CHAPTER X

THE FALL OF MANCHESTER HOUSE

Alvina rose chastened and wistful. As she was doing her hair, she heard the plaintive nasal sound of Ciccio's mandoline. She looked down the mixed vista of back-yards and little gardens, and was able to catch sight of a portion of Ciccio, who was sitting on a box in the blue-brick yard of his house, bare-headed and in his shirt-sleeves, twitching away at the wailing mandoline. It was not a warm morning, but there was a streak of sunshine. Alvina had noticed that Ciccio did not seem to feel the cold, unless it were a wind or a driving rain. He was playing the wildly-yearning Neapolitan songs, of which Alvina knew nothing. But, although she only saw a section of him, the glimpse of his head was enough to rouse in her that overwhelming fascination, which came and went in spells. His remoteness, his southernness, something velvety and dark. So easily she might miss him altogether! Within a hair's-breadth she had let him disappear.

She hurried down. Geoffrey opened the door to her. She smiled at him in a quick, luminous smile, a magic change in her.

"I could hear Ciccio playing," she said.

Geoffrey spread his rather thick lips in a smile, and jerked his head in the direction of the back door, with a deep, intimate look into Alvina's eyes, as if to say his friend was lovesick.

"Shall I go through?" said Alvina.

Geoffrey laid his large hand on her shoulder for a moment, looked into her eyes, and nodded. He was a broad-shouldered fellow, with a rather flat, handsome face, well-coloured, and with the look of the Alpine ox about him, slow, eternal, even a little mysterious. Alvina was startled by the deep, mysterious look in his dark-fringed ox-eyes. The odd arch of his eyebrows made him suddenly seem not quite human to her. She smiled to him again, startled. But he only inclined his head, and with his heavy hand on her shoulder gently impelled her towards Ciccio.

When she came out at the back she smiled straight into Ciccio's face, with her sudden, luminous smile. His hand on the mandoline trembled into silence. He sat looking at her with an instant re-establishment of knowledge. And yet she shrank from the long, inscrutable gaze of his black-set, tawny eyes. She resented him a little. And yet she went forward to him and stood so that her dress touched him. And still he gazed up at her, with the heavy, unspeaking look, that seemed to bear her down: he seemed like some creature that was watching her for his purposes. She looked aside at the black garden, which had a wiry goose-berry bush.

"You will come with me to Woodhouse?" she said.

He did not answer till she turned to him again. Then, as she met his eyes,

"To Woodhouse?" he said, watching her, to fix her.

"Yes," she said, a little pale at the lips.

And she saw his eternal smile of triumph slowly growing round his mouth. She wanted to cover his mouth with her hand. She preferred his tawny eyes with their black brows and lashes. His eyes watched her as a cat watches a bird, but without the white gleam of ferocity. In his eyes was a deep, deep sun-warmth, something fathomless, deepening black and abysmal, but somehow sweet to her.

"Will you?" she repeated.

But his eyes had already begun to glimmer their consent. He turned aside his face, as if unwilling to give a straight answer.

"Yes," he said.

"Play something to me," she cried.

He lifted his face to her, and shook his head slightly.

"Yes do," she said, looking down on him.

And he bent his head to the mandoline, and suddenly began to sing a Neapolitan song, in a faint, compressed head-voice, looking up at her again as his lips moved, looking straight into her face with a curious mocking caress as the muted voix blanche came through his lips at her, amid the louder quavering of the mandoline. The sound penetrated her like a thread of fire, hurting, but delicious, the high thread of his voice. She could see the Adam's apple move in his throat, his brows tilted as he looked along his lashes at her all the time. Here was the strange sphinx singing again, and herself between its paws! She seemed almost to melt into his power.

Madame intervened to save her.

"What, serenade before breakfast! You have strong stomachs, I say. Eggs and ham are more the question, hein? Come, you smell them, don't you?"

A flicker of contempt and derision went over Ciccio's face as he broke off and looked aside.

"I prefer the serenade," said Alvina. "I've had ham and eggs before."

"You do, hein? Well--always, you won't. And now you must eat the ham and eggs, however. Yes? Isn't it so?"

Ciccio rose to his feet, and looked at Alvina: as he would have looked at Gigi, had Gigi been there. His eyes said unspeakable things about Madame. Alvina flashed a laugh, suddenly. And a good-humoured, half-mocking smile came over his face too.

They turned to follow Madame into the house. And as Alvina went before him, she felt his fingers stroke the nape of her neck, and pass in a soft touch right down her back. She started as if some unseen creature had stroked her with its paw, and she glanced swiftly round, to see the face of Ciccio mischievous behind her shoulder.

"Now I think," said Madame, "that today we all take the same train. We go by the Great Central as far as the junction, together. Then you, Allaye, go on to Knarborough, and we leave you until tomorrow. And now there is not much time."

"I am going to Woodhouse," said Ciccio in French.

"You also! By the train, or the bicycle?"

"Train," said Ciccio.

"Waste so much money?"

Ciccio raised his shoulders slightly.

When breakfast was over, and Alvina had gone to her room, Geoffrey went out into the back yard, where the bicycles stood.

"Cic'," he said. "I should like to go with thee to Woodhouse. Come on bicycle with me."

Ciccio shook his head.

"I'm going in train with her," he said.

Geoffrey darkened with his heavy anger.

"I would like to see how it is, there, chez elle," he said.

"Ask her," said Ciccio.

Geoffrey watched him suddenly.

"Thou forsakest me," he said. "I would like to see it, there."

"Ask her," repeated Ciccio. "Then come on bicycle."

"You're content to leave me," muttered Geoffrey.

Ciccio touched his friend on his broad cheek, and smiled at him with affection.

"I don't leave thee, Gigi. I asked thy advice. You said, Go. But come. Go and ask her, and then come. Come on bicycle, eh? Ask her! Go on! Go and ask her."

Alvina was surprised to hear a tap at her door, and Gigi's voice, in his strong foreign accent:

"Mees Houghton, I carry your bag."

She opened her door in surprise. She was all ready.

"There it is," she said, smiling at him.

But he confronted her like a powerful ox, full of dangerous force. Her smile had reassured him.

"Na, Allaye," he said, "tell me something."

"What?" laughed Alvina.

"Can I come to Woodhouse?"

"When?"

"Today. Can I come on bicycle, to tea, eh? At your house with you and Ciccio? Eh?"

He was smiling with a thick, doubtful, half sullen smile.

"Do!" said Alvina.

He looked at her with his large, dark-blue eyes.

"Really, eh?" he said, holding out his large hand.

She shook hands with him warmly.

"Yes, really!" she said. "I wish you would."

"Good," he said, a broad smile on his thick mouth. And all the time he watched her curiously, from his large eyes.

"Ciccio--a good chap, eh?" he said.

"Is he?" laughed Alvina.

"Ha-a--!" Gigi shook his head solemnly. "The best!" He made such solemn eyes, Alvina laughed. He laughed too, and picked up her bag as if it were a bubble.

"Na Cic'--" he said, as he saw Ciccio in the street. "Sommes d'accord."

"Ben!" said Ciccio, holding out his hand for the bag. "Donne."

"Ne-ne," said Gigi, shrugging.

Alvina found herself on the new and busy station that Sunday morning, one of the little theatrical company. It was an odd experience. They were so obviously a theatrical company--people apart from the world. Madame was darting her black eyes here and there, behind her spotted veil, and standing with the ostensible self-possession of her profession. Max was circling round with large strides, round a big black box on which the red words Natcha-Kee-Tawara showed mystic, and round the small bunch of stage fittings at the end of the platform. Louis was waiting to get the tickets, Gigi and Ciccio were bringing up the bicycles. They were a whole train of departure in themselves, busy, bustling, cheerful--and curiously apart, vagrants.

Alvina strolled away towards the half-open bookstall. Geoffrey was standing monumental between her and the company. She returned to him.

"What time shall we expect you?" she said.

He smiled at her in his broad, friendly fashion.

"Expect me to be there? Why--" he rolled his eyes and proceeded to calculate. "At four o'clock."

"Just about the time when we get there," she said.

He looked at her sagely, and nodded.

They were a good-humoured company in the railway carriage. The men smoked cigarettes and tapped off the ash on the heels of their boots, Madame watched every traveller with professional curiosity. Max scrutinized the newspaper, Lloyds, and pointed out items to Louis, who read them over Max's shoulder, Ciccio suddenly smacked Geoffrey on the thigh, and looked laughing into his face. So till they arrived at the junction. And then there was a kissing and a taking of farewells, as if the company were separating for ever. Louis darted into the refreshment bar and returned with little pies and oranges, which he deposited in the carriage, Madame presented Alvina with a packet of chocolate. And it was "Good-bye, good-bye, Allaye! Good-bye, Ciccio! Bon voyage. Have a good time, both."

So Alvina sped on in the fast train to Knarborough with Ciccio.

"I do like them all," she said.

He opened his mouth slightly and lifted his head up and down. She saw in the movement how affectionate he was, and in his own way, how emotional. He loved them all. She put her hand to his. He gave her hand one sudden squeeze, of physical understanding, then left it as if nothing had happened. There were other people in the carriage with them. She could not help feeling how sudden and lovely that moment's grasp of his hand was: so warm, so whole.

And thus they watched the Sunday morning landscape slip by, as they ran into Knarborough. They went out to a little restaurant to eat. It was one o'clock.

"Isn't it strange, that we are travelling together like this?" she said, as she sat opposite him.

He smiled, looking into her eyes.

"You think it's strange?" he said, showing his teeth slightly.

"Don't you?" she cried.

He gave a slight, laconic laugh.

"And I can hardly bear it that I love you so much," she said, quavering, across the potatoes.

He glanced furtively round, to see if any one was listening, if any one might hear. He would have hated it. But no one was near. Beneath the tiny table, he took her two knees between his knees, and pressed them with a slow, immensely powerful pressure. Helplessly she put her hand across the table to him. He covered it for one moment with his hand, then ignored it. But her knees were still between the powerful, living vice of his knees.

"Eat!" he said to her, smiling, motioning to her plate. And he relaxed her.

They decided to go out to Woodhouse on the tram-car, a long hour's ride. Sitting on the top of the covered car, in the atmosphere of strong tobacco smoke, he seemed self-conscious, withdrawn into his own cover, so obviously a dark-skinned foreigner. And Alvina, as she sat beside him, was reminded of the woman with the negro husband, down in Lumley. She understood the woman's reserve. She herself felt, in the same way, something of an outcast, because of the man at her side. An outcast! And glad to be an outcast. She clung to Ciccio's dark, despised foreign nature. She loved it, she worshipped it, she defied all the other world. Dark, he sat beside her, drawn in to himself, overcast by his presumed inferiority among these northern industrial people. And she was with him, on his side,

outside the pale of her own people.

There were already acquaintances on the tram. She nodded in answer to their salutation, but so obviously from a distance, that they kept turning round to eye her and Ciccio. But they left her alone. The breach between her and them was established for ever--and it was her will which established it.

So up and down the weary hills of the hilly, industrial countryside, till at last they drew near to Woodhouse. They passed the ruins of Throttle-Ha'penny, and Alvina glanced at it indifferent. They ran along the Knarborough Road. A fair number of Woodhouse young people were strolling along the pavements in their Sunday clothes. She knew them all. She knew Lizzie Bates's fox furs, and Fanny Clough's lilac costume, and Mrs. Smitham's winged hat. She knew them all. And almost inevitably the old Woodhouse feeling began to steal over her, she was glad they could not see her, she was a little ashamed of Ciccio. She wished, for the moment, Ciccio were not there. And as the time came to get down, she looked anxiously back and forth to see at which halt she had better descend--where fewer people would notice her. But then she threw her scruples to the wind, and descended into the staring, Sunday afternoon street, attended by Ciccio, who carried her bag. She knew she was a marked figure.

They slipped round to Manchester House. Miss Pinnegar expected Alvina, but by the train, which came later. So she had to be knocked

up, for she was lying down. She opened the door looking a little patched in her cheeks, because of her curious colouring, and a little forlorn, and a little dumpy, and a little irritable.

"I didn't know there'd be two of you," was her greeting.

"Didn't you," said Alvina, kissing her. "Ciccio came to carry my bag."

"Oh," said Miss Pinnegar. "How do you do?" and she thrust out her hand to him. He shook it loosely.

"I had your wire," said Miss Pinnegar. "You said the train. Mrs. Rollings is coming in at four again--"

"Oh all right--" said Alvina.

The house was silent and afternoon-like. Ciccio took off his coat and sat down in Mr. Houghton's chair. Alvina told him to smoke. He kept silent and reserved. Miss Pinnegar, a poor, patch-cheeked, rather round-backed figure with grey-brown fringe, stood as if she did not quite know what to say or do.

She followed Alvina upstairs to her room.

"I can't think why you bring him here," snapped Miss Pinnegar. "I

don't know what you're thinking about. The whole place is talking already."

"I don't care," said Alvina. "I like him."

"Oh--for shame!" cried Miss Pinnegar, lifting her hand with Miss Frost's helpless, involuntary movement. "What do you think of yourself? And your father a month dead."

"It doesn't matter. Father is dead. And I'm sure the dead don't mind."

"I never knew such things as you say."

"Why? I mean them."

Miss Pinnegar stood blank and helpless.

"You're not asking him to stay the night," she blurted.

"Yes. And I'm going back with him to Madame tomorrow. You know I'm part of the company now, as pianist."

"And are you going to marry him?"

"I don't know."

"How can you say you don't know! Why, it's awful. You make me feel I shall go out of my mind."

"But I don't know," said Alvina.

"It's incredible! Simply incredible! I believe you're out of your senses. I used to think sometimes there was something wrong with your mother. And that's what it is with you. You're not quite right in your mind. You need to be looked after."

"Do I, Miss Pinnegar! Ah, well, don't you trouble to look after me, will you?"

"No one will if I don't."

"I hope no one will."

There was a pause.

"I'm ashamed to live another day in Woodhouse," said Miss Pinnegar.

"I'm leaving it for ever," said Alvina.

"I should think so," said Miss Pinnegar.

Suddenly she sank into a chair, and burst into tears, wailing:

"Your poor father! Your poor father!"

"I'm sure the dead are all right. Why must you pity him?"

"You're a lost girl!" cried Miss Pinnegar.

"Am I really?" laughed Alvina. It sounded funny.

"Yes, you're a lost girl," sobbed Miss Pinnegar, on a final note of despair.

"I like being lost," said Alvina.

Miss Pinnegar wept herself into silence. She looked huddled and forlorn. Alvina went to her and laid her hand on her shoulder.

"Don't fret, Miss Pinnegar," she said. "Don't be silly. I love to be with Ciccio and Madame. Perhaps in the end I shall marry him. But if I don't--" her hand suddenly gripped Miss Pinnegar's heavy arm till it hurt--"I wouldn't lose a minute of him, no, not for anything would I."

Poor Miss Pinnegar dwindled, convinced.

"You make it hard for me, in Woodhouse," she said, hopeless.

"Never mind," said Alvina, kissing her. "Woodhouse isn't heaven and earth."

"It's been my home for forty years."

"It's been mine for thirty. That's why I'm glad to leave it." There was a pause.

"I've been thinking," said Miss Pinnegar, "about opening a little business in Tamworth. You know the Watsons are there."

"I believe you'd be happy," said Alvina.

Miss Pinnegar pulled herself together. She had energy and courage still.

"I don't want to stay here, anyhow," she said. "Woodhouse has nothing for me any more."

"Of course it hasn't," said Alvina. "I think you'd be happier away from it."

"Yes--probably I should--now!"

None the less, poor Miss Pinnegar was grey-haired, she was almost a dumpy, odd old woman.

They went downstairs. Miss Pinnegar put on the kettle.

"Would you like to see the house?" said Alvina to Ciccio.

He nodded. And she took him from room to room. His eyes looked quickly and curiously over everything, noticing things, but without criticism.

"This was my mother's little sitting-room," she said. "She sat here for years, in this chair."

"Always here?" he said, looking into Alvina's face.

"Yes. She was ill with her heart. This is another photograph of her. I'm not like her."

"Who is that?" he asked, pointing to a photograph of the handsome, white-haired Miss Frost.

"That was Miss Frost, my governess. She lived here till she died. I loved her--she meant everything to me."

"She also dead--?"

"Yes, five years ago."

They went to the drawing-room. He laid his hand on the keys of the piano, sounding a chord.

"Play," she said.

He shook his head, smiling slightly. But he wished her to play. She sat and played one of Kishwégin's pieces. He listened, faintly smiling.

"Fine piano--eh?" he said, looking into her face.

"I like the tone," she said.

"Is it yours?"

"The piano? Yes. I suppose everything is mine--in name at least. I don't know how father's affairs are really."

He looked at her, and again his eye wandered over the room. He saw a little coloured portrait of a child with a fleece of brownish-gold hair and surprised eyes, in a pale-blue stiff frock with a broad dark-blue sash.

"You?" he said.

"Do you recognize me?" she said. "Aren't I comical?"

She took him upstairs--first to the monumental bedroom.

"This was mother's room," she said. "Now it is mine."

He looked at her, then at the things in the room, then out of the window, then at her again. She flushed, and hurried to show him his room, and the bath-room. Then she went downstairs.

He kept glancing up at the height of the ceilings, the size of the rooms, taking in the size and proportion of the house, and the quality of the fittings.

"It is a big house," he said. "Yours?"

"Mine in name," said Alvina. "Father left all to me--and his debts as well, you see."

"Much debts?"

"Oh yes! I don't quite know how much. But perhaps more debts than there is property. I shall go and see the lawyer in the morning. Perhaps there will be nothing at all left for me, when everything is

paid."

She had stopped on the stairs, telling him this, turning round to him, who was on the steps above. He looked down on her, calculating. Then he smiled sourly.

"Bad job, eh, if it is all gone--!" he said.

"I don't mind, really, if I can live," she said.

He spread his hands, deprecating, not understanding. Then he glanced up the stairs and along the corridor again, and downstairs into the hall.

"A fine big house. Grand if it was yours," he said.

"I wish it were," she said rather pathetically, "if you like it so much."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Hé!" he said. "How not like it!"

"I don't like it," she said. "I think it's a gloomy miserable hole. I hate it. I've lived here all my life and seen everything bad happen here. I hate it."

"Why?" he said, with a curious, sarcastic intonation.

"It's a bad job it isn't yours, for certain," he said, as they entered the living-room, where Miss Pinnegar sat cutting bread and butter.

"What?" said Miss Pinnegar sharply.

"The house," said Alvina.

"Oh well, we don't know. We'll hope for the best," replied Miss Pinnegar, arranging the bread and butter on the plate. Then, rather tart, she added: "It is a bad job. And a good many things are a bad job, besides that. If Miss Houghton had what she ought to have, things would be very different, I assure you."

"Oh yes," said Ciccio, to whom this address was directed.

"Very different indeed. If all the money hadn't been--lost--in the way it has, Miss Houghton wouldn't be playing the piano, for one thing, in a cinematograph show."

"No, perhaps not," said Ciccio.

"Certainly not. It's not the right thing for her to be doing, at

all!"

"You think not?" said Ciccio.

"Do you imagine it is?" said Miss Pinnegar, turning point blank on him as he sat by the fire.

He looked curiously at Miss Pinnegar, grinning slightly.

"Hé!" he said. "How do I know!"

"I should have thought it was obvious," said Miss Pinnegar.

"Hé!" he ejaculated, not fully understanding.

"But of course those that are used to nothing better can't see anything but what they're used to," she said, rising and shaking the crumbs from her black silk apron, into the fire. He watched her.

Miss Pinnegar went away into the scullery. Alvina was laying a fire in the drawing-room. She came with a dustpan to take some coal from the fire of the living-room.

"What do you want?" said Ciccio, rising. And he took the shovel from her hand.

"Big, hot fires, aren't they?" he said, as he lifted the burning coals from the glowing mass of the grate.

"Enough," said Alvina. "Enough! We'll put it in the drawing-room." He carried the shovel of flaming, smoking coals to the other room, and threw them in the grate on the sticks, watching Alvina put on more pieces of coal.

"Fine, a fire! Quick work, eh? A beautiful thing, a fire! You know what they say in my place: You can live without food, but you can't live without fire."

"But I thought it was always hot in Naples," said Alvina.

"No, it isn't. And my village, you know, when I was small boy, that was in the mountains, an hour quick train from Naples. Cold in the winter, hot in the summer--"

"As cold as England?" said Alvina.

"Hé--and colder. The wolves come down. You could hear them crying in the night, in the frost--"

"How terrifying--!" said Alvina.

"And they will kill the dogs! Always they kill the dogs. You know,

they hate dogs, wolves do." He made a queer noise, to show how wolves hate dogs. Alvina understood, and laughed.

"So should I, if I was a wolf," she said.

"Yes--eh?" His eyes gleamed on her for a moment.

"Ah but, the poor dogs! You find them bitten--carried away among the trees or the stones, hard to find them, poor things, the next day."

"How frightened they must be--!" said Alvina.

"Frightened--hu!" he made sudden gesticulations and ejaculations, which added volumes to his few words.

"And did you like it, your village?" she said.

He put his head on one side in deprecation.

"No," he said, "because, you see--hé, there is nothing to do--no money--work--work--work--no life--you see nothing. When I was a small boy my father, he died, and my mother comes with me to Naples. Then I go with the little boats on the sea--fishing, carrying people--" He flourished his hand as if to make her understand all the things that must be wordless. He smiled at her--but there was a faint, poignant sadness and remoteness in him, a beauty of old

fatality, and ultimate indifference to fate.

"And were you very poor?"

"Poor?--why yes! Nothing. Rags--no shoes--bread, little fish from the sea--shell-fish--"

His hands flickered, his eyes rested on her with a profound look of knowledge. And it seemed, in spite of all, one state was very much the same to him as another, poverty was as much life as affluence. Only he had a sort of jealous idea that it was humiliating to be poor, and so, for vanity's sake, he would have possessions. The countless generations of civilization behind him had left him an instinct of the world's meaninglessness. Only his little modern education made money and independence an idée fixe. Old instinct told him the world was nothing. But modern education, so shallow, was much more efficacious than instinct. It drove him to make a show of himself to the world. Alvina watching him, as if hypnotized, saw his old beauty, formed through civilization after civilization; and at the same time she saw his modern vulgarianism, and decadence.

"And when you go back, you will go back to your old village?" she said.

He made a gesture with his head and shoulders, evasive, non-committal.

"I don't know, you see," he said.

"What is the name of it?"

"Pescocalascio." He said the word subduedly, unwillingly.

"Tell me again," said Alvina.

"Pescocalascio."

She repeated it.

"And tell me how you spell it," she said.

He fumbled in his pocket for a pencil and a piece of paper. She rose and brought him an old sketch-book. He wrote, slowly, but with the beautiful Italian hand, the name of his village.

"And write your name," she said.

"Marasca Francesco," he wrote.

"And write the name of your father and mother," she said. He looked at her enquiringly.

"I want to see them," she said.

"Marasca Giovanni," he wrote, and under that "Califano Maria."

She looked at the four names, in the graceful Italian script. And one after the other she read them out. He corrected her, smiling gravely. When she said them properly, he nodded.

"Yes," he said. "That's it. You say it well."

At that moment Miss Pinnegar came in to say Mrs. Rollings had seen another of the young men riding down the street.

"That's Gigi! He doesn't know how to come here," said Ciccio, quickly taking his hat and going out to find his friend.

Geoffrey arrived, his broad face hot and perspiring.

"Couldn't you find it?" said Alvina.

"I find the house, but I couldn't find no door," said Geoffrey.

They all laughed, and sat down to tea. Geoffrey and Ciccio talked to each other in French, and kept each other in countenance. Fortunately for them, Madame had seen to their table-manners. But still they were far too free and easy to suit Miss Pinnegar.

"Do you know," said Ciccio in French to Geoffrey, "what a fine house this is?"

"No," said Geoffrey, rolling his large eyes round the room, and speaking with his cheek stuffed out with food. "Is it?"

"Ah--if it was hers, you know--"

And so, after tea, Ciccio said to Alvina:

"Shall you let Geoffrey see the house?"

The tour commenced again. Geoffrey, with his thick legs planted apart, gazed round the rooms, and made his comments in French to Ciccio. When they climbed the stairs, he fingered the big, smooth mahogany bannister-rail. In the bedroom he stared almost dismayed at the colossal bed and cupboard. In the bath-room he turned on the old-fashioned, silver taps.

"Here is my room--" said Ciccio in French.

"Assez éloigné!" replied Gigi. Ciccio also glanced along the corridor.

"Yes," he said. "But an open course--"

"Look, my boy--if you could marry this--" meaning the house.

"Ha, she doesn't know if it hers any more! Perhaps the debts cover every bit of it."

"Don't say so! Na, that's a pity, that's a pity! La pauvre fille--pauvre demoiselle!" lamented Geoffrey.

"Isn't it a pity! What dost say?"

"A thousand pities! A thousand pities! Look, my boy, love needs no havings, but marriage does. Love is for all, even the grasshoppers. But marriage means a kitchen. That's how it is. La pauvre demoiselle; c'est malheur pour elle."

"That's true," said Ciccio. "Et aussi pour moi. For me as well."

"For thee as well, cher! Perhaps--" said Geoffrey, laying his arm on Ciccio's shoulder, and giving him a sudden hug. They smiled to each other.

"Who knows!" said Ciccio.

"Who knows, truly, my Cic'."

As they went downstairs to rejoin Alvina, whom they heard playing on the piano in the drawing-room, Geoffrey peeped once more into the big bedroom.

"Tu n'es jamais monté si haut, mon beau. Pour moi, ça serait difficile de m'élever. J'aurais bien peur, moi. Tu te trouves aussi un peu ébahi, hein? n'est-ce pas?"

"Y'a place pour trois," said Ciccio.

"Non, je crêverais, là haut. Pas pour moi!"

And they went laughing downstairs.

Miss Pinnegar was sitting with Alvina, determined not to go to Chapel this evening. She sat, rather hulked, reading a novel. Alvina flirted with the two men, played the piano to them, and suggested a game of cards.

"Oh, Alvina, you will never bring out the cards tonight!" expostulated poor Miss Pinnegar.

"But, Miss Pinnegar, it can't possibly hurt anybody."

"You know what I think--and what your father thought--and your mother and Miss Frost--"

"You see I think it's only prejudice," said Alvina.

"Oh very well!" said Miss Pinnegar angrily.

And closing her book, she rose and went to the other room.

Alvina brought out the cards, and a little box of pence which remained from Endeavour harvests. At that moment there was a knock. It was Mr. May. Miss Pinnegar brought him in, in triumph.

"Oh!" he said. "Company! I heard you'd come, Miss Houghton, so I hastened to pay my compliments. I didn't know you had company. How do you do, Francesco! How do you do, Geoffrey. Comment allez-vous, alors?"

"Bien!" said Geoffrey. "You are going to take a hand?"

"Cards on Sunday evening! Dear me, what a revolution! Of course, I'm not bigoted. If Miss Houghton asks me--"

Miss Pinnegar looked solemnly at Alvina.

"Yes, do take a hand, Mr. May," said Alvina.

"Thank you, I will then, if I may. Especially as I see those

tempting piles of pennies and ha'pennies. Who is bank, may I ask? Is Miss Pinnegar going to play too?"

But Miss Pinnegar had turned her poor, bowed back, and departed.

"I'm afraid she's offended," said Alvina.

"But why? We don't put her soul in danger, do we now? I'm a good Catholic, you know, I can't do with these provincial little creeds. Who deals? Do you, Miss Houghton? But I'm afraid we shall have a rather dry game? What? Isn't that your opinion?"

The other men laughed.

"If Miss Houghton would just allow me to run round and bring something in. Yes? May I? That would be so much more cheerful. What is your choice, gentlemen?"

"Beer," said Ciccio, and Geoffrey nodded.

"Beer! Oh really! Extraor'nary! I always take a little whiskey myself. What kind of beer? Ale?--or bitter? I'm afraid I'd better bring bottles. Now how can I secrete them? You haven't a small travelling case, Miss Houghton? Then I shall look as if I'd just been taking a journey. Which I have--to the Sun and back: and if that isn't far enough, even for Miss Pinnegar and John Wesley,

why, I'm sorry."

Alvina produced the travelling case.

"Excellent!" he said. "Excellent! It will hold half-a-dozen beautifully. Now--" he fell into a whisper--"hadn't I better sneak out at the front door, and so escape the clutches of the watch-dog?"

Out he went, on tip-toe, the other two men grinning at him. Fortunately there were glasses, the best old glasses, in the side cupboard in the drawing room. But unfortunately, when Mr. May returned, a corkscrew was in request. So Alvina stole to the kitchen. Miss Pinnegar sat dumped by the fire, with her spectacles and her book. She watched like a lynx as Alvina returned. And she saw the tell-tale corkscrew. So she dumped a little deeper in her chair.

"There was a sound of revelry by night!" For Mr. May, after a long depression, was in high feather. They shouted, positively shouted over their cards, they roared with excitement, expostulation, and laughter. Miss Pinnegar sat through it all. But at one point she could bear it no longer.

The drawing-room door opened, and the dumpy, hulked, faded woman in a black serge dress stood like a rather squat avenging angel in the doorway.

"What would your father say to this?" she said sternly.

The company suspended their laughter and their cards, and looked around. Miss Pinnegar wilted and felt strange under so many eyes.

"Father!" said Alvina. "But why father?"

"You lost girl!" said Miss Pinnegar, backing out and closing the door.

Mr. May laughed so much that he knocked his whiskey over.

"There," he cried, helpless, "look what she's cost me!" And he went off into another paroxysm, swelling like a turkey.

Ciccio opened his mouth, laughing silently.

"Lost girl! Lost girl! How lost, when you are at home?" said Geoffrey, making large eyes and looking hither and thither as if he had lost something.

They all went off again in a muffled burst.

"No but, really," said Mr. May, "drinking and card-playing with strange men in the drawing-room on Sunday evening, of cauce it's

scandalous. It's terrible! I don't know how ever you'll be saved, after such a sin. And in Manchester House, too--!" He went off into another silent, turkey-scarlet burst of mirth, wriggling in his chair and squealing faintly: "Oh, I love it, I love it! You lost girl! Why of cauce she's lost! And Miss Pinnegar has only just found it out. Who wouldn't be lost? Why even Miss Pinnegar would be lost if she could. Of cauce she would! Quite natch'ral!"

Mr. May wiped his eyes, with his handkerchief which had unfortunately mopped up his whiskey.

So they played on, till Mr. May and Geoffrey had won all the pennies, except twopence of Ciccio's. Alvina was in debt.

"Well I think it's been a most agreeable game," said Mr. May. "Most agreeable! Don't you all?"

The two other men smiled and nodded.

"I'm only sorry to think Miss Houghton has lost so steadily all evening. Really quite remarkable. But then--you see--I comfort myself with the reflection 'Lucky in cards, unlucky in love.' I'm certainly hounded with misfortune in love. And I'm sure Miss Houghton would rather be unlucky in cards than in love. What, isn't it so?"

"Of course," said Alvina.

"There, you see, of cauce! Well, all we can do after that is to wish her success in love. Isn't that so, gentlemen? I'm sure we are all quite willing to do our best to contribute to it. Isn't it so, gentlemen? Aren't we all ready to do our best to contribute to Miss Houghton's happiness in love? Well then, let us drink to it." He lifted his glass, and bowed to Alvina. "With every wish for your success in love, Miss Houghton, and your devoted servant--" He bowed and drank.

Geoffrey made large eyes at her as he held up his glass.

"I know you'll come out all right in love, I know," he said heavily.

"And you, Ciccio? Aren't you drinking?" said Mr. May.

Ciccio held up his glass, looked at Alvina, made a little mouth at her, comical, and drank his beer.

"Well," said Mr. May, "beer must confirm it, since words won't."

"What time is it?" said Alvina. "We must have supper."

It was past nine o'clock. Alvina rose and went to the kitchen, the

men trailing after her. Miss Pinnegar was not there. She was not anywhere.

"Has she gone to bed?" said Mr. May. And he crept stealthily upstairs on tip-toe, a comical, flush-faced, tubby little man. He was familiar with the house. He returned prancing.

"I heard her cough," he said. "There's a light under her door. She's gone to bed. Now haven't I always said she was a good soul? I shall drink her health. Miss Pinnegar--" and he bowed stiffly in the direction of the stairs--"your health, and a good night's rest."

After which, giggling gaily, he seated himself at the head of the table and began to carve the cold mutton.

"And where are the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras this week?" he asked. They told him.

"Oh? And you two are cycling back to the camp of Kishwégin tonight? We mustn't prolong our cheerfulness too far."

"Ciccio is staying to help me with my bag tomorrow," said Alvina. "You know I've joined the Tawaras permanently--as pianist."

"No, I didn't know that! Oh really! Really! Oh! Well! I see! Permanently! Yes, I am surprised! Yes! As pianist? And if I might

ask, what is your share of the tribal income?"

"That isn't settled yet," said Alvina.

"No! Exactly! Exactly! It wouldn't be settled yet. And you say it is a permanent engagement? Of cauce, at such a figure."

"Yes, it is a permanent engagement," said Alvina.

"Really! What a blow you give me! You won't come back to the Endeavour? What? Not at all?"

"No," said Alvina. "I shall sell out of the Endeavour."

"Really! You've decided, have you? Oh! This is news to me. And is this quite final, too?"

"Quite," said Alvina.

"I see! Putting two and two together, if I may say so--" and he glanced from her to the young men--"I see. Most decidedly, most one-sidedly, if I may use the vulgarism, I see--e--e! Oh! but what a blow you give me! What a blow you give me!"

"Why?" said Alvina.

"What's to become of the Endeavour? and consequently, of poor me?"

"Can't you keep it going?--form a company?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I've done my best. But I'm afraid, you know, you've landed me."

"I'm so sorry," said Alvina. "I hope not."

"Thank you for the hope" said Mr. May sarcastically. "They say hope is sweet. I begin to find it a little bitter!"

Poor man, he had already gone quite yellow in the face. Ciccio and Geoffrey watched him with dark-seeing eyes.

"And when are you going to let this fatal decision take effect?" asked Mr. May.

"I'm going to see the lawyer tomorrow, and I'm going to tell him to sell everything and clear up as soon as possible," said Alvina.

"Sell everything! This house, and all it contains?"

"Yes," said Alvina. "Everything."

"Really!" Mr. May seemed smitten quite dumb. "I feel as if the world

had suddenly come to an end," he said.

"But hasn't your world often come to an end before?" said Alvina.

"Well--I suppose, once or twice. But never quite on top of me, you see, before--"

There was a silence.

"And have you told Miss Pinnegar?" said Mr. May.

"Not finally. But she has decided to open a little business in Tamworth, where she has relations."

"Has she! And are you really going to tour with these young people--?" he indicated Ciccio and Gigi. "And at no salary!" His voice rose. "Why! It's almost White Slave Traffic, on Madame's part. Upon my word!"

"I don't think so," said Alvina. "Don't you see that's insulting."

"Insulting! Well, I don't know. I think it's the truth--"

"Not to be said to me, for all that," said Alvina, quivering with anger.

"Oh!" perked Mr. May, yellow with strange rage. "Oh! I mustn't say what I think! Oh!"

"Not if you think those things--" said Alvina.

"Oh really! The difficulty is, you see, I'm afraid I do think them--" Alvina watched him with big, heavy eyes.

"Go away," she said. "Go away! I won't be insulted by you."

"No indeed!" cried Mr. May, starting to his feet, his eyes almost bolting from his head. "No indeed! I wouldn't think of insulting you in the presence of these two young gentlemen."

Ciccio rose slowly, and with a slow, repeated motion of the head, indicated the door.

"Allez!" he said.

"Certainement!" cried Mr. May, flying at Ciccio, verbally, like an enraged hen yellow at the gills. "Certainement! Je m'en vais. Cette compagnie n'est pas de ma choix."

"Allez!" said Ciccio, more loudly.

And Mr. May strutted out of the room like a bird bursting with its

own rage. Ciccio stood with his hands on the table, listening. They heard Mr. May slam the front door.

"Gone!" said Geoffrey.

Ciccio smiled sneeringly.

"Voyez, un cochon de lait," said Gigi amply and calmly.

Ciccio sat down in his chair. Geoffrey poured out some beer for him, saying:

"Drink, my Cic', the bubble has burst, prfff!" And Gigi knocked in his own puffed cheek with his fist. "Allaye, my dear, your health! We are the Tawaras. We are Allaye! We are Pacohuila! We are Walgatchka! Allons! The milk-pig is stewed and eaten. Voilà!" He drank, smiling broadly.

"One by one," said Geoffrey, who was a little drunk: "One by one we put them out of the field, they are hors de combat. Who remains? Pacohuila, Walgatchka, Allaye--"

He smiled very broadly. Alvina was sitting sunk in thought and torpor after her sudden anger.

"Allaye, what do you think about? You are the bride of Tawara," said

Geoffrey.

Alvina looked at him, smiling rather wanly.

"And who is Tawara?" she asked.

He raised his shoulders and spread his hands and swayed his head from side to side, for all the world like a comic mandarin.

"There!" he cried. "The question! Who is Tawara? Who? Tell me! Ciccio is he--and I am he--and Max and Louis--" he spread his hand to the distant members of the tribe.

"I can't be the bride of all four of you," said Alvina, laughing.

"No--no! No--no! Such a thing does not come into my mind. But you are the Bride of Tawara. You dwell in the tent of Pacohuila. And comes the day, should it ever be so, there is no room for you in the tent of Pacohuila, then the lodge of Walgatchka the bear is open for you. Open, yes, wide open--" He spread his arms from his ample chest, at the end of the table. "Open, and when Allaye enters, it is the lodge of Allaye, Walgatchka is the bear that serves Allaye. By the law of the Pale Face, by the law of the Yenghees, by the law of the Fransayes, Walgatchka shall be husband-bear to Allaye, that day she lifts the door-curtain of his tent--"

He rolled his eyes and looked around. Alvina watched him.

"But I might be afraid of a husband-bear," she said.

Geoffrey got on to his feet.

"By the Manitou," he said, "the head of the bear Walgatchka is humble--" here Geoffrey bowed his head--"his teeth are as soft as lilies--" here he opened his mouth and put his finger on his small close teeth--"his hands are as soft as bees that stroke a flower--" here he spread his hands and went and suddenly flopped on his knees beside Alvina, showing his hands and his teeth still, and rolling his eyes. "Allaye can have no fear at all of the bear Walgatchka," he said, looking up at her comically.

Ciccio, who had been watching and slightly grinning, here rose to his feet and took Geoffrey by the shoulder, pulling him up.

"Basta!" he said. "Tu es saoul. You are drunk, my Gigi. Get up. How are you going to ride to Mansfield, hein?--great beast."

"Ciccio," said Geoffrey solemnly. "I love thee, I love thee as a brother, and also more. I love thee as a brother, my Ciccio, as thou knowest. But--" and he puffed fiercely--"I am the slave of Allaye, I am the tame bear of Allaye."

"Get up," said Ciccio, "get up! Per bacco! She doesn't want a tame bear." He smiled down on his friend.

Geoffrey rose to his feet and flung his arms round Ciccio.

"Cic'," he besought him. "Cic'--I love thee as a brother. But let me be the tame bear of Allaye, let me be the gentle bear of Allaye."

"All right," said Ciccio. "Thou art the tame bear of Allaye."

Geoffrey strained Ciccio to his breast.

"Thank you! Thank you! Salute me, my own friend."

And Ciccio kissed him on either cheek. Whereupon Geoffrey immediately flopped on his knees again before Alvina, and presented her his broad, rich-coloured cheek.

"Salute your bear, Allaye," he cried. "Salute your slave, the tame bear Walgatchka, who is a wild bear for all except Allaye and his brother Pacohuila the Puma." Geoffrey growled realistically as a wild bear as he kneeled before Alvina, presenting his cheek.

Alvina looked at Ciccio, who stood above, watching. Then she lightly kissed him on the cheek, and said:

"Won't you go to bed and sleep?"

Geoffrey staggered to his feet, shaking his head.

"No--no--" he said. "No--no! Walgatchka must travel to the tent of Kishwégin, to the Camp of the Tawaras."

"Not tonight, mon brave," said Ciccio. "Tonight we stay here, hein. Why separate, hein?--frère?"

Geoffrey again clasped Ciccio in his arms.

"Pacohuila and Walgatchka are blood-brothers, two bodies, one blood. One blood, in two bodies; one stream, in two valleys: one lake, between two mountains."

Here Geoffrey gazed with large, heavy eyes on Ciccio. Alvina brought a candle and lighted it.

"You will manage in the one room?" she said. "I will give you another pillow."

She led the way upstairs. Geoffrey followed, heavily. Then Ciccio. On the landing Alvina gave them the pillow and the candle, smiled, bade them good-night in a whisper, and went downstairs again. She cleared away the supper and carried away all glasses and bottles

from the drawing-room. Then she washed up, removing all traces of the feast. The cards she restored to their old mahogany box. Manchester House looked itself again.

She turned off the gas at the meter, and went upstairs to bed. From the far room she could hear the gentle, but profound vibrations of Geoffrey's snoring. She was tired after her day: too tired to trouble about anything any more.

But in the morning she was first downstairs. She heard Miss Pinnegar, and hurried. Hastily she opened the windows and doors to drive away the smell of beer and smoke. She heard the men rumbling in the bath-room. And quickly she prepared breakfast and made a fire. Mrs. Rollings would not appear till later in the day. At a quarter to seven Miss Pinnegar came down, and went into the scullery to make her tea.

"Did both the men stay?" she asked.

"Yes, they both slept in the end room," said Alvina.

Miss Pinnegar said no more, but padded with her tea and her boiled egg into the living room. In the morning she was wordless.

Ciccio came down, in his shirt-sleeves as usual, but wearing a collar. He greeted Miss Pinnegar politely.

"Good-morning!" she said, and went on with her tea.

Geoffrey appeared. Miss Pinnegar glanced once at him, sullenly, and briefly answered his good-morning. Then she went on with her egg, slow and persistent in her movements, mum.

The men went out to attend to Geoffrey's bicycle. The morning was slow and grey, obscure. As they pumped up the tires, they heard some one padding behind. Miss Pinnegar came and unbolted the yard door, but ignored their presence. Then they saw her return and slowly mount the outer stair-ladder, which went up to the top floor. Two minutes afterwards they were startled by the irruption of the work-girls. As for the work-girls, they gave quite loud, startled squeals, suddenly seeing the two men on their right hand, in the obscure morning. And they lingered on the stair-way to gaze in rapt curiosity, poking and whispering, until Miss Pinnegar appeared overhead, and sharply rang a bell which hung beside the entrance door of the work-rooms.

After which excitements Geoffrey and Ciccio went in to breakfast, which Alvina had prepared.

"You have done it all, eh?" said Ciccio, glancing round.

"Yes. I've made breakfast for years, now," said Alvina.

"Not many more times here, eh?" he said, smiling significantly.

"I hope not," said Alvina.

Ciccio sat down almost like a husband--as if it were his right.

Geoffrey was very quiet this morning. He ate his breakfast, and rose to go.

"I shall see you soon," he said, smiling sheepishly and bowing to Alvina. Ciccio accompanied him to the street.

When Ciccio returned, Alvina was once more washing dishes.

"What time shall we go?" he said.

"We'll catch the one train. I must see the lawyer this morning."

"And what shall you say to him?"

"I shall tell him to sell everything--"

"And marry me?"

She started, and looked at him.

"You don't want to marry, do you?" she said.

"Yes, I do."

"Wouldn't you rather wait, and see--"

"What?" he said.

"See if there is any money."

He watched her steadily, and his brow darkened.

"Why?" he said.

She began to tremble.

"You'd like it better if there was money."

A slow, sinister smile came on his mouth. His eyes never smiled, except to Geoffrey, when a flood of warm, laughing light sometimes suffused them.

"You think I should!"

"Yes. It's true, isn't it? You would!"

He turned his eyes aside, and looked at her hands as she washed the forks. They trembled slightly. Then he looked back at her eyes again, that were watching him large and wistful and a little accusing.

His impudent laugh came on his face.

"Yes," he said, "it is always better if there is money." He put his hand on her, and she winced. "But I marry you for love, you know. You know what love is--" And he put his arms round her, and laughed down into her face.

She strained away.

"But you can have love without marriage," she said. "You know that."

"All right! All right! Give me love, eh? I want that."

She struggled against him.

"But not now," she said.

She saw the light in his eyes fix determinedly, and he nodded.

"Now!" he said. "Now!"

His yellow-tawny eyes looked down into hers, alien and overbearing.

"I can't," she struggled. "I can't now."

He laughed in a sinister way: yet with a certain warmheartedness.

"Come to that big room--" he said.

Her face flew fixed into opposition.

"I can't now, really," she said grimly.

His eyes looked down at hers. Her eyes looked back at him, hard and cold and determined. They remained motionless for some seconds. Then, a stray wisp of her hair catching his attention, desire filled his heart, warm and full, obliterating his anger in the combat. For a moment he softened. He saw her hardness becoming more assertive, and he wavered in sudden dislike, and almost dropped her. Then again the desire flushed his heart, his smile became reckless of her, and he picked her right up.

"Yes," he said. "Now."

For a second, she struggled frenziedly. But almost instantly she recognized how much stronger he was, and she was still, mute and

motionless with anger. White, and mute, and motionless, she was taken to her room. And at the back of her mind all the time she wondered at his deliberate recklessness of her. Recklessly, he had his will of her--but deliberately, and thoroughly, not rushing to the issue, but taking everything he wanted of her, progressively, and fully, leaving her stark, with nothing, nothing of herself--nothing.

When she could lie still she turned away from him, still mute. And he lay with his arms over her, motionless. Noises went on, in the street, overhead in the work-room. But theirs was complete silence.

At last he rose and looked at her.

"Love is a fine thing, Allaye," he said.

She lay mute and unmoving. He approached, laid his hand on her breast, and kissed her.

"Love," he said, asserting, and laughing.

But still she was completely mute and motionless. He threw bedclothes over her and went downstairs, whistling softly.

She knew she would have to break her own trance of obstinacy. So she snuggled down into the bedclothes, shivering deliciously, for her skin had become chilled. She didn't care a bit, really, about her

own downfall. She snuggled deliciously in the sheets, and admitted to herself that she loved him. In truth, she loved him--and she was laughing to herself.

Luxuriously, she resented having to get up and tackle her heap of broken garments. But she did it. She took other clothes, adjusted her hair, tied on her apron, and went downstairs once more. She could not find Ciccio: he had gone out. A stray cat darted from the scullery, and broke a plate in her leap. Alvina found her washing-up water cold. She put on more, and began to dry her dishes.

Ciccio returned shortly, and stood in the doorway looking at her. She turned to him, unexpectedly laughing.

"What do you think of yourself?" she laughed.

"Well," he said, with a little nod, and a furtive look of triumph about him, evasive. He went past her and into the room. Her inside burned with love for him: so elusive, so beautiful, in his silent passing out of her sight. She wiped her dishes happily. Why was she so absurdly happy, she asked herself? And why did she still fight so hard against the sense of his dark, unseizable beauty? Unseizable, for ever unseizable! That made her almost his slave. She fought against her own desire to fall at his feet. Ridiculous to be so happy.

She sang to herself as she went about her work downstairs. Then she went upstairs, to do the bedrooms and pack her bag. At ten o'clock she was to go to the family lawyer.

She lingered over her possessions: what to take, and what not to take. And so doing she wasted her time. It was already ten o'clock when she hurried downstairs. He was sitting quite still, waiting. He looked up at her.

"Now I must hurry," she said. "I don't think I shall be more than an hour."

He put on his hat and went out with her.

"I shall tell the lawyer I am engaged to you. Shall I?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Tell him what you like." He was indifferent.

"Because," said Alvina gaily, "we can please ourselves what we do, whatever we say. I shall say we think of getting married in the summer, when we know each other better, and going to Italy."

"Why shall you say all that?" said Ciccio.

"Because I shall have to give some account of myself, or they'll make me do something I don't want to do. You might come to the

lawyer's with me, will you? He's an awfully nice old man. Then he'd believe in you."

But Ciccio shook his head.

"No," he said. "I shan't go. He doesn't want to see me."

"Well, if you don't want to. But I remember your name, Francesco Marasca, and I remember Pescocalascio."

Ciccio heard in silence, as they walked the half-empty, Monday-morning street of Woodhouse. People kept nodding to Alvina. Some hurried inquisitively across to speak to her and look at Ciccio. Ciccio however stood aside and turned his back.

"Oh yes," Alvina said. "I am staying with friends, here and there, for a few weeks. No, I don't know when I shall be back. Good-bye!"

"You're looking well, Alvina," people said to her. "I think you're looking wonderful. A change does you good."

"It does, doesn't it," said Alvina brightly. And she was pleased she was looking well.

"Well, good-bye for a minute," she said, glancing smiling into his eyes and nodding to him, as she left him at the gate of the lawyer's

house, by the ivy-covered wall.

The lawyer was a little man, all grey. Alvina had known him since she was a child: but rather as an official than an individual. She arrived all smiling in his room. He sat down and scrutinized her sharply, officially, before beginning.

"Well, Miss Houghton, and what news have you?"

"I don't think I've any, Mr. Beeby. I came to you for news."

"Ah!" said the lawyer, and he fingered a paper-weight that covered a pile of papers. "I'm afraid there is nothing very pleasant, unfortunately. And nothing very unpleasant either, for that matter."

He gave her a shrewd little smile.

"Is the will proved?"

"Not yet. But I expect it will be through in a few days' time."

"And are all the claims in?"

"Yes. I think so. I think so!" And again he laid his hand on the

pile of papers under the paper-weight, and ran through the edges with the tips of his fingers.

"All those?" said Alvina.

"Yes," he said quietly. It sounded ominous.

"Many!" said Alvina.

"A fair amount! A fair amount! Let me show you a statement."

He rose and brought her a paper. She made out, with the lawyer's help, that the claims against her father's property exceeded the gross estimate of his property by some seven hundred pounds.

"Does it mean we owe seven hundred pounds?" she asked.

"That is only on the estimate of the property. It might, of course, realize much more, when sold--or it might realize less."

"How awful!" said Alvina, her courage sinking.

"Unfortunate! Unfortunate! However, I don't think the realization of the property would amount to less than the estimate. I don't think so."

"But even then," said Alvina. "There is sure to be something owing--"

She saw herself saddled with her father's debts.

"I'm afraid so," said the lawyer.

"And then what?" said Alvina.

"Oh--the creditors will have to be satisfied with a little less than they claim, I suppose. Not a very great deal, you see. I don't expect they will complain a great deal. In fact, some of them will be less badly off than they feared. No, on that score we need not trouble further. Useless if we do, anyhow. But now, about yourself. Would you like me to try to compound with the creditors, so that you could have some sort of provision? They are mostly people who know you, know your condition: and I might try--"

"Try what?" said Alvina.

"To make some sort of compound. Perhaps you might retain a lease of Miss Pinnegar's work-rooms. Perhaps even something might be done about the cinematograph. What would you like--?"

Alvina sat still in her chair, looking through the window at the ivy sprays, and the leaf buds on the lilac. She felt she could not, she

could not cut off every resource. In her own heart she had confidently expected a few hundred pounds: even a thousand or more. And that would make her something of a catch, to people who had nothing. But now!--nothing!--nothing at the back of her but her hundred pounds. When that was gone--!

In her dilemma she looked at the lawyer.

"You didn't expect it would be quite so bad?" he said.

"I think I didn't," she said.

"No. Well--it might have been worse."

Again he waited. And again she looked at him vacantly.

"What do you think?" he said.

For answer, she only looked at him with wide eyes.

"Perhaps you would rather decide later."

"No," she said. "No. It's no use deciding later."

The lawyer watched her with curious eyes, his hand beat a little impatiently.

"I will do my best," he said, "to get what I can for you."

"Oh well!" she said. "Better let everything go. I don't want to hang on. Don't bother about me at all. I shall go away, anyhow."

"You will go away?" said the lawyer, and he studied his finger-nails.

"Yes. I shan't stay here."

"Oh! And may I ask if you have any definite idea, where you will go?"

"I've got an engagement as pianist, with a travelling theatrical company."

"Oh indeed!" said the lawyer, scrutinizing her sharply. She stared away vacantly out of the window. He took to the attentive study of his finger-nails once more. "And at a sufficient salary?"

"Quite sufficient, thank you," said Alvina.

"Oh! Well! Well now!--" He fidgetted a little. "You see, we are all old neighbours and connected with your father for many years. We--that is the persons interested, and myself--would not like to

think that you were driven out of Woodhouse--er--er--destitute. If--er--we could come to some composition--make some arrangement that would be agreeable to you, and would, in some measure, secure you a means of livelihood--"

He watched Alvina with sharp blue eyes. Alvina looked back at him, still vacantly.

"No--thanks awfully!" she said. "But don't bother. I'm going away."

"With the travelling theatrical company?"

"Yes."

The lawyer studied his finger-nails intensely.

"Well," he said, feeling with a finger-tip an imaginary roughness of one nail-edge. "Well, in that case--In that case--Supposing you have made an irrevocable decision--"

He looked up at her sharply. She nodded slowly, like a porcelain mandarin.

"In that case," he said, "we must proceed with the valuation and the preparation for the sale."

"Yes," she said faintly.

"You realize," he said, "that everything in Manchester House, except your private personal property, and that of Miss Pinnegar, belongs to the claimants, your father's creditors, and may not be removed from the house."

"Yes," she said.

"And it will be necessary to make an account of everything in the house. So if you and Miss Pinnegar will put your possessions strictly apart--But I shall see Miss Pinnegar during the course of the day. Would you ask her to call about seven--I think she is free then--"

Alvina sat trembling.

"I shall pack my things today," she said.

"Of course," said the lawyer, "any little things to which you may be attached the claimants would no doubt wish you to regard as your own. For anything of greater value--your piano, for example--I should have to make a personal request--"

"Oh, I don't want anything--" said Alvina.

"No? Well! You will see. You will be here a few days?"

"No," said Alvina. "I'm going away today."

"Today! Is that also irrevocable?"

"Yes. I must go this afternoon."

"On account of your engagement? May I ask where your company is performing this week? Far away?"

"Mansfield!"

"Oh! Well then, in case I particularly wished to see you, you could come over?"

"If necessary," said Alvina. "But I don't want to come to Woodhouse unless it is necessary. Can't we write?"

"Yes--certainly! Certainly!--most things! Certainly! And now--"

He went into certain technical matters, and Alvina signed some documents. At last she was free to go. She had been almost an hour in the room.

"Well, good-morning, Miss Houghton. You will hear from me, and I

from you. I wish you a pleasant experience in your new occupation. You are not leaving Woodhouse for ever."

"Good-bye!" she said. And she hurried to the road.

Try as she might, she felt as if she had had a blow which knocked her down. She felt she had had a blow.

At the lawyer's gate she stood a minute. There, across a little hollow, rose the cemetery hill. There were her graves: her mother's, Miss Frost's, her father's. Looking, she made out the white cross at Miss Frost's grave, the grey stone at her parents'. Then she turned slowly, under the church wall, back to Manchester House.

She felt humiliated. She felt she did not want to see anybody at all. She did not want to see Miss Pinnegar, nor the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras: and least of all, Ciccio. She felt strange in Woodhouse, almost as if the ground had risen from under her feet and hit her over the mouth. The fact that Manchester House and its very furniture was under seal to be sold on behalf of her father's creditors made her feel as if all her Woodhouse life had suddenly gone smash. She loathed the thought of Manchester House. She loathed staying another minute in it.

And yet she did not want to go to the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras either. The church clock above her clanged eleven. She ought to take the twelve-forty train to Mansfield. Yet instead of going home she

turned off down the alley towards the fields and the brook.

How many times had she gone that road! How many times had she seen Miss Frost bravely striding home that way, from her music-pupils. How many years had she noticed a particular wild cherry-tree come into blossom, a particular bit of black-thorn scatter its whiteness in among the pleached twigs of a hawthorn hedge. How often, how many springs had Miss Frost come home with a bit of this black-thorn in her hand!

Alvina did not want to go to Mansfield that afternoon. She felt insulted. She knew she would be much cheaper in Madame's eyes. She knew her own position with the troupe would be humiliating. It would be openly a little humiliating. But it would be much more maddeningly humiliating to stay in Woodhouse and experience the full flavour of Woodhouse's calculated benevolence. She hardly knew which was worse: the cool look of insolent half-contempt, half-satisfaction with which Madame would receive the news of her financial downfall, or the officious patronage which she would meet from the Woodhouse magnates. She knew exactly how Madame's black eyes would shine, how her mouth would curl with a sneering, slightly triumphant smile, as she heard the news. And she could hear the bullying tone in which Henry Wagstaff would dictate the Woodhouse benevolence to her. She wanted to go away from them all--from them all--for ever.

Even from Ciccio. For she felt he insulted her too. Subtly, they all

did it. They had regard for her possibilities as an heiress. Five hundred, even two hundred pounds would have made all the difference. Useless to deny it. Even to Ciccio. Ciccio would have had a lifelong respect for her, if she had come with even so paltry a sum as two hundred pounds. Now she had nothing, he would coolly withhold this respect. She felt he might jeer at her. And she could not get away from this feeling.

Mercifully she had the bit of ready money. And she had a few trinkets which might be sold. Nothing else. Mercifully, for the mere moment, she was independent.

Whatever else she did, she must go back and pack. She must pack her two boxes, and leave them ready. For she felt that once she had left, she could never come back to Woodhouse again. If England had cliffs all round--why, when there was nowhere else to go and no getting beyond, she could walk over one of the cliffs. Meanwhile, she had her short run before her. She banked hard on her independence.

So she turned back to the town. She would not be able to take the twelve-forty train, for it was already mid-day. But she was glad. She wanted some time to herself. She would send Ciccio on. Slowly she climbed the familiar hill--slowly--and rather bitterly. She felt her native place insulted her: and she felt the Natchas insulted her. In the midst of the insult she remained isolated upon herself,

and she wished to be alone.

She found Ciccio waiting at the end of the yard: eternally waiting, it seemed. He was impatient.

"You've been a long time," he said.

"Yes," she answered.

"We shall have to make haste to catch the train."

"I can't go by this train. I shall have to come on later. You can just eat a mouthful of lunch, and go now."

They went indoors. Miss Pinnegar had not yet come down. Mrs. Rollings was busily peeling potatoes.

"Mr. Marasca is going by the train, he'll have to have a little cold meat," said Alvina. "Would you mind putting it ready while I go upstairs?"

"Sharpses and Fullbankses sent them bills," said Mrs. Rollings. Alvina opened them, and turned pale. It was thirty pounds, the total funeral expenses. She had completely forgotten them.

"And Mr. Atterwell wants to know what you'd like put on th'

headstone for your father--if you'd write it down."

"All right."

Mrs. Rollings popped on the potatoes for Miss Pinnegar's dinner, and spread the cloth for Ciccio. When he was eating, Miss Pinnegar came in. She inquired for Alvina--and went upstairs.

"Have you had your dinner?" she said. For there was Alvina sitting writing a letter.

"I'm going by a later train," said Alvina.

"Both of you?"

"No. He's going now."

Miss Pinnegar came downstairs again, and went through to the scullery. When Alvina came down, she returned to the living room.

"Give this letter to Madame," Alvina said to Ciccio. "I shall be at the hall by seven tonight. I shall go straight there."

"Why can't you come now?" said Ciccio.

"I can't possibly," said Alvina. "The lawyer has just told me

father's debts come to much more than everything is worth. Nothing is ours--not even the plate you're eating from. Everything is under seal to be sold to pay off what is owing. So I've got to get my own clothes and boots together, or they'll be sold with the rest. Mr. Beeby wants you to go round at seven this evening, Miss Pinnegar--before I forget."

"Really!" gasped Miss Pinnegar. "Really! The house and the furniture and everything got to be sold up? Then we're on the streets! I can't believe it."

"So he told me," said Alvina.

"But how positively awful," said Miss Pinnegar, sinking motionless into a chair.

"It's not more than I expected," said Alvina. "I'm putting my things into my two trunks, and I shall just ask Mrs. Slaney to store them for me. Then I've the bag I shall travel with."

"Really!" gasped Miss Pinnegar. "I can't believe it! And when have we got to get out?"

"Oh, I don't think there's a desperate hurry. They'll take an inventory of all the things, and we can live on here till they're actually ready for the sale."

"And when will that be?"

"I don't know. A week or two."

"And is the cinematograph to be sold the same?"

"Yes--everything! The piano--even mother's portrait--"

"It's impossible to believe it," said Miss Pinnegar. "It's impossible. He can never have left things so bad."

"Ciccio," said Alvina. "You'll really have to go if you are to catch the train. You'll give Madame my letter, won't you? I should hate you to miss the train. I know she can't bear me already, for all the fuss and upset I cause."

Ciccio rose slowly, wiping his mouth.

"You'll be there at seven o'clock?" he said.

"At the theatre," she replied.

And without more ado, he left.

Mrs. Rollings came in.

"You've heard?" said Miss Pinnegar dramatically.

"I heard somethink," said Mrs. Rollings.

"Sold up! Everything to be sold up. Every stick and rag! I never thought I should live to see the day," said Miss Pinnegar.

"You might almost have expected it," said Mrs. Rollings. "But you're all right, yourself, Miss Pinnegar. Your money isn't with his, is it?"

"No," said Miss Pinnegar. "What little I have put by is safe. But it's not enough to live on. It's not enough to keep me, even supposing I only live another ten years. If I only spend a pound a week, it costs fifty-two pounds a year. And for ten years, look at it, it's five hundred and twenty pounds. And you couldn't say less. And I haven't half that amount. I never had more than a wage, you know. Why, Miss Frost earned a good deal more than I do. And she didn't leave much more than fifty. Where's the money to come from--?"

"But if you've enough to start a little business--" said Alvina.

"Yes, it's what I shall have to do. It's what I shall have to do. And then what about you? What about you?"

"Oh, don't bother about me," said Alvina.

"Yes, it's all very well, don't bother. But when you come to my age, you know you've got to bother, and bother a great deal, if you're not going to find yourself in a position you'd be sorry for. You have to bother. And you'll have to bother before you've done."

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," said Alvina.

"Ha, sufficient for a good many days, it seems to me."

Miss Pinnegar was in a real temper. To Alvina this seemed an odd way of taking it. The three women sat down to an uncomfortable dinner of cold meat and hot potatoes and warmed-up pudding.

"But whatever you do," pronounced Miss Pinnegar; "whatever you do, and however you strive, in this life, you're knocked down in the end. You're always knocked down."

"It doesn't matter," said Alvina, "if it's only in the end. It doesn't matter if you've had your life."

"You've never had your life, till you're dead," said Miss Pinnegar. "And if you work and strive, you've a right to the fruits of your work."

"It doesn't matter," said Alvina laconically, "so long as you've enjoyed working and striving."

But Miss Pinnegar was too angry to be philosophic. Alvina knew it was useless to be either angry or otherwise emotional. None the less, she also felt as if she had been knocked down. And she almost envied poor Miss Pinnegar the prospect of a little, day-by-day haberdashery shop in Tamworth. Her own problem seemed so much more menacing. "Answer or die," said the Sphinx of fate. Miss Pinnegar could answer her own fate according to its question. She could say "haberdashery shop," and her sphinx would recognize this answer as true to nature, and would be satisfied. But every individual has his own, or her own fate, and her own sphinx. Alvina's sphinx was an old, deep thoroughbred, she would take no mongrel answers. And her thoroughbred teeth were long and sharp. To Alvina, the last of the fantastic but pure-bred race of Houghton, the problem of her fate was terribly abstruse.

The only thing to do was not to solve it: to stray on, and answer fate with whatever came into one's head. No good striving with fate. Trust to a lucky shot, or take the consequences.

"Miss Pinnegar," said Alvina. "Have we any money in hand?"

"There is about twenty pounds in the bank. It's all shown in my

books," said Miss Pinnegar.

"We couldn't take it, could we?"

"Every penny shows in the books."

Alvina pondered again.

"Are there more bills to come in?" she asked. "I mean my bills. Do I owe anything?"

"I don't think you do," said Miss Pinnegar.

"I'm going to keep the insurance money, any way. They can say what they like. I've got it, and I'm going to keep it."

"Well," said Miss Pinnegar, "it's not my business. But there's Sharps and Fullbanks to pay."

"I'll pay those," said Alvina. "You tell Atterwell what to put on father's stone. How much does it cost?"

"Five shillings a letter, you remember."

"Well, we'll just put the name and the date. How much will that be? James Houghton. Born 17th January--"

"You'll have to put 'Also of,'" said Miss Pinnegar.

"Also of--" said Alvina. "One--two--three--four--five--six--. Six letters--thirty shillings. Seems an awful lot for Also of--"

"But you can't leave it out," said Miss Pinnegar. "You can't economize over that."

"I begrudge it," said Alvina.