

CHAPTER XI

HONOURABLE ENGAGEMENT

For days, after joining the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras, Alvina was very quiet, subdued, and rather remote, sensible of her humiliating position as a hanger-on. They none of them took much notice of her. They drifted on, rather disjointedly. The cordiality, the *joie de vivre* did not revive. Madame was a little irritable, and very exacting, and inclined to be spiteful. Ciccio went his way with Geoffrey.

In the second week, Madame found out that a man had been surreptitiously inquiring about them at their lodgings, from the landlady and the landlady's blowsy daughter. It must have been a detective--some shoddy detective. Madame waited. Then she sent Max over to Mansfield, on some fictitious errand. Yes, the lousy-looking dogs of detectives had been there too, making the most minute enquiries as to the behaviour of the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras, what they did, how their sleeping was arranged, how Madame addressed the men, what attitude the men took towards Alvina.

Madame waited again. And again, when they moved to Doncaster, the same two mongrel-looking fellows were lurking in the street, and plying the inmates of their lodging-house with questions. All the

Natchas caught sight of the men. And Madame cleverly wormed out of the righteous and respectable landlady what the men had asked. Once more it was about the sleeping accommodation--whether the landlady heard anything in the night--whether she noticed anything in the bedrooms, in the beds.

No doubt about it, the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras were under suspicion. They were being followed, and watched. What for? Madame made a shrewd guess. "They want to say we are immoral foreigners," she said.

"But what have our personal morals got to do with them?" said Max angrily.

"Yes--but the English! They are so pure," said Madame.

"You know," said Louis, "somebody must have put them up to it--"

"Perhaps," said Madame, "somebody on account of Allaye."

Alvina went white.

"Yes," said Geoffrey. "White Slave Traffic! Mr. May said it."

Madame slowly nodded.

"Mr. May!" she said. "Mr. May! It is he. He knows all about

morals--and immorals. Yes, I know. Yes--yes--yes! He suspects all our immoral doings, mes braves."

"But there aren't any, except mine," cried Alvina, pale to the lips.

"You! You! There you are!" Madame smiled archly, and rather mockingly.

"What are we to do?" said Max, pale on the cheekbones.

"Curse them! Curse them!" Louis was muttering, in his rolling accent.

"Wait," said Madame. "Wait. They will not do anything to us. You are only dirty foreigners, mes braves. At the most they will ask us only to leave their pure country."

"We don't interfere with none of them," cried Max.

"Curse them," muttered Louis.

"Never mind, mon cher. You are in a pure country. Let us wait."

"If you think it's me," said Alvina, "I can go away."

"Oh, my dear, you are only the excuse," said Madame, smiling

indulgently at her. "Let us wait, and see."

She took it smilingly. But her cheeks were white as paper, and her eyes black as drops of ink, with anger.

"Wait and see!" she chanted ironically. "Wait and see! If we must leave the dear country--then adieu!" And she gravely bowed to an imaginary England.

"I feel it's my fault. I feel I ought to go away," cried Alvina, who was terribly distressed, seeing Madame's glitter and pallor, and the black brows of the men. Never had Ciccio's brow looked so ominously black. And Alvina felt it was all her fault. Never had she experienced such a horrible feeling: as if something repulsive were creeping on her from behind. Every minute of these weeks was a horror to her: the sense of the low-down dogs of detectives hanging round, sliding behind them, trying to get hold of some clear proof of immorality on their part. And then--the unknown vengeance of the authorities. All the repulsive secrecy, and all the absolute power of the police authorities. The sense of a great malevolent power which had them all the time in its grip, and was watching, feeling, waiting to strike the morbid blow: the sense of the utter helplessness of individuals who were not even accused, only watched and enmeshed! the feeling that they, the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras, herself included, must be monsters of hideous vice, to have provoked all this: and yet the sane knowledge that they, none of them, were

monsters of vice; this was quite killing. The sight of a policeman would send up Alvina's heart in a flame of fear, agony; yet she knew she had nothing legally to be afraid of. Every knock at the door was horrible.

She simply could not understand it. Yet there it was: they were watched, followed. Of that there was no question. And all she could imagine was that the troupe was secretly accused of White Slave Traffic by somebody in Woodhouse. Probably Mr. May had gone the round of the benevolent magnates of Woodhouse, concerning himself with her virtue, and currying favour with his concern. Of this she became convinced, that it was concern for her virtue which had started the whole business: and that the first instigator was Mr. May, who had got round some vulgar magistrate or County Councillor.

Madame did not consider Alvina's view very seriously. She thought it was some personal malevolence against the Tawaras themselves, probably put up by some other professionals, with whom Madame was not popular.

Be that as it may, for some weeks they went about in the shadow of this repulsive finger which was following after them, to touch them and destroy them with the black smear of shame. The men were silent and inclined to be sulky. They seemed to hold together. They seemed to be united into a strong, four-square silence and tension. They kept to themselves--and Alvina kept to herself--and Madame kept to

herself. So they went about.

And slowly the cloud melted. It never broke. Alvina felt that the very force of the sullen, silent fearlessness and fury in the Tawaras had prevented its bursting. Once there had been a weakening, a cringing, they would all have been lost. But their hearts hardened with black, indomitable anger. And the cloud melted, it passed away. There was no sign.

Early summer was now at hand. Alvina no longer felt at home with the Natchas. While the trouble was hanging over, they seemed to ignore her altogether. The men hardly spoke to her. They hardly spoke to Madame, for that matter. They kept within the four-square enclosure of themselves.

But Alvina felt herself particularly excluded, left out. And when the trouble of the detectives began to pass off, and the men became more cheerful again, wanted her to jest and be familiar with them, she responded verbally, but in her heart there was no response.

Madame had been quite generous with her. She allowed her to pay for her room, and the expense of travelling. But she had her food with the rest. Wherever she was, Madame bought the food for the party, and cooked it herself. And Alvina came in with the rest: she paid no board.

She waited, however, for Madame to suggest a small salary--or at least, that the troupe should pay her living expenses. But Madame did not make such a suggestion. So Alvina knew that she was not very badly wanted. And she guarded her money, and watched for some other opportunity.

It became her habit to go every morning to the public library of the town in which she found herself, to look through the advertisements: advertisements for maternity nurses, for nursery governesses, pianists, travelling companions, even ladies' maids. For some weeks she found nothing, though she wrote several letters.

One morning Ciccio, who had begun to hang round her again, accompanied her as she set out to the library. But her heart was closed against him.

"Why are you going to the library?" he asked her. It was in Lancaster.

"To look at the papers and magazines."

"Ha-a! To find a job, eh?"

His cuteness startled her for a moment.

"If I found one I should take it," she said.

"Hé! I know that," he said.

It so happened that that very morning she saw on the notice-board of the library an announcement that the Borough Council wished to engage the services of an experienced maternity nurse, applications to be made to the medical board. Alvina wrote down the directions. Ciccio watched her.

"What is a maternity nurse?" he said.

"An accoucheuse!" she said. "The nurse who attends when babies are born."

"Do you know how to do that?" he said, incredulous, and jeering slightly.

"I was trained to do it," she said.

He said no more, but walked by her side as she returned to the lodgings. As they drew near the lodgings, he said:

"You don't want to stop with us any more?"

"I can't," she said.

He made a slight, mocking gesture.

"I can't," he repeated. "Why do you always say you can't?"

"Because I can't," she said.

"Pff--!" he went, with a whistling sound of contempt.

But she went indoors to her room. Fortunately, when she had finally cleared her things from Manchester House, she had brought with her her nurse's certificate, and recommendations from doctors. She wrote out her application, took the tram to the Town Hall and dropped it in the letterbox there. Then she wired home to her doctor for another reference. After which she went to the library and got out a book on her subject. If summoned, she would have to go before the medical board on Monday. She had a week. She read and pondered hard, recalling all her previous experience and knowledge.

She wondered if she ought to appear before the board in uniform. Her nurse's dresses were packed in her trunk at Mrs. Slaney's, in Woodhouse. It was now May. The whole business at Woodhouse was finished. Manchester House and all the furniture was sold to some boot-and-shoe people: at least the boot-and-shoe people had the house. They had given four thousand pounds for it--which was above the lawyer's estimate. On the other hand, the theatre was sold for almost nothing. It all worked out that some thirty-three pounds,

which the creditors made up to fifty pounds, remained for Alvina. She insisted on Miss Pinnegar's having half of this. And so that was all over. Miss Pinnegar was already in Tamworth, and her little shop would be opened next week. She wrote happily and excitedly about it.

Sometimes fate acts swiftly and without a hitch. On Thursday Alvina received her notice that she was to appear before the Board on the following Monday. And yet she could not bring herself to speak of it to Madame till the Saturday evening. When they were all at supper, she said:

"Madame, I applied for a post of maternity nurse, to the Borough of Lancaster."

Madame raised her eyebrows. Ciccio had said nothing.

"Oh really! You never told me."

"I thought it would be no use if it all came to nothing. They want me to go and see them on Monday, and then they will decide--"

"Really! Do they! On Monday? And then if you get this work you will stay here? Yes?"

"Yes, of course."

"Of course! Of course! Yes! H'm! And if not?"

The two women looked at each other.

"What?" said Alvina.

"If you don't get it--! You are not sure?"

"No," said Alvina. "I am not a bit sure."

"Well then--! Now! And if you don't get it--?"

"What shall I do, you mean?"

"Yes, what shall you do?"

"I don't know."

"How! you don't know! Shall you come back to us, then?"

"I will if you like--"

"If I like! If I like! Come, it is not a question of if I like.

It is what do you want to do yourself."

"I feel you don't want me very badly," said Alvina.

"Why? Why do you feel? Who makes you? Which of us makes you feel so? Tell me."

"Nobody in particular. But I feel it."

"Oh we-ell! If nobody makes you, and yet you feel it, it must be in yourself, don't you see? Eh? Isn't it so?"

"Perhaps it is," admitted Alvina.

"We-ell then! We-ell--" So Madame gave her her congé. "But if you like to come back--if you laike--then--" Madame shrugged her shoulders--"you must come, I suppose."

"Thank you," said Alvina.

The young men were watching. They seemed indifferent. Ciccio turned aside, with his faint, stupid smile.

In the morning Madame gave Alvina all her belongings, from the little safe she called her bank.

"There is the money--so--and so--and so--that is correct. Please count it once more!--" Alvina counted it and kept it clutched in her hand. "And there are your rings, and your chain, and your

locket--see--all--everything--! But not the brooch. Where is the brooch? Here! Shall I give it back, hein?"

"I gave it to you," said Alvina, offended. She looked into Madame's black eyes. Madame dropped her eyes.

"Yes, you gave it. But I thought, you see, as you have now not much mooney, perhaps you would like to take it again--"

"No, thank you," said Alvina, and she went away, leaving Madame with the red brooch in her plump hand.

"Thank goodness I've given her something valuable," thought Alvina to herself, as she went trembling to her room.

She had packed her bag. She had to find new rooms. She bade good-bye to the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras. Her face was cold and distant, but she smiled slightly as she bade them good-bye.

"And perhaps," said Madame, "perhaps you will come to Wigan tomorrow afternoon--or evening? Yes?"

"Thank you," said Alvina.

She went out and found a little hotel, where she took her room for the night, explaining the cause of her visit to Lancaster. Her heart

was hard and burning. A deep, burning, silent anger against everything possessed her, and a profound indifference to mankind.

And therefore, the next day, everything went as if by magic. She had decided that at the least sign of indifference from the medical board people she would walk away, take her bag, and go to Windermere. She had never been to the Lakes. And Windermere was not far off. She would not endure one single hint of contumely from any one else. She would go straight to Windermere, to see the big lake. Why not do as she wished! She could be quite happy by herself among the lakes. And she would be absolutely free, absolutely free. She rather looked forward to leaving the Town Hall, hurrying to take her bag and off to the station and freedom. Hadn't she still got about a hundred pounds? Why bother for one moment? To be quite alone in the whole world--and quite, quite free, with her hundred pounds--the prospect attracted her sincerely.

And therefore, everything went charmingly at the Town Hall. The medical board were charming to her--charming. There was no hesitation at all. From the first moment she was engaged. And she was given a pleasant room in a hospital in a garden, and the matron was charming to her, and the doctors most courteous.

When could she undertake to commence her duties? When did they want her? The very moment she could come. She could begin tomorrow--but she had no uniform. Oh, the matron would lend her uniform and

aprons, till her box arrived.

So there she was--by afternoon installed in her pleasant little room looking on the garden, and dressed in a nurse's uniform. It was all sudden like magic. She had wired to Madame, she had wired for her box. She was another person.

Needless to say, she was glad. Needless to say that, in the morning, when she had thoroughly bathed, and dressed in clean clothes, and put on the white dress, the white apron, and the white cap, she felt another person. So clean, she felt, so thankful! Her skin seemed caressed and live with cleanliness and whiteness, luminous she felt. It was so different from being with the Natchas.

In the garden the snowballs, guelder-roses, swayed softly among green foliage, there was pink may-blossom, and single scarlet may-blossom, and underneath the young green of the trees, irises rearing purple and moth-white. A young gardener was working--and a convalescent slowly trailed a few paces.

Having ten minutes still, Alvina sat down and wrote to Ciccio: "I am glad I have got this post as nurse here. Every one is most kind, and I feel at home already. I feel quite happy here. I shall think of my days with the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras, and of you, who were such a stranger to me. Good-bye.--A. H."

This she addressed and posted. No doubt Madame would find occasion to read it. But let her.

Alvina now settled down to her new work. There was of course a great deal to do, for she had work both in the hospital and out in the town, though chiefly out in the town. She went rapidly from case to case, as she was summoned. And she was summoned at all hours. So that it was tiring work, which left her no time to herself, except just in snatches.

She had no serious acquaintance with anybody, she was too busy. The matron and sisters and doctors and patients were all part of her day's work, and she regarded them as such. The men she chiefly ignored: she felt much more friendly with the matron. She had many a cup of tea and many a chat in the matron's room, in the quiet, sunny afternoons when the work was not pressing. Alvina took her quiet moments when she could: for she never knew when she would be rung up by one or other of the doctors in the town.

And so, from the matron, she learned to crochet. It was work she had never taken to. But now she had her ball of cotton and her hook, and she worked away as she chatted. She was in good health, and she was getting fatter again. With the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras, she had improved a good deal, her colour and her strength had returned. But undoubtedly the nursing life, arduous as it was, suited her best. She became a handsome, reposeful woman, jolly with the other nurses,

really happy with her friend the matron, who was well-bred and wise, and never over-intimate.

The doctor with whom Alvina had most to do was a Dr. Mitchell, a Scotchman. He had a large practice among the poor, and was an energetic man. He was about fifty-four years old, tall, largely-built, with a good figure, but with extraordinarily large feet and hands. His face was red and clean-shaven, his eyes blue, his teeth very good. He laughed and talked rather mouthingly. Alvina, who knew what the nurses told her, knew that he had come as a poor boy and bottle-washer to Dr. Robertson, a fellow-Scotchman, and that he had made his way up gradually till he became a doctor himself, and had an independent practice. Now he was quite rich--and a bachelor. But the nurses did not set their bonnets at him very much, because he was rather mouthy and overbearing.

In the houses of the poor he was a great autocrat.

"What is that stuff you've got there!" he inquired largely, seeing a bottle of somebody's Soothing Syrup by a poor woman's bedside. "Take it and throw it down the sink, and the next time you want a soothing syrup put a little boot-blackening in hot water. It'll do you just as much good."

Imagine the slow, pompous, large-mouthed way in which the red-faced, handsomely-built man pronounced these words, and you realize why the

poor set such store by him.

He was eagle-eyed. Wherever he went, there was a scuffle directly his foot was heard on the stairs. And he knew they were hiding something. He sniffed the air: he glanced round with a sharp eye: and during the course of his visit picked up a blue mug which was pushed behind the looking-glass. He peered inside--and smelled it.

"Stout?" he said, in a tone of indignant inquiry: God-Almighty would presumably take on just such a tone, finding the core of an apple flung away among the dead-nettle of paradise: "Stout! Have you been drinking stout?" This as he gazed down on the wan mother in the bed.

"They gave me a drop, doctor. I felt that low."

The doctor marched out of the room, still holding the mug in his hand. The sick woman watched him with haunted eyes. The attendant women threw up their hands and looked at one another. Was he going for ever? There came a sudden smash. The doctor had flung the blue mug downstairs. He returned with a solemn stride.

"There!" he said. "And the next person that gives you stout will be thrown down along with the mug."

"Oh doctor, the bit o' comfort!" wailed the sick woman. "It ud never do me no harm."

"Harm! Harm! With a stomach as weak as yours! Harm! Do you know better than I do? What have I come here for? To be told by you what will do you harm and what won't? It appears to me you need no doctor here, you know everything already--"

"Oh no, doctor. It's not like that. But when you feel as if you'd sink through the bed, an' you don't know what to do with yourself--"

"Take a little beef-tea, or a little rice pudding. Take nourishment, don't take that muck. Do you hear--" charging upon the attendant women, who shrank against the wall--"she's to have nothing alcoholic at all, and don't let me catch you giving it her."

"They say there's nobbut fower per cent. i' stout," retorted the daring female.

"Fower per cent.," mimicked the doctor brutally. "Why, what does an ignorant creature like you know about fower per cent."

The woman muttered a little under her breath.

"What? Speak out. Let me hear what you've got to say, my woman. I've no doubt it's something for my benefit--"

But the affronted woman rushed out of the room, and burst into tears

on the landing. After which Dr. Mitchell, mollified, largely told the patient how she was to behave, concluding:

"Nourishment! Nourishment is what you want. Nonsense, don't tell me you can't take it. Push it down if it won't go down by itself--"

"Oh doctor--"

"Don't say oh doctor to me. Do as I tell you. That's your business." After which he marched out, and the rattle of his motor car was shortly heard.

Alvina got used to scenes like these. She wondered why the people stood it. But soon she realized that they loved it--particularly the women.

"Oh, nurse, stop till Dr. Mitchell's been. I'm scared to death of him, for fear he's going to shout at me."

"Why does everybody put up with him?" asked innocent Alvina.

"Oh, he's good-hearted, nurse, he does feel for you."

And everywhere it was the same: "Oh, he's got a heart, you know. He's rough, but he's got a heart. I'd rather have him than your smarmy slormin sort. Oh, you feel safe with Dr. Mitchell, I don't

care what you say."

But to Alvina this peculiar form of blustering, bullying heart which had all the women scurrying like chickens was not particularly attractive.

The men did not like Dr. Mitchell, and would not have him if possible. Yet since he was club doctor and panel doctor, they had to submit. The first thing he said to a sick or injured labourer, invariably, was:

"And keep off the beer."

"Oh ay!"

"Keep off the beer, or I shan't set foot in this house again."

"Tha's got a red enough face on thee, tha nedna shout."

"My face is red with exposure to all weathers, attending ignorant people like you. I never touch alcohol in any form."

"No, an' I dunna. I drink a drop o' beer, if that's what you ca' touchin' alcohol. An' I'm none th' wuss for it, tha sees."

"You've heard what I've told you."

"Ah, I have."

"And if you go on with the beer, you may go on with curing yourself. I shan't attend you. You know I mean what I say, Mrs. Larrick"--this to the wife.

"I do, doctor. And I know it's true what you say. An' I'm at him night an' day about it--"

"Oh well, if he will hear no reason, he must suffer for it. He mustn't think I'm going to be running after him, if he disobeys my orders." And the doctor stalked off, and the woman began to complain.

None the less the women had their complaints against Dr. Mitchell. If ever Alvina entered a clean house on a wet day, she was sure to hear the housewife chuntering.

"Oh my lawk, come in nurse! What a day! Doctor's not been yet. And he's bound to come now I've just cleaned up, trapesin' wi' his gret feet. He's got the biggest understandin's of any man i' Lancaster. My husband says they're the best pair o' pasties i' th' kingdom. An' he does make such a mess, for he never stops to wipe his feet on th' mat, marches straight up your clean stairs--"

"Why don't you tell him to wipe his feet?" said Alvina.

"Oh my word! Fancy me telling him! He'd jump down my throat with both feet afore I'd opened my mouth. He's not to be spoken to, he isn't. He's my-lord, he is. You mustn't look, or you're done for."

Alvina laughed. She knew they all liked him for browbeating them, and having a heart over and above.

Sometimes he was given a good hit--though nearly always by a man. It happened he was in a workman's house when the man was at dinner.

"Canna yer gi'e a man summat better nor this 'ere pap, Missis?" said the hairy husband, turning up his nose at the rice pudding.

"Oh go on," cried the wife. "I hadna time for owt else." Dr. Mitchell was just stooping his handsome figure in the doorway.

"Rice pudding!" he exclaimed largely. "You couldn't have anything more wholesome and nourishing. I have a rice pudding every day of my life--every day of my life, I do."

The man was eating his pudding and pearling his big moustache copiously with it. He did not answer.

"Do you doctor!" cried the woman. "And never no different."

"Never," said the doctor.

"Fancy that! You're that fond of them?"

"I find they agree with me. They are light and digestible. And my stomach is as weak as a baby's."

The labourer wiped his big moustache on his sleeve.

"Mine isna, tha sees," he said, "so pap's no use. 'S watter ter me. I want ter feel as I've had summat: a bit o' suetty dumplin' an' a pint o' hale, summat ter fill th' hole up. An' tha'd be th' same if tha did my work."

"If I did your work," sneered the doctor. "Why I do ten times the work that any one of you does. It's just the work that has ruined my digestion, the never getting a quiet meal, and never a whole night's rest. When do you think I can sit at table and digest my dinner? I have to be off looking after people like you--"

"Eh, tha can ta'e th' titty-bottle wi' thee," said the labourer.

But Dr. Mitchell was furious for weeks over this. It put him in a black rage to have his great manliness insulted. Alvina was quietly amused.

The doctor began by being rather lordly and condescending with her. But luckily she felt she knew her work at least as well as he knew it. She smiled and let him condescend. Certainly she neither feared nor even admired him. To tell the truth, she rather disliked him: the great, red-faced bachelor of fifty-three, with his bald spot and his stomach as weak as a baby's, and his mouthing imperiousness and his good heart which was as selfish as it could be. Nothing can be more cocksuredly selfish than a good heart which believes in its own beneficence. He was a little too much the teetotaller on the one hand to be so largely manly on the other. Alvina preferred the labourers with their awful long moustaches that got full of food. And he was a little too loud-mouthedly lordly to be in human good taste.

As a matter of fact, he was conscious of the fact that he had risen to be a gentleman. Now if a man is conscious of being a gentleman, he is bound to be a little less than a man. But if he is gnawed with anxiety lest he may not be a gentleman, he is only pitiable. There is a third case, however. If a man must loftily, by his manner, assert that he is now a gentleman, he shows himself a clown. For Alvina, poor Dr. Mitchell fell into this third category, of clowns. She tolerated him good-humouredly, as women so often tolerate ninnies and poseurs. She smiled to herself when she saw his large and important presence on the board. She smiled when she saw him at a sale, buying the grandest pieces of antique furniture.

She smiled when he talked of going up to Scotland, for grouse shooting, or of snatching an hour on Sunday morning, for golf. And she talked him over, with quiet, delicate malice, with the matron. He was no favourite at the hospital.

Gradually Dr. Mitchell's manner changed towards her. From his imperious condescension he took to a tone of uneasy equality. This did not suit him. Dr. Mitchell had no equals: he had only the vast stratum of inferiors, towards whom he exercised his quite profitable beneficence--it brought him in about two thousand a year: and then his superiors, people who had been born with money. It was the tradesmen and professionals who had started at the bottom and clambered to the motor-car footing, who distressed him. And therefore, whilst he treated Alvina on this uneasy tradesman footing, he felt himself in a false position.

She kept her attitude of quiet amusement, and little by little he sank. From being a lofty creature soaring over her head, he was now like a big fish poking its nose above water and making eyes at her. He treated her with rather presuming deference.

"You look tired this morning," he barked at her one hot day.

"I think it's thunder," she said.

"Thunder! Work, you mean," and he gave a slight smile. "I'm going to

drive you back."

"Oh no, thanks, don't trouble! I've got to call on the way."

"Where have you got to call?"

She told him.

"Very well. That takes you no more than five minutes. I'll wait for you. Now take your cloak."

She was surprised. Yet, like other women, she submitted.

As they drove he saw a man with a barrow of cucumbers. He stopped the car and leaned towards the man.

"Take that barrow-load of poison and bury it!" he shouted, in his strong voice. The busy street hesitated.

"What's that, mister?" replied the mystified hawker.

Dr. Mitchell pointed to the green pile of cucumbers.

"Take that barrow-load of poison, and bury it," he called, "before you do anybody any more harm with it."

"What barrow-load of poison's that?" asked the hawker, approaching. A crowd began to gather.

"What barrow-load of poison is that!" repeated the doctor. "Why your barrow-load of cucumbers."

"Oh," said the man, scrutinizing his cucumbers carefully. To be sure, some were a little yellow at the end. "How's that? Cumber is right enough: fresh from market this morning."

"Fresh or not fresh," said the doctor, mouthing his words distinctly, "you might as well put poison into your stomach, as those things. Cucumbers are the worst thing you can eat."

"Oh!" said the man, stuttering. "That's 'appen for them as doesn't like them. I niver knowed a cumber do me no harm, an' I eat 'em like a happple." Whereupon the hawker took a "cumber" from his barrow, bit off the end, and chewed it till the sap squirted.

"What's wrong with that?" he said, holding up the bitten cucumber.

"I'm not talking about what's wrong with that," said the doctor. "My business is what's wrong with the stomach it goes into. I'm a doctor. And I know that those things cause me half my work. They cause half the internal troubles people suffer from in summertime."

"Oh ay! That's no loss to you, is it? Me an' you's partners. More

cumbers I sell, more graft for you, 'cordin' to that. What's wrong then. Cum-bers! Fine fresh Cum-berrrs! All fresh and juisty, all cheap and tasty--!" yelled the man.

"I am a doctor not only to cure illness, but to prevent it where I can. And cucumbers are poison to everybody."

"Cum-bers! Cum-bers! Fresh cumbers!" yelled the man,

Dr. Mitchell started his car.

"When will they learn intelligence?" he said to Alvina, smiling and showing his white, even teeth.

"I don't care, you know, myself," she said. "I should always let people do what they wanted--"

"Even if you knew it would do them harm?" he queried, smiling with amiable condescension.

"Yes, why not! It's their own affair. And they'll do themselves harm one way or another."

"And you wouldn't try to prevent it?"

"You might as well try to stop the sea with your fingers."

"You think so?" smiled the doctor. "I see, you are a pessimist. You are a pessimist with regard to human nature."

"Am I?" smiled Alvina, thinking the rose would smell as sweet. It seemed to please the doctor to find that Alvina was a pessimist with regard to human nature. It seemed to give her an air of distinction. In his eyes, she seemed distinguished. He was in a fair way to dote on her.

She, of course, when he began to admire her, liked him much better, and even saw graceful, boyish attractions in him. There was really something childish about him. And this something childish, since it looked up to her as if she were the saving grace, naturally flattered her and made her feel gentler towards him.

He got in the habit of picking her up in his car, when he could. And he would tap at the matron's door, smiling and showing all his beautiful teeth, just about tea-time.

"May I come in?" His voice sounded almost flirty.

"Certainly."

"I see you're having tea! Very nice, a cup of tea at this hour!"

"Have one too, doctor."

"I will with pleasure." And he sat down wreathed with smiles. Alvina rose to get a cup. "I didn't intend to disturb you, nurse," he said.

"Men are always intruders," he smiled to the matron.

"Sometimes," said the matron, "women are charmed to be intruded upon."

"Oh really!" his eyes sparkled. "Perhaps you wouldn't say so, nurse?" he said, turning to Alvina. Alvina was just reaching at the cupboard. Very charming she looked, in her fresh dress and cap and soft brown hair, very attractive her figure, with its full, soft loins. She turned round to him.

"Oh yes," she said. "I quite agree with the matron."

"Oh, you do!" He did not quite know how to take it. "But you mind being disturbed at your tea, I am sure."

"No," said Alvina. "We are so used to being disturbed."

"Rather weak, doctor?" said the matron, pouring the tea.

"Very weak, please."

The doctor was a little laboured in his gallantry, but unmistakably gallant. When he was gone, the matron looked demure, and Alvina confused. Each waited for the other to speak.

"Don't you think Dr. Mitchell is quite coming out?" said Alvina.

"Quite! Quite the ladies' man! I wonder who it is can be bringing him out. A very praiseworthy work, I am sure." She looked wickedly at Alvina.

"No, don't look at me," laughed Alvina, "I know nothing about it."

"Do you think it may be me!" said the matron, mischievous.

"I'm sure of it, matron! He begins to show some taste at last."

"There now!" said the matron. "I shall put my cap straight." And she went to the mirror, fluffing her hair and settling her cap.

"There!" she said, bobbing a little curtsey to Alvina.

They both laughed, and went off to work.

But there was no mistake, Dr. Mitchell was beginning to expand. With Alvina he quite unbent, and seemed even to sun himself when she was near, to attract her attention. He smiled and smirked and became

oddly self-conscious: rather uncomfortable. He liked to hang over her chair, and he made a great event of offering her a cigarette whenever they met, although he himself never smoked. He had a gold cigarette case.

One day he asked her in to see his garden. He had a pleasant old square house with a big walled garden. He showed her his flowers and his wall-fruit, and asked her to eat his strawberries. He bade her admire his asparagus. And then he gave her tea in the drawing-room, with strawberries and cream and cakes, of all of which he ate nothing. But he smiled expansively all the time. He was a made man: and now he was really letting himself go, luxuriating in everything; above all, in Alvina, who poured tea gracefully from the old Georgian tea-pot, and smiled so pleasantly above the Queen Anne tea-cups.

And she, wicked that she was, admired every detail of his drawing-room. It was a pleasant room indeed, with roses outside the French door, and a lawn in sunshine beyond, with bright red flowers in beds. But indoors, it was insistently antique. Alvina admired the Jacobean sideboard and the Jacobean arm-chairs and the Hepplewhite wall-chairs and the Sheraton settee and the Chippendale stands and the Axminster carpet and the bronze clock with Shakespeare and Ariosto reclining on it--yes, she even admired Shakespeare on the clock--and the ormolu cabinet and the bead-work foot-stools and the dreadful Sèvres dish with a cherub in it and--but why enumerate. She

admired everything! And Dr. Mitchell's heart expanded in his bosom till he felt it would burst, unless he either fell at her feet or did something extraordinary. He had never even imagined what it was to be so expanded: what a delicious feeling. He could have kissed her feet in an ecstasy of wild expansion. But habit, so far, prevented his doing more than beam.

Another day he said to her, when they were talking of age:

"You are as young as you feel. Why, when I was twenty I felt I had all the cares and responsibility of the world on my shoulders. And now I am middle-aged more or less, I feel as light as if I were just beginning life." He beamed down at her.

"Perhaps you are only just beginning your own life," she said.

"You have lived for your work till now."

"It may be that," he said. "It may be that up till now I have lived for others, for my patients. And now perhaps I may be allowed to live a little more for myself." He beamed with real luxury, saw the real luxury of life begin.

"Why shouldn't you?" said Alvina.

"Oh yes, I intend to," he said, with confidence.

He really, by degrees, made up his mind to marry now, and to retire in part from his work. That is, he would hire another assistant, and give himself a fair amount of leisure. He was inordinately proud of his house. And now he looked forward to the treat of his life: hanging round the woman he had made his wife, following her about, feeling proud of her and his house, talking to her from morning till night, really finding himself in her. When he had to go his rounds she would go with him in the car: he made up his mind she would be willing to accompany him. He would teach her to drive, and they would sit side by side, she driving him and waiting for him. And he would run out of the houses of his patients, and find her sitting there, and he would get in beside her and feel so snug and so sure and so happy as she drove him off to the next case, he informing her about his work.

And if ever she did not go out with him, she would be there on the doorstep waiting for him the moment she heard the car. And they would have long, cosy evenings together in the drawing-room, as he luxuriated in her very presence. She would sit on his knees and they would be snug for hours, before they went warmly and deliciously to bed. And in the morning he need not rush off. He would loiter about with her, they would loiter down the garden looking at every new flower and every new fruit, she would wear fresh flowery dresses and no cap on her hair, he would never be able to tear himself away from her. Every morning it would be unbearable to have to tear himself away from her, and every hour he would be rushing back to her. They

would be simply everything to one another. And how he would enjoy it! Ah!

He pondered as to whether he would have children. A child would take her away from him. That was his first thought. But then--! Ah well, he would have to leave it till the time. Love's young dream is never so delicious as at the virgin age of fifty-three.

But he was quite cautious. He made no definite advances till he had put a plain question. It was August Bank Holiday, that for ever black day of the declaration of war, when his question was put. For this year of our story is the fatal year 1914.

There was quite a stir in the town over the declaration of war. But most people felt that the news was only intended to give an extra thrill to the all-important event of Bank Holiday. Half the world had gone to Blackpool or Southport, the other half had gone to the Lakes or into the country. Lancaster was busy with a sort of fête, notwithstanding. And as the weather was decent, everybody was in a real holiday mood.

So that Dr. Mitchell, who had contrived to pick up Alvina at the Hospital, contrived to bring her to his house at half-past three, for tea.

"What do you think of this new war?" said Alvina.

"Oh, it will be over in six weeks," said the doctor easily. And there they left it. Only, with a fleeting thought, Alvina wondered if it would affect the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras. She had never heard any more of them.

"Where would you have liked to go today?" said the doctor, turning to smile at her as he drove the car.

"I think to Windermere--into the Lakes," she said.

"We might make a tour of the Lakes before long," he said. She was not thinking, so she took no particular notice of the speech.

"How nice!" she said vaguely.

"We could go in the car, and take them as we chose," said the doctor.

"Yes," she said, wondering at him now.

When they had had tea, quietly and gallantly tête-à-tête in his drawing-room, he asked her if she would like to see the other rooms of the house. She thanked him, and he showed her the substantial oak dining-room, and the little room with medical works and a revolving chair, which he called his study: then the kitchen and the pantry,

the housekeeper looking askance; then upstairs to his bedroom, which was very fine with old mahogany tall-boys and silver candle-sticks on the dressing-table, and brushes with green ivory backs, and a hygienic white bed and straw mats: then the visitors' bedroom corresponding, with its old satin-wood furniture and cream-coloured chairs with large, pale-blue cushions, and a pale carpet with reddish wreaths. Very nice, lovely, awfully nice, I do like that, isn't that beautiful, I've never seen anything like that! came the gratifying fireworks of admiration from Alvina. And he smiled and gloated. But in her mind she was thinking of Manchester House, and how dark and horrible it was, how she hated it, but how it had impressed Ciccio and Geoffrey, how they would have loved to feel themselves masters of it, and how done in the eye they were. She smiled to herself rather grimly. For this afternoon she was feeling unaccountably uneasy and wistful, yearning into the distance again: a trick she thought she had happily lost.

The doctor dragged her up even to the slanting attics. He was a big man, and he always wore navy blue suits, well-tailored and immaculate. Unconsciously she felt that big men in good navy-blue suits, especially if they had reddish faces and rather big feet and if their hair was wearing thin, were a special type all to themselves, solid and rather namby-pamby and tiresome.

"What very nice attics! I think the many angles which the roof makes, the different slants, you know, are so attractive. Oh, and

the fascinating little window!" She crouched in the hollow of the small dormer window. "Fascinating! See the town and the hills! I know I should want this room for my own."

"Then have it," he said. "Have it for one of your own."

She crept out of the window recess and looked up at him. He was leaning forward to her, smiling, self-conscious, tentative, and eager. She thought it best to laugh it off.

"I was only talking like a child, from the imagination," she said.

"I quite understand that," he replied deliberately. "But I am speaking what I mean--"

She did not answer, but looked at him reproachfully. He was smiling and smirking broadly at her.

"Won't you marry me, and come and have this garret for your own?" He spoke as if he were offering her a chocolate. He smiled with curious uncertainty.

"I don't know," she said vaguely.

His smile broadened.

"Well now," he said, "make up your mind. I'm not good at talking about love, you know. But I think I'm pretty good at feeling it, you know. I want you to come here and be happy: with me." He added the two last words as a sort of sly post-scriptum, and as if to commit himself finally.

"But I've never thought about it," she said, rapidly cogitating.

"I know you haven't. But think about it now--" He began to be hugely pleased with himself. "Think about it now. And tell me if you could put up with me, as well as the garret." He beamed and put his head a little on one side--rather like Mr. May, for one second. But he was much more dangerous than Mr. May. He was overbearing, and had the devil's own temper if he was thwarted. This she knew. He was a big man in a navy blue suit, with very white teeth.

Again she thought she had better laugh it off.

"It's you I am thinking about," she laughed, flirting still. "It's you I am wondering about."

"Well," he said, rather pleased with himself, "you wonder about me till you've made up your mind--"

"I will--" she said, seizing the opportunity. "I'll wonder about you till I've made up my mind--shall I?"

"Yes," he said. "That's what I wish you to do. And the next time I ask you, you'll let me know. That's it, isn't it?" He smiled indulgently down on her: thought her face young and charming, charming.

"Yes," she said. "But don't ask me too soon, will you?"

"How, too soon--?" He smiled delightedly.

"You'll give me time to wonder about you, won't you? You won't ask me again this month, will you?"

"This month?" His eyes beamed with pleasure. He enjoyed the procrastination as much as she did. "But the month's only just begun! However! Yes, you shall have your way. I won't ask you again this month."

"And I'll promise to wonder about you all the month," she laughed.

"That's a bargain," he said.

They went downstairs, and Alvina returned to her duties. She was very much excited, very much excited indeed. A big, well-to-do man in a navy blue suit, of handsome appearance, aged fifty-three, with white teeth and a delicate stomach: it was exciting. A sure

position, a very nice home and lovely things in it, once they were dragged about a bit. And of course he'd adore her. That went without saying. She was as fussy as if some one had given her a lovely new pair of boots. She was really fussy and pleased with herself: and quite decided she'd take it all on. That was how it put itself to her: she would take it all on.

Of course there was the man himself to consider. But he was quite presentable. There was nothing at all against it: nothing at all. If he had pressed her during the first half of the month of August, he would almost certainly have got her. But he only beamed in anticipation.

Meanwhile the stir and restlessness of the war had begun, and was making itself felt even in Lancaster. And the excitement and the unease began to wear through Alvina's rather glamorous fussiness. Some of her old fretfulness came back on her. Her spirit, which had been as if asleep these months, now woke rather irritably, and chafed against its collar. Who was this elderly man, that she should marry him? Who was he, that she should be kissed by him. Actually kissed and fondled by him! Repulsive. She avoided him like the plague. Fancy reposing against his broad, navy blue waistcoat! She started as if she had been stung. Fancy seeing his red, smiling face just above hers, coming down to embrace her! She pushed it away with her open hand. And she ran away, to avoid the thought.

And yet! And yet! She would be so comfortable, she would be so well-off for the rest of her life. The hateful problem of material circumstance would be solved for ever. And she knew well how hateful material circumstances can make life.

Therefore, she could not decide in a hurry. But she bore poor Dr. Mitchell a deep grudge, that he could not grant her all the advantages of his offer, and excuse her the acceptance of him himself. She dared not decide in a hurry. And this very fear, like a yoke on her, made her resent the man who drove her to decision.

Sometimes she rebelled. Sometimes she laughed unpleasantly in the man's face: though she dared not go too far: for she was a little afraid of him and his rabid temper, also. In her moments of sullen rebellion she thought of Natcha-Kee-Tawara. She thought of them deeply. She wondered where they were, what they were doing, how the war had affected them. Poor Geoffrey was a Frenchman--he would have to go to France to fight. Max and Louis were Swiss, it would not affect them: nor Ciccio, who was Italian. She wondered if the troupe was in England: if they would continue together when Geoffrey was gone. She wondered if they thought of her. She felt they did. She felt they did not forget her. She felt there was a connection.

In fact, during the latter part of August she wondered a good deal more about the Natchas than about Dr. Mitchell. But wondering about the Natchas would not help her. She felt, if she knew where they

were, she would fly to them. But then she knew she wouldn't.

When she was at the station she saw crowds and bustle. People were seeing their young men off. Beer was flowing: sailors on the train were tipsy: women were holding young men by the lapel of the coat. And when the train drew away, the young men waving, the women cried aloud and sobbed after them.

A chill ran down Alvina's spine. This was another matter, apart from her Dr. Mitchell. It made him feel very unreal, trivial. She did not know what she was going to do. She realized she must do something--take some part in the wild dislocation of life. She knew that she would put off Dr. Mitchell again.

She talked the matter over with the matron. The matron advised her to procrastinate. Why not volunteer for war-service? True, she was a maternity nurse, and this was hardly the qualification needed for the nursing of soldiers. But still, she was a nurse.

Alvina felt this was the thing to do. Everywhere was a stir and a seethe of excitement. Men were active, women were needed too. She put down her name on the list of volunteers for active service. This was on the last day of August.

On the first of September Dr. Mitchell was round at the hospital early, when Alvina was just beginning her morning duties there. He

went into the matron's room, and asked for Nurse Houghton. The matron left them together.

The doctor was excited. He smiled broadly, but with a tension of nervous excitement. Alvina was troubled. Her heart beat fast.

"Now!" said Dr. Mitchell. "What have you to say to me?"

She looked up at him with confused eyes. He smiled excitedly and meaningful at her, and came a little nearer.

"Today is the day when you answer, isn't it?" he said. "Now then, let me hear what you have to say."

But she only watched him with large, troubled eyes, and did not speak. He came still nearer to her.

"Well then," he said, "I am to take it that silence gives consent." And he laughed nervously, with nervous anticipation, as he tried to put his arm round her. But she stepped suddenly back.

"No, not yet," she said.

"Why?" he asked.

"I haven't given my answer," she said.

"Give it then," he said, testily.

"I've volunteered for active service," she stammered. "I felt I ought to do something."

"Why?" he asked. He could put a nasty intonation into that monosyllable. "I should have thought you would answer me first."

She did not answer, but watched him. She did not like him.

"I only signed yesterday," she said.

"Why didn't you leave it till tomorrow? It would have looked better." He was angry. But he saw a half-frightened, half-guilty look on her face, and during the weeks of anticipation he had worked himself up.

"But put that aside," he smiled again, a little dangerously. "You have still to answer my question. Having volunteered for war service doesn't prevent your being engaged to me, does it?"

Alvina watched him with large eyes. And again he came very near to her, so that his blue-serge waistcoat seemed, to impinge on her, and his purplish red face was above her.

"I'd rather not be engaged, under the circumstances," she said.

"Why?" came the nasty monosyllable. "What have the circumstances got to do with it?"

"Everything is so uncertain," she said. "I'd rather wait."

"Wait! Haven't you waited long enough? There's nothing at all to prevent your getting engaged to me now. Nothing whatsoever! Come now. I'm old enough not to be played with. And I'm much too much in love with you to let you go on indefinitely like this. Come now!" He smiled imminent, and held out his large hand for her hand. "Let me put the ring on your finger. It will be the proudest day of my life when I make you my wife. Give me your hand--"

Alvina was wavering. For one thing, mere curiosity made her want to see the ring. She half lifted her hand. And but for the knowledge that he would kiss her, she would have given it. But he would kiss her--and against that she obstinately set her will. She put her hand behind her back, and looked obstinately into his eyes.

"Don't play a game with me," he said dangerously.

But she only continued to look mockingly and obstinately into his eyes.

"Come," he said, beckoning for her to give her hand.

With a barely perceptible shake of the head, she refused, staring at him all the time. His ungovernable temper got the better of him. He saw red, and without knowing, seized her by the shoulder, swung her back, and thrust her, pressed her against the wall as if he would push her through it. His face was blind with anger, like a hot, red sun. Suddenly, almost instantaneously, he came to himself again and drew back his hands, shaking his right hand as if some rat had bitten it.

"I'm sorry!" he shouted, beside himself. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry." He dithered before her.

She recovered her equilibrium, and, pale to the lips, looked at him with sombre eyes.

"I'm sorry!" he continued loudly, in his strange frenzy like a small boy. "Don't remember! Don't remember! Don't think I did it."

His face was a kind of blank, and unconsciously he wrung the hand that had gripped her, as if it pained him. She watched him, and wondered why on earth all this frenzy. She was left rather cold, she did not at all feel the strong feelings he seemed to expect of her.

There was nothing so very unnatural, after all, in being bumped up suddenly against the wall. Certainly her shoulder hurt where he had

gripped it. But there were plenty of worse hurts in the world. She watched him with wide, distant eyes.

And he fell on his knees before her, as she backed against the bookcase, and he caught hold of the edge of her dress-bottom, drawing it to him. Which made her rather abashed, and much more uncomfortable.

"Forgive me!" he said. "Don't remember! Forgive me! Love me! Love me! Forgive me and love me! Forgive me and love me!"

As Alvina was looking down dismayed on the great, red-faced, elderly man, who in his crying-out showed his white teeth like a child, and as she was gently trying to draw her skirt from his clutch, the door opened, and there stood the matron, in her big frilled cap. Alvina glanced at her, flushed crimson and looked down to the man. She touched his face with her hand.

"Never mind," she said. "It's nothing. Don't think about it."

He caught her hand and clung to it.

"Love me! Love me! Love me!" he cried.

The matron softly closed the door again, withdrawing.

"Love me! Love me!"

Alvina was absolutely dumbfounded by this scene. She had no idea men did such things. It did not touch her, it dumbfounded her.

The doctor, clinging to her hand, struggled to his feet and flung his arms round her, clasping her wildly to him.

"You love me! You love me, don't you?" he said, vibrating and beside himself as he pressed her to his breast and hid his face against her hair. At such a moment, what was the good of saying she didn't? But she didn't. Pity for his shame, however, kept her silent, motionless and silent in his arms, smothered against the blue-serge waistcoat of his broad breast.

He was beginning to come to himself. He became silent. But he still strained her fast, he had no idea of letting her go.

"You will take my ring, won't you?" he said at last, still in the strange, lamentable voice. "You will take my ring."

"Yes," she said coldly. Anything for a quiet emergence from this scene.

He fumbled feverishly in his pocket with one hand, holding her still fast by the other arm. And with one hand he managed to extract the

ring from its case, letting the case roll away on the floor. It was a diamond solitaire.

"Which finger? Which finger is it?" he asked, beginning to smile rather weakly. She extricated her hand, and held out her engagement finger. Upon it was the mourning-ring Miss Frost had always worn. The doctor slipped the diamond solitaire above the mourning ring, and folded Alvina to his breast again.

"Now," he said, almost in his normal voice. "Now I know you love me." The pleased self-satisfaction in his voice made her angry. She managed to extricate herself.

"You will come along with me now?" he said.

"I can't," she answered. "I must get back to my work here."

"Nurse Allen can do that."

"I'd rather not."

"Where are you going today?"

She told him her cases.

"Well, you will come and have tea with me. I shall expect you to

have tea with me every day."

But Alvina was straightening her crushed cap before the mirror, and did not answer.

"We can see as much as we like of each other now we're engaged," he said, smiling with satisfaction.

"I wonder where the matron is," said Alvina, suddenly going into the cool white corridor. He followed her. And they met the matron just coming out of the ward.

"Matron!" said Dr. Mitchell, with a return of his old mouthing importance. "You may congratulate Nurse Houghton and me on our engagement--" He smiled largely.

"I may congratulate you, you mean," said the matron.

"Yes, of course. And both of us, since we are now one," he replied.

"Not quite, yet," said the matron gravely.

And at length she managed to get rid of him.

At once she went to look for Alvina, who had gone to her duties.

"Well, I suppose it is all right," said the matron gravely.

"No it isn't," said Alvina. "I shall never marry him."

"Ah, never is a long while! Did he hear me come in?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't."

"Thank goodness for that."

"Yes indeed! It was perfectly horrible. Following me round on his knees and shouting for me to love him! Perfectly horrible!"

"Well," said the matron. "You never know what men will do till you've known them. And then you need be surprised at nothing, nothing. I'm surprised at nothing they do--"

"I must say," said Alvina, "I was surprised. Very unpleasantly."

"But you accepted him--"

"Anything to quieten him--like a hysterical child."

"Yes, but I'm not sure you haven't taken a very risky way of quietening him, giving him what he wanted--"

"I think," said Alvina, "I can look after myself. I may be moved any day now."

"Well--!" said the matron. "He may prevent your getting moved, you know. He's on the board. And if he says you are indispensable--"

This was a new idea for Alvina to cogitate. She had counted on a speedy escape. She put his ring in her apron pocket, and there she forgot it until he pounced on her in the afternoon, in the house of one of her patients. He waited for her, to take her off.

"Where is your ring?" he said.

And she realized that it lay in the pocket of a soiled, discarded apron--perhaps lost for ever.

"I shan't wear it on duty," she said. "You know that."

She had to go to tea with him. She avoided his love-making, by telling him any sort of spooniness revolted her. And he was too much an old bachelor to take easily to a fondling habit--before marriage, at least. So he mercifully left her alone: he was on the whole devoutly thankful she wanted to be left alone. But he wanted her to be there. That was his greatest craving. He wanted her to be always there. And so he craved for marriage: to possess her entirely, and to have her always there with him, so that he was never alone. Alone

and apart from all the world: but by her side, always by her side.

"Now when shall we fix the marriage?" he said. "It is no good putting it back. We both know what we are doing. And now the engagement is announced--"

He looked at her anxiously. She could see the hysterical little boy under the great, authoritative man.

"Oh, not till after Christmas!" she said.

"After Christmas!" he started as if he had been bitten. "Nonsense! It's nonsense to wait so long. Next month, at the latest."

"Oh no," she said. "I don't think so soon."

"Why not? The sooner the better. You had better send in your resignation at once, so that you're free."

"Oh but is there any need? I may be transferred for war service."

"That's not likely. You're our only maternity nurse--"

And so the days went by. She had tea with him practically every afternoon, and she got used to him. They discussed the furnishing--she could not help suggesting a few alterations, a few arrangements

according to her idea. And he drew up a plan of a wedding tour in Scotland. Yet she was quite certain she would not marry him. The matron laughed at her certainty. "You will drift into it," she said. "He is tying you down by too many little threads."

"Ah, well, you'll see!" said Alvina.

"Yes," said the matron. "I shall see."

And it was true that Alvina's will was indeterminate, at this time. She was resolved not to marry. But her will, like a spring that is hitched somehow, did not fly direct against the doctor. She had sent in her resignation, as he suggested. But not that she might be free to marry him, but that she might be at liberty to flee him. So she told herself. Yet she worked into his hands.

One day she sat with the doctor in the car near the station--it was towards the end of September--held up by a squad of soldiers in khaki, who were marching off with their band wildly playing, to embark on the special troop train that was coming down from the north. The town was in great excitement. War-fever was spreading everywhere. Men were rushing to enlist--and being constantly rejected, for it was still the days of regular standards.

As the crowds surged on the pavement, as the soldiers tramped to the station, as the traffic waited, there came a certain flow in the

opposite direction. The 4:15 train had come in. People were struggling along with luggage, children were running with spades and buckets, cabs were crawling along with families: it was the seaside people coming home. Alvina watched the two crowds mingle.

And as she watched she saw two men, one carrying a mandoline case and a suit-case which she knew. It was Ciccio. She did not know the other man; some theatrical individual. The two men halted almost near the car, to watch the band go by. Alvina saw Ciccio quite near to her. She would have liked to squirt water down his brown, handsome, oblivious neck. She felt she hated him. He stood there, watching the music, his lips curling in his faintly-derisive Italian manner, as he talked to the other man. His eyelashes were as long and dark as ever, his eyes had still the attractive look of being set in with a smutty finger. He had got the same brownish suit on, which she disliked, the same black hat set slightly, jauntily over one eye. He looked common: and yet with that peculiar southern aloofness which gave him a certain beauty and distinction in her eyes. She felt she hated him, rather. She felt she had been let down by him.

The band had passed. A child ran against the wheel of the standing car. Alvina suddenly reached forward and made a loud, screeching flourish on the hooter. Every one looked round, including the laden, tramping soldiers.

"We can't move yet," said Dr. Mitchell.

But Alvina was looking at Ciccio at that moment. He had turned with the rest, looking inquiringly at the car. And his quick eyes, the whites of which showed so white against his duskiness, the yellow pupils so non-human, met hers with a quick flash of recognition. His mouth began to curl in a smile of greeting. But she stared at him without moving a muscle, just blankly stared, abstracting every scrap of feeling, even of animosity or coldness, out of her gaze. She saw the smile die on his lips, his eyes glance sideways, and again sideways, with that curious animal shyness which characterized him. It was as if he did not want to see her looking at him, and ran from side to side like a caged weasel, avoiding her blank, glaucous look.

She turned pleasantly to Dr. Mitchell.

"What did you say?" she asked sweetly.