills. Poor Miss Pinnegar! She stood outside on the trodden grass behind the Band of Hope, and really cried. Luckily she had put a veil on.

She went valiantly round to the front entrance, and climbed the steps. The crowd was just coming. There was James's face peeping inside the little ticket-window.

"One!" he said officially, pushing out the ticket. And then he recognized her. "Oh," he said, "You're not going to pay."

"Yes I am," she said, and she left her fourpence, and James's

coppery, grimy fingers scooped it in, as the youth behind Miss Pinnegar shoved her forward.

"Arf way down, fourpenny," said the man at the door, poking her in the direction of Mr. May, who wanted to put her in the red velvet. But she marched down one of the pews, and took her seat.

The place was crowded with a whooping, whistling, excited audience. The curtain was down. James had let it out to his fellow tradesmen, and it represented a patchwork of local adverts. There was a fat porker and a fat pork-pie, and the pig was saying: "You all know where to find me. Inside the crust at Frank Churchill's, Knarborough Road, Woodhouse." Round about the name of W. H. Johnson floated a bowler hat, a collar-and-necktie, a pair of braces and an umbrella. And so on and so on. It all made you feel very homely. But Miss Pinnegar was sadly hot and squeezed in her pew.

Time came, and the colliers began to drum their feet. It was exactly the excited, crowded audience Mr. May wanted. He darted out to drive James round in front of the curtain. But James, fascinated by raking in the money so fast, could not be shifted from the pay-box, and the two men nearly had a fight. At last Mr. May was seen shooing James, like a scuffled chicken, down the side gangway and on to the stage.

James before the illuminated curtain of local adverts, bowing and beginning and not making a single word audible! The crowd quieted

itself, the eloquence flowed on. The crowd was sick of James, and began to shuffle. "Come down, come down!" hissed Mr. May frantically from in front. But James did not move. He would flow on all night. Mr. May waved excitedly at Alvina, who sat obscurely at the piano, and darted on to the stage. He raised his voice and drowned James. James ceased to wave his penny-blackened hands, Alvina struck up "Welcome All" as loudly and emphatically as she could.

And all the time Miss Pinnegar sat like a sphinx--like a sphinx. What she thought she did not know herself. But stolidly she stared at James, and anxiously she glanced sideways at the pounding Alvina. She knew Alvina had to pound until she received the cue that Mr. May was fitted in his pug-dog "Costoom."

A twitch of the curtain. Alvina wound up her final flourish, the curtain rose, and:

"Well really!" said Miss Pinnegar, out loud.

There was Mr. May as a pug dog begging, too lifelike and too impossible. The audience shouted. Alvina sat with her hands in her lap. The Pug was a great success.

Curtain! A few bars of Toreador--and then Miss Poppy's sheets of music. Soft music. Miss Poppy was on the ground under a green scarf. And so the accumulating dilation, on to the whirling climax of the

perfect arum lily. Sudden curtain, and a yell of ecstasy from the colliers. Of all blossoms, the arum, the arum lily is most mystical and portentous.

Now a crash and rumble from Alvina's piano. This is the storm from whence the rainbow emerges. Up goes the curtain--Miss Poppy twirling till her skirts lift as in a breeze, rise up and become a rainbow above her now darkened legs. The footlights are all but extinguished. Miss Poppy is all but extinguished also.

The rainbow is not so moving as the arum lily. But the Catherine wheel, done at the last moment on one leg and then an amazing leap into the air backwards, again brings down the house.

Miss Poppy herself sets all store on her cup and saucer. But the audience, vulgar as ever, cannot quite see it.

And so, Alvina slips away with Miss Poppy's music-sheets, while Mr. May sits down like a professional at the piano and makes things fly for the up-and-down-stairs Baxter Bros. Meanwhile, Alvina's pale face hovering like a ghost in the side darkness, as it were under the stage.

The lamps go out: gurglings and kissings--and then the dither on the screen: "The Human Bird," in awful shivery letters. It's not a very good machine, and Mr. May is not a very good operator. Audience

distinctly critical. Lights up--an "Chot-let, penny a bar! Chot-let, penny a bar!" even as in Alvina's dream--and then "The Pancake"--so the first half over. Lights up for the interval.

Miss Pinnegar sighed and folded her hands. She looked neither to right nor to left. In spite of herself, in spite of outraged shame and decency, she was excited. But she felt such excitement was not wholesome. In vain the boy most pertinently yelled "Chot-let" at her. She looked neither to right nor left. But when she saw Alvina nodding to her with a quick smile from the side gangway under the stage, she almost burst into tears. It was too much for her, all at once. And Alvina looked almost indecently excited. As she slipped across in front of the audience, to the piano, to play the seductive "Dream Waltz!" she looked almost fussy, like her father. James, needless to say, flittered and hurried hither and thither around the audience and the stage, like a wagtail on the brink of a pool.

The second half consisted of a comic drama acted by two Baxter Bros., disguised as women, and Miss Poppy disguised as a man--with a couple of locals thrown in to do the guardsman and the Count. This went very well. The winding up was the first instalment of "The Silent Grip."

When lights went up and Alvina solemnly struck "God Save Our Gracious King," the audience was on its feet and not very quiet, evidently hissing with excitement like doughnuts in the pan even

when the pan is taken off the fire. Mr. Houghton thanked them for their courtesy and attention, and hoped--And nobody took the slightest notice.

Miss Pinnegar stayed last, waiting for Alvina. And Alvina, in her excitement, waited for Mr. May and her father.

Mr. May fairly pranced into the empty hall.

"Well!" he said, shutting both his fists and flourishing them in Miss Pinnegar's face. "How did it go?"

"I think it went very well," she said.

"Very well! I should think so, indeed. It went like a house on fire. What? Didn't it?" And he laughed a high, excited little laugh.

James was counting pennies for his life, in the cash-place, and dropping them into a Gladstone bag. The others had to wait for him. At last he locked his bag.

"Well," said Mr. May, "done well?"

"Fairly well," said James, huskily excited. "Fairly well."

"Only fairly? Oh-h!" And Mr. May suddenly picked up the bag. James

turned as if he would snatch it from him. "Well! Feel that, for fairly well!" said Mr. May, handing the bag to Alvina.

"Goodness!" she cried, handing it to Miss Pinnegar.

"Would you believe it?" said Miss Pinnegar, relinquishing it to James. But she spoke coldly, aloof.

Mr. May turned off the gas at the meter, came talking through the darkness of the empty theatre, picking his way with a flash-light.

"C'est le premier pas qui coute," he said, in a sort of American French, as he locked the doors and put the key in his pocket. James tripped silently alongside, bowed under the weight of his Gladstone bag of pennies.

"How much have we taken, father?" asked Alvina gaily.

"I haven't counted," he snapped.

When he got home he hurried upstairs to his bare chamber. He swept his table clear, and then, in an expert fashion, he seized handfuls of coin and piled them in little columns on his board. There was an army of fat pennies, a dozen to a column, along the back, rows and rows of fat brown rank-and-file. In front of these, rows of slim halfpence, like an advance-guard. And commanding all, a stout column

of half-crowns, a few stoutish and important florin-figures, like general and colonels, then quite a file of shillings, like so many captains, and a little cloud of silvery lieutenant sixpences. Right at the end, like a frail drummer boy, a thin stick of threepenny pieces.

There they all were: burly dragoons of stout pennies, heavy and holding their ground, with a screen of halfpenny light infantry, officered by the immovable half-crown general, who in his turn was flanked by all his staff of florin colonels and shilling captains, from whom lightly moved the nimble sixpenny lieutenants all ignoring the wan, frail Joey of the threepenny-bits.

Time after time James ran his almighty eye over his army. He loved them. He loved to feel that his table was pressed down, that it groaned under their weight. He loved to see the pence, like innumerable pillars of cloud, standing waiting to lead on into wildernesses of unopened resource, while the silver, as pillars of light, should guide the way down the long night of fortune. Their weight sank sensually into his muscle, and gave him gratification. The dark redness of bronze, like full-blooded fleas, seemed alive and pulsing, the silver was magic as if winged.