

**A Message
from Mars**

*Lester Lurgan &
Richard Ganthony*

Arthur Oliver

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1st

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1912.

A MESSAGE FROM MARS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Mill-Owner

Madame.—'Very interesting.'

Bystander.—'The book is well written, and the result is a pleasing story.'

Bohemian Blood

Morning Post.—'It is a romantic tale of a stolen child, of revenge and of retaliation, and will please many readers, who will find the book interesting.'

The League of the Triangle

Dublin Express.—'It is just the right thing for a quiet evening vision, a cosy fire on the wild nights of the mid-winter season.'

LONDON : GREENING & CO., LTD.

A MESSAGE FROM MARS

A STORY

By
LESTER LURGAN

FOUNDED ON THE POPULAR PLAY BY
RICHARD GANTHONY



LONDON
GREENING & CO., LTD.

1912

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March 1912

MERCAT PRESS EDINBURGH

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. A REASON FOR PROPOSAL	7
II. THE WOMAN'S POINT OF VIEW	16
III. ENGAGED	29
IV. THE SELFISHNESS OF MAN	34
V. AUNT MARTHA TRIES PERSUASION	49
VI. LOVE VERSUS SCIENCE	60
VII. MR DICEY INTERVENES	77
VIII. THE MAN WHO HAD 'GONE UNDER'	86
IX. A MESSENGER FROM MARS	101
X. A FIRST LESSON	120
XI. WHAT MR PARKER OVERHEARD	139
XII. AUNT MARTHA'S OPINION	150
XIII. A STREET ACCIDENT	158
XIV. RUIN	177
XV. THE LAST STRAW	191
XVI. DESPAIR	200
XVII. A STRANGE 'MATE'	206

CHAP.	PAGE
XVIII. A PROFITLESS 'JOB'	219
XIX. 'HALVES, PARTNER, HALVES'	225
XX. THE AWAKENING	233
XXI. LOCKED OUT	244
XXII. UNLOOKED FOR VISITORS	255
XXIII. 'MY LITTLE MINNIE'	263
XXIV. A NEW HORACE PARKER	275
XXV. THE RE-PLIGHTING OF A TROTH	282

A MESSAGE FROM MARS

CHAPTER I

A REASON FOR PROPOSAL

‘WAITER!’

The call was peremptory and the club waiter, flurried and anxious, hurried up.

‘Yessir. Beg your pardon, sir. I quite forgot, sir. Just going—’

‘Confound it all,—and what right had you to forget? I shall complain to the authorities. Here I’ve been waiting for the last quarter of an hour for the brandy and soda I ordered and then I am told it has been forgotten. Send for——’

‘Sir—please sir, I hope you will overlook it this time, being Christmas, sir—and the club so full. Besides, it might mean my place to me and I’m a married man, with——’

‘A dozen children. Of course. Deuced improvident lot! That’s what you all go in for, but what have your wife and children to do with *my* brandy and soda?’

'If you'd only overlook it this once, sir. I won't be a moment, sir. Just going—'

Mr Horace Parker stared grimly after the retreating figure. After all argument and abuse left him thirstier than ever. Perhaps it would be wiser to have his drink first and call the delinquent to account afterwards. These idle, dilatory waiters ought to be shown up and dismissed if negligent,—it was his duty to the club not to let the matter slip. It was astonishing how strong Mr Parker could be on the subject of duty when it suited him.

In the meantime, whilst awaiting the return of his victim, he might as well settle himself for a comfortable read of his paper. It was not a difficult matter, and the worthy Horace felt a glow of superiority steal through his veins as he ostentatiously unfolded the pages of the *Astronomer*. It was his secret pride and joy to be looked upon as a shining light in the world of science and felt already on a higher plane from the common herd of his fellows who were merely content with the details of daily events on their own paltry globe.

So interested did he become that he was quite oblivious to the fact that his brandy and soda stood on the table by his side and that the waiter had fled without further reproof to the farther end of the room.

H'm—yes—this required reading and re-reading so that his active brain might fully assimilate the astounding facts which at first appeared so fantastical.

Was it really sober fact, that men of science detected some strange meteor-like flashes emanating from the direction of the planet Mars? Could these indeed be signals, as some affirmed? Signals passed from the inhabitants of one world to the other?

Mr Parker sat up, discovered his drink, and refreshed himself liberally, then, with a sigh of satisfaction, he re-opened his paper. Mars inhabited! If so, by whom?

Close by, seated near the window, two of the club members began talking.

At first our scientist in embryo was only conscious of jarring voices, breaking aggressively through calm reflection. Great Scot! what a beastly American twang the one chap had. They ought never to have had a fellow like that in the club, he should speak to the authorities.

The thought of the authorities recalled the waiter and his short-comings, and again Mr Parker was about to rouse himself when a familiar name caught his ear.

What were those fellows saying about Minnie? Minnie Templar too—there was no mistaking the name!

With the sheets of the *Astronomer* held carefully before his face, Mr Parker proceeded to listen with growing interest and indignation.

It was fifteen years ago since his mother—now dead—had adopted the three-year-old little orphan girl of whose antecedents few seemed to know. But of what value, after all, are antecedents? The fact remained that little Minnie was the daintiest, prettiest baby girl imaginable, and every year seemed to leave her prettier, more charming and sweet-natured.

Mrs Parker's act of charity had its own reward, and the tiny orphan girl came to be the light and sunshine of her home.

Even the self-centred old maiden aunt, Martha Parker, had been unable to resist the influence of sunny youth and innocence. To live in the same house with pretty, golden-haired Minnie was to love her, almost in spite of oneself.

As for Mrs Parker, she had adored the child who was so rapidly growing towards womanhood when she herself died. It was Minnie who had watched over her, tended her, wept for her, with a far more whole-hearted devotion than the widow's only son had been capable of displaying.

From his earliest youth, Horace Parker had been accustomed to have his own way, and

a very primrose path he had found it so far. Now at the age of twenty-nine there seemed little else left him to desire. With riches, health, comfort, good-looks—none to dispute his will—was it any great wonder that finding the world ready to bow down to his least behest Horace Parker proceeded to trample over it, regardless of the thoughts, feeling or concerns of others, so long as he could attain all his desires.

In the general scheme of content, Minnie Templar unconsciously had her part. In lordly fashion Mr Parker approved her bright presence, her unfailing sweetness of disposition, her undoubted beauty and charm. He had come to regard her as much his goods and chattel as the dining-room suite or the drawing-room piano, and it annoyed him very much to hear her being discussed over there by those two bounders. Another name was already being introduced into their conversation. Horace had no scruple whatever about listening.

‘Arthur Dicey?’ demanded the man with the twang which so jarred on Parker’s sensibilities. ‘Oh, yes, I know him. Got plenty of stuff and a nice young chap into the bargain.’

‘Used to have no end of fun in him too,’ agreed the other, ‘but he’s been a bit down on his luck lately—and I think I can cotton to what it is. He’s in love with pretty Miss Minnie.’

‘What, — the girl we were speaking of? Minnie Templar?’

‘That’s the one. Jolly pretty little kid too. And I should think she would jump at any one who could take her away from the Parker *ménage*, it must be a bit ‘off tap’ for a young girl having to live with that pair.’

‘What? the immaculate Horace and the spinster aunt? I should say they *were* a couple of holy terrors, eaten up by self, eh?’

‘Absolutely. Parker is the limit—always has been. Wouldn’t raise his little finger to help any one. I can’t stick the chap. But Miss Minnie will be all right if she gets Dicey. A real good sort.’

‘One of the best—I quite agree. I shouldn’t think the girl will require much inducement to change her home. What a fool Dicey must be not to go in and win right away.’

‘A bit diffident I suppose. Well, after all it’s no concern of ours—but here’s luck anyway.’ There was the clinking of glass, and then, presently, the speakers rose to their feet and moved away. Apparently they had not recognised the identity of the reader of the *Astronomer*.

Interesting though his paper was, Horace Parker did not return to its perusal immediately.

He was thinking over what those two idiots had been discussing. Not that he troubled about their uncomplimentary remarks concerning himself. His egotism was too supreme to recognise the truth of the indictment, he merely regarded such speeches as the babble of ignorant fools. But he was conscious of a sudden uneasiness with regard to Minnie.

What was that twaddle about Arthur Dicey? Dicey indeed! What possible right had he to come interfering in the domestic régime of his, Horace Parker's, household?

Horace was conservative in his tastes, and hated the very mention of the word 'change.' He insisted, indeed, on his aunt retaining a cook, whose honesty was not above suspicion and whose temper was proverbial, simply because she was ideal in her culinary treatment of kidneys.

And now—worse still—came the inconvenience of anticipating the loss of Minnie.

What business was it of that young cub Dicey's to dare to fall in love with her?

It was all an outrage to society—a crime which must straightway be nipped in the bud.

He was suddenly aware that he could not possibly get on with his full quantum of ease and comfort without Minnie.

He should miss her bright presence at meal

times, find an uncomfortable blank where youth and sunshine had reigned—only appreciated now when the possibility of loss arose.

In a hundred little ways Minnie conduced to his comfort—there were a hundred and one trifling acts of thoughtfulness which he should hate to do without even though they were too small and many to enumerate—still less to thank for. No! when he came to think it over, he was resolved that Minnie should *not* be sacrificed to that brainless cub, Arther Dicey. Sooner than that he would marry her himself.

Yes, positively he would do her that inestimable honour.

The idea was a new one, and required careful consideration. But the more he considered it the more attractive did it appear.

Minnie 'knew his ways' so perfectly. She would not worry or fuss him in any way and would be perfectly content and grateful for his affection without wanting to exact much demonstration.

Hang it all! The thought that someone else was already contemplating the carrying off of this domesticated treasure roused Horace's anger to quite a boiling pitch.

He was very, very fond of Minnie, though he had never troubled to tell himself so before, and he should certainly marry her and so keep

her safely to continue ministering to his wants.

It was, after all, quite an easy solution to the problem, and so Mr Dicey might go and hang himself whilst he, Horace Parker, returned to his reflections on the stars and their inhabitants, having settled in his mind that Minnie Templar should have the unutterable and supreme honour of becoming the legitimate tender of his wants, and waitress-in-chief on his good pleasure to the end of her mortal life.

He had not the slightest fear but that she would fully appreciate the extent of her good fortune.

Dear little Minnie! She was wonderfully 'understanding' for a woman, and would quite know what to expect from such a brainful and superior husband.

He smiled as he turned over the pages of his paper and returned to the contemplation of Mars and its inhabitants, having metaphorically consigned Mr Arthur Dicey to considerably lower regions.

CHAPTER II

THE WOMAN'S POINT OF VIEW

'Going out at this time, Minnie?'

'I *was* going out, Horace. I had some shopping to do at Gorrings, and then Cissie Benkleigh wanted me to drop in to tea with her if I could manage it.'

'Where's Aunt Bella?'

'Gone to a Bridge drive. She will be home to dinner.'

'I wasn't talking about dinner, I wanted to know who was going to give me my tea.'

Minnie paused, whilst Horace stood, both hands thrust into his pockets, the very picture of injured manhood.

'I didn't think you would be home to tea, you so seldom are.'

'But I am to-day,' he retorted with unanswerable logic.

Minnie gave the tiniest of sighs and came slowly back across the threshold.

'Then I won't go,' she said, yet delayed, half hoping he might not accept the sacrifice.

But hope was vain.

'Come in then and shut the door,' replied Horace more cheerfully, 'there's a beastly draught.'

Minnie tried to smile down her own disappointment.

'I'd better go and take my things off first,' she said, 'auntie does not like seeing coats and hats lying about, and they are too warm to keep on in this room.'

'Make haste,' he urged, 'there's a great deal I want to say to you.'

His manner was quite impressive.

Minnie hurried away upstairs. She had been looking forward to having a cosy gossip with her friend, and the shopping had been quite important from a feminine point of view. However, if Horace really wanted her,—Minnie checked a sigh whilst the soft colour rose to her cheeks as she stood before the looking-glass unpinning the big beaver hat which so well framed the pretty face beneath. A sweet, girlish face it was, with rounded cheeks in which a lurking dimple might be seen on occasion whilst fair waving hair was brought low over a broad brow from beneath which a pair of clear blue eyes looked out with serene innocence into

the world of which their owner knew so little. And yet she was not *quite* a child now, Minnie told herself, whilst again the warm colour stole to her cheeks as she reflected over Horace's words.

She wondered whether it was true that he had something very important to say, and vaguely hoped that it would not be about stars and astronomy, and all those dreadfully clever things in which he was so interested, and which she herself could never understand.

'Minnie!'

Was that Horace calling? How unusually impatient he was! She had not even had time to smooth her hair. There—that would do. Of course Horace must not be kept waiting—she knew how he disliked drinking tea that had stood for more than a minute and a half in the teapot.

She ran lightly downstairs, humming gaily to herself, the momentary disappointment to her afternoon's plans forgotten. It was not her way to brood over a grievance, and besides if Horace wanted her. He was sitting in his own special chair by the fire when she entered, the tea equipage drawn near. Bella had not lighted the lamps, but what matter? The gloaming and firelight were cosier, more romantic too, though Horace was not inclined to be romantic, he was far too clever.

But he did not ask for the lamps and really did not seem to be in a particularly clever frame of mind, at least he did not talk of stars, but merely of Bridge and the folly of women taking it up so greatly to the detriment of their household duties. He even went so far as to hope *his* wife would never play Bridge, whilst pointing to Aunt Martha as the moral of his tale.

Minnie listened to the lengthy diatribe with silent respect, and amused herself by toasting buns for their joint delectation. She was very partial to toasted buns, and Horace ate the portions which were the most delicately browned and buttered with an air of reflection which told of a soul far removed from such mundane and trivial affairs of the flesh.

'I am glad I did not go out after all,' said Minnie as she set down her empty cup and curled herself in front of the fire-place, 'Isn't it nice and cosy, Horace? and it is dreadfully cold outside. I can't help thinking of all the poor people who have no fire to sit by. Mustn't it be simply *awful*?'

'Probably their own faults,' retorted Horace, 'Brought to it by drink and reckless improvidence, half the fault of the so-called charitable societies which pauperise the masses. I don't believe in any of it.'

'But Horace, think, the poor women and

little children *they* can't help it, and I am sure lots of men too are only unfortunate, you can't help being sorry for *them* !'

'The women,' replied Mr Parker loftily, 'are at the bottom of all the mischief. They nag, the men drink, and then hard-working, intelligent members of society—like myself for instance—are expected to provide Christmas crackers and plum pudding for their children when it is entirely their own faults that they can't provide their own.'

Minnie sighed, gazing into the depths of the fire.

'I don't know,' she said. 'But it must be hard to be cold and hungry this weather. One must pity them.'

'Pity them as much as you like, my dear girl, but don't get into that hysterical fashion of lavishing indiscriminate charity on the undeserving, it is almost as fatal as the Bridge craze.'

For a moment a dimple flashed in a smooth pink cheek.

'You really are teaching me quite a lot, Horace,' said Minnie demurely. 'Is it all part of the "lots of things" you had to say to me?' He looked down half suspiciously into the upraised face, but the dimple had vanished and been replaced by an expression of demure innocence.

It was of course impossible that Minnie should dare attempt the mildest form of sarcasm.

'What I particularly wished to say to you,' observed Horace deliberately, 'was of a more personal character, but the rest all lead up to it.'

'Lead up to what?'

Certainly the gloaming of a winter's evening with ruddy firelight aglow on a flushed and pretty face should have made the art of proposal easy. And yet Horace Parker was not at all romantic, at the moment he was thinking chiefly of Arthur Dicey's unwarrantable liberty in daring to fall in love with part and parcel of his household belongings.

Nevertheless it would not greatly inconvenience him to thwart Mr Dicey's intentions. Even Horace's slow pulses quickened as he looked into blue eyes and read a tale which unconsciously betrayed their owner.

'Has it ever occurred to you, Minnie,' he observed, 'that we might reasonably be expected to marry?' Minnie gave a faint gasp. Never, never, in any of the romances over which she had pored and revelled for the last four years had the hero couched his proposal in such terms.

The very surprise brought the irrepressible dimple to her cheek.

'To marry, Horace?' she questioned, with sublime innocence, 'to marry *whom*?'

He frowned a little at her denseness. 'Marry each other of course,' he retorted. 'Who else should we marry?' he looked half suspiciously at her, thinking again of Arthur Dicey.

Minnie's head was averted, and he could no longer see her eyes, in fact she seemed intent on rolling her handkerchief into the smallest possible compass.

'Do you mean,' she whispered, 'That—that you want me to marry you?'

Horace was becoming irritated. 'Of course I mean it,' he retorted. 'I shouldn't have asked you otherwise.'

Suddenly Minnie knelt up, resting one of her hands on his knee. 'Tell me, Horace,' she pleaded, and there was a wistful tremor in her young voice. 'Are you asking me because you are in love with me. *Do* you love me—really?' Horace groaned. Minnie was a dear little thing, quite charming and lovable at times, but just at the present moment she was showing herself a singularly obtuse young woman.

'Naturally I love you,' he said in an injured fashion, 'really, really, really. That settles it, doesn't it? and you are going to be married to me, and everything will go on just as it has been going.'

He patted her hand. Even pressed it in quite an affectionate way. After all he could

not help experiencing a glow of satisfaction at the clever way in which he had succeeded in outwitting that Arthur Dicey.

And Minnie was the dearest little soul, only he wished she was not so anxious to pursue a subject about which he imagined quite enough had been said for the present.

But Minnie still knelt there on the hearth-rug as though expectant—and he could not go on patting her hand for ever. What did she want him to do next?

Then an idea struck him.

‘Oh of course, there’s the ring,’ he added. ‘I’ll see about getting that to-morrow.’

Instantly the hand beneath his own was sharply withdrawn.

‘It—it doesn’t matter about the ring,’ said Minnie, and rose from her knees.

‘Nonsense,’ replied Horace briskly as he watched the slim little figure in its blue serge frock moving slowly away towards the table where a work-basket was placed. ‘Of course, you must have a ring since we are engaged.’ He was again congratulating himself on this eminently practical and suitable arrangement.

Minnie turned swiftly and came back to his side, resting her hand on his shoulder as she bent towards him.

‘Are we engaged?’ she asked, ‘Is—is this

what is meant by being engaged?—why! you've hardly said a word about—about loving me.'

Horace wriggled away as far as he conveniently could. This was the worst of women, they always wanted a scene, and constant repetition of an obvious remark.

'My dear Minnie,' he replied. 'How many more times am I to say it? Once ought to be quite sufficient. But there, if you *want* it said, I love you very much indeed, and we shall get on splendidly if only you remain just the same as you have always been, not making a fuss—or, er—making too great a demand on my time. Of course with women it is different—but a man's time is valuable. I have my books to read, and my astronomical researches to occupy me—in point of fact at the present moment I have a most important article to read—.'

'Poor Horace! And you have wasted all this time in proposing to me?'

'My dear girl, I don't in the least regret it. And I shall have plenty of time now to read it all through before I have to dress for dinner.'

'And you would rather read your paper which I am sure says a great deal that is only guess work and argues about things which are

millions of miles off so that no one can come to contradict them, instead—instead of making love to *me*?’

Horace sighed wearily. How utterly impossible it was to instil common-sense even into the most sensible girl's ears.

‘I quite thought I had been making love to you for the last hour,’ he observed, taking out his watch. ‘In fact I don't see what more I could say. I have told you I love you, and as you, dearest Minnie, return the affection we shall doubtless be married and live—er—quite happily, on the whole, afterwards.’

For a moment Minnie struggled between tears and laughter—but laughter predominated as she surprised this prosaic lover by bending yet lower and bestowing a kiss—gratis and unasked for, on his lips.

It was certainly a surprise, something quite abnormal in the sketch of domestic bliss Mr Parker had drawn for himself, and yet he was not altogether displeased after he had quite realised what had happened.

In fact, yes, in fact he was quite prepared to be appreciative in moderation. Dear little Minnie! How she loved him—and the kiss was sweet enough, the soft clinging of the fresh young lips being a revelation which had nothing to do with the discoveries of science,

and was infinitely nearer and more satisfying than the contemplation of stars.

So he smiled up into the laughing face which the firelight shewed him as Minnie, growing bolder, since receiving no rebuff, perched herself on the side of his chair.

‘And do you know, you dear, wise old thing,’ she observed. ‘You have never troubled to ask me if *I* love you. Is it—is it such a foregone conclusion that you don’t bother to enquire?’

It was a disconcerting suggestion since it happened to be true enough. So Horace passed it off with a laugh.

‘Come, you shall tell me if you like,’ he said. ‘And then run away like a dear little girl and ask Bella to light the lamp. I particularly wish to read this article.’

‘And I particularly doubt whether I shall allow you to do so. But there, I won’t tease because—because I want to tell you, Horace, that I do really, really love you very much indeed.’

She slipped her hand into his, looking wistfully down at him. Perhaps she even hoped that he would begin love-making in the old-fashioned, and orthodox way, she would not mind how hackneyed the phrasing might be, or how common-place the simple words might sound. ‘Very much indeed,’ she echoed.

Horace set his feet comfortably on the low fender. He did not worry in the least about that Dicey fellow now, and might remain perfectly content that no item of the household régime need be altered.

He was positively glad to think dear little Minnie adored him so, and of course he was very, very fond of her. He did not so much mind if she cared to kiss him again, though it did not occur to him just then that he might be expected to take the initiative. Afterwards he would smoke a cigar and have a quiet read—the correct and legitimate way of spending a winter's evening.

'That's right, my dear little girl,' he rejoined, in answer to Minnie's bashful confidence. 'I am sure you do, and we shall be very, very happy. You won't forget to tell Bella about the lamp?—or you can ring if you like.'

Minnie slipped from the arm of the chair. 'No,' she said with the faintest of sighs—'I'll tell Bella myself, I—I was going upstairs anyway, and you will like to be quiet with your reading.'

She waited a moment in hopes of a reply,—possibly of an invitation to remain, but none came, he probably thought she had already gone.

'I wonder . . .' whispered Minnie to herself,

'if he *really* loves me? But then why should he have asked me to marry him if he did not? There are hundreds of other girls, better looking, — better-off, — more suitable altogether, whilst I am only his mother's protégée. And how good they have all been to me during my life here. Aunt Martha—Horace—all of them. I do hope I shall be able to repay him by making him happy and . . . and not expecting too much from him. It is so easy to be selfish when one is very very fond of a person. Perhaps that is why I almost hated that paper and all those astronomic researches of his. As if the stars and planets really concern one, when . . . when there are so many *other* things!'

She sighed pensively over such reflections, whilst unable to repress a vague wish that Horace were less clever and more like other men—those heroes of romance for instance who set their lady-loves in the foremost place of honour, paying homage as well as offering devotion.

Yet the laughter of irrepressible youth came bubbling to her lips at the mental picture conjured up of Horace—*Horace* the great and worshipful—paying homage to her! ! !

There was something positively irreverent in the thought.

CHAPTER III

ENGAGED

‘My dear, I am delighted, of course I am, it will do Horace all the good in the world to have a wife to look after, and he could not have chosen more wisely. It’s delightful to think everything will go on just as it always has done without any change.’

Unconsciously Miss Martha Parker voiced her nephew’s sentiments exactly in those last words.

Minnie knelt on a footstool at her aunt’s side, slowly twirling a ring round her third finger.

This outward and visible sign of her engagement was an unfailing source of delight and pride. ‘Look at the lovely ring he has given me too, auntie!’ she cried. ‘Rubies and diamonds, wasn’t it kind of him?’

‘Not at all. And I thought pearls were your favourites.’

Minnie flushed. ‘He forgot, I am sure, and he said rubies and diamonds were his favourites, so they must be mine too.’

She kissed the ring as she spoke, rising from her knees and crossing towards the window.

Miss Parker continued her knitting without immediately replying. She was a lady of uncertain age, though a casual guess might have placed forty-five to her credit, and—like her nephew—of dominant character.

Be it said, however, for the lady in question, hers was by no means a selfish nature.

Vain she might be, with a still carefully cherished weakness for pretty clothes, but her heart was kind and sympathetic, her charitable instinct largely developed, and her mind alert, keen-witted and shrewd.

She was fond of her nephew Horace, but in spite of a strong and genuine attachment no one could be more fully awake to the fact of his gross selfishness of disposition. It pained and annoyed her daily, hourly, and yet she could suggest no cure.

Certainly he was blind to the practical lesson of example as practised by his mother's little protégée Minnie Templar. Miss Parker was devoted to her adopted niece and entirely appreciative of a sweet and selfless nature, a nature of which it had seemed Horace took no sort of notice at all.

It was a great surprise as well as pleasure to the spinster lady to hear that after all he must have been more observant than was apparent.

‘An excellent thing,’ she murmured, as the knitting needles flew faster, ‘if only Minnie does not spoil him at the outset. Minnie!’ she added in a louder key, ‘come here, dear, I wish to speak to you.’

Minnie obeyed, coming back to her former position on the footstool.

‘Yes, auntie dear,’ she replied demurely, whilst her blue eyes seemed dancing with a hundred gay little lights.

‘I want you to listen to good advice,’ said Miss Parker impressively. ‘To begin with, *don’t* spoil Horace. *Now* is your great chance. If he won’t give up to his fiancée he will end in making a white slave of his wife. That’s the worst possible thing for him. What he needs is to discover that the world was not altogether fashioned for the comfort and advancement of Horace Parker. Don’t give way. Be exacting at times. He won’t like it, but it will be the best tonic in the world. Impress on him that you are beginning as you mean to go on, and that a wife is not going to be a slave to fetch and carry for his lord high-mightiness.’

Minnie’s laughter was spontaneous, but she kissed her adoptive aunt with affection.

‘How kind of you, Aunt Martha,’ she said, ‘to give me such good advice. And do you know, I believe the cure must have begun to

work already without any effort on my part, for Horace has actually promised to come with us to Mrs Clarence's dance to-morrow night. Now isn't that splendid—and unselfish?'

'It certainly is a step in the right direction, and for your own sake I am pleased to hear it, my dear. It will take the boy out of himself, and when he finds that giving you pleasure brings the same to his own heart, why, then we shall indeed see a change for the better. And high time too.'

Minnie smiled.

'I told him it was perfectly sweet of him to come,' she said. 'And I have my new white dress, it fits me beautifully too. I hope he will like it. *How* I shall enjoy wearing it, and dancing with him. I wish to-morrow night would make haste and come. Has your dress been sent home from Louise's yet, Auntie?'

'Not yet,' replied Miss Parker, 'It is very annoying as there might be some trifling alteration necessary at the last moment. I must 'phone through and ask her.'

'I'll go,' replied Minnie readily. 'And tell her to send it round at once. Oh! you don't know how happy I feel, and I shall count the hours till to-morrow evening. I *love* dancing anyhow, and dancing with Horace far best of all.'

The knitting lay idle on Miss Parker's lap

after the girl had gone, whilst the face on which Time had set its searing hand saddened perceptibly as the spinster sat gazing into the fire.

Ah, it was a quarter of a century ago since she had been young, pretty and gay-hearted like little Minnie; and yet it only seemed so short a time back. There were dream-faces in that past which looked now into hers through the red glow of burning embers. Faces which had haunted her dreams for many a long year. Ah! many a long year, since dead and shrouded.

Twenty-five years ago! And she was still Martha Parker—would always remain Martha Parker now to the end of the chapter. She hoped life would have a different reading for little Minnie. Yes, she hoped that, and sighed as she took up her knitting again and started a fresh row.

‘Horace must be kind to her,’ she murmured. ‘But will she ever be dominant enough to compel him to change his nature?’

It seemed to the reflecter that in such dominance alone happiness could be won, whilst upstairs Minnie was smoothing out and admiring—for the hundredth time—the dainty new dress she was to wear at to-morrow’s dance.

‘I do hope he will like it, and that I shall look *nice*,’ she whispered, as she glanced from the gown to the reflection of her own fair little face in the glass.

CHAPTER IV

THE SELFISHNESS OF MAN

‘He’s not here!’

Minnie’s voice rang with a keen note of disappointment as she stood on the threshold of the empty library, a vision of dainty girlhood in her soft white gown, a white rose-bud nestling amongst the coils of her fair hair.

Already the evening had opened disastrously, since that most faithless of dressmakers had failed to send home Aunt Martha’s new gown.

In vain had telephone messages and telegrams been sent,—the dress was not ready,—it had been impossible to send it. And at last, irritated and annoyed at the delay and waiting, Miss Parker had decided that she should not go to the dance at all.

‘It was entirely for your sake that I accepted, my dear,’ she told Minnie when the latter tried to urge a change of decision. ‘And since Horace is going *I* shall not.’

‘But I thought you liked seeing your friends, and there will be many disappointed not to meet you,’ pleaded Minnie. ‘Could you not go in another gown?’

Miss Parker flushed, drawing herself up somewhat primly as her manner was when annoyed.

‘Certainly not,’ she replied. ‘I have nothing in the least suitable, so please say no more about it. I shall not go.’

Minnie had obeyed and said no more, but she herself was conscious of a vague sense of irritation and annoyance, such as one so easily experiences after looking forward to an ideal time of pleasure and finding some hitch in the contemplated perfection.

‘I wish Aunt Martha had been going,’ she said to herself on the way downstairs, and now, peeping into the library, confident of finding Horace awaiting her, came the warning of a yet more disastrous disappointment.

In vain she looked round, as though half expecting to see her fiancé appearing from behind one of the comfortable chairs which furnished the room.

‘Not here?’ echoed Miss Parker, following her niece, ‘why! surely he must be.’

‘No, he is not. Where can he be?’

The anxiety deepened in the girl’s voice.

Horace was certainly not upstairs,—and she had been positive of finding him here.

‘Extraordinary,’ exclaimed Miss Parker, crossing over to the fire-side. ‘He ought to be here.’

‘We shall be late,’ went on Minnie, with a most unusual note of petulance in her gentle voice. ‘Aunt Martha,—do you hear? we shall be late.’

She drew back the crimson curtain from before the window as she spoke, peering between the Venetian blinds.

Outside the snow fell fast. It was a bitter night, and where *could* Horace be?

Tears stung in Minnie’s pretty eyes. Perhaps the disappointment was disproportionately great, but she did love dancing, and the delight and pride of taking her fiancé to Mrs Clarence’s ball had been so sweet a dream to which she had been looking forward with intense pleasure.

It aggravated her to see Aunt Martha kneeling calmly by the fire poking the logs.

‘We shall be late,’ she reiterated, turning away from the window with a despairing sigh.

‘Yes, dear—I think you will,’ said Aunt Martha as she laid aside the poker.

‘He promised to go,—didn’t he?’ went on Minnie tragically.

‘Yes, dear, he certainly did.’

The calmness of such agreement provoked a petulant outburst.

'I do call it a shame!' cried poor Minnie, the tears brimming over and running down her cheeks. 'Horace is the meanest, most selfish—'

'Quite right,' said Aunt Martha rising to her feet and turning to watch the younger woman, who was pacing up and down in restless impatience. 'He *is* most selfish.'

'He thinks,' went on Minnie, giving full vent to outraged feelings, 'of nothing but his books and his papers, and—and his *horrid* little stars.'

'Quite true,' agreed Miss Parker, 'he does.' This was too much for disappointed sweet seventeen.

'Then why do you let him do it?' demanded Minnie, too indignant to trouble as to the injustice of the attack.

'I?' echoed Miss Parker, taken aback at this sudden shaft.

'Yes, you,' repeated the girl. 'You know he's engaged to me, and yet you allow him to treat me as if . . . as if we had been married for years.'

Miss Martha raised her brows in delicate surprise, whilst she shook her head gravely.

'My dear Minnie,' she expostulated, 'If Horace is a little thoughtless, surely it is not my fault? I suppose, if the truth were to

be known, he has forgotten all about the dance.'

The very mention of that eagerly anticipated pleasure added fuel to a pretty brisk fire.

'Forgotten!' echoed Minnie, pausing to regard her companion who had seated herself at a table and drawn a book towards her, with the evident intention of settling down to a quiet read. 'I . . . I'll tell you what it is, Aunt Martha, *you'll* have to go instead.'

There was considerable triumph in this last suggestion, and Minnie stooped, warming her hands at the blaze, purposely avoiding an indignant glance.

'You know, my dear,' said Miss Parker firmly, 'it is quite impossible.'

Minnie's shoulders were raised in an imperceptible shrug. 'Impossible?' she queried with a perfect show of innocence, 'why?'

'Well dear,' argued her aunt, 'you know that horrid Louise hasn't sent home my dress.'

Minnie laughed heartlessly. She was ready in her present mood to carry the war into any one's camp, and she knew Miss Parker's pet weakness perfectly well.

'You know you have lots of dresses,' she replied.

'Not fit to be seen,' retorted Miss Parker,

bridling, 'you know that as well as I do, Minnie.'

'There's that plum coloured silk to begin with,' said Minnie half mischievously as she stood by her aunt's side, counting off the items of a considerable wardrobe on her fingers.

'My dear child!' cried Miss Parker in horror, 'I wore that all last winter!'

'Only about three times! Then there's your yellow satin.'

'My dear pet! now you know I look a perfect fright in that—yellow doesn't suit me.'

'Nothing suits you to-night,' pouted poor Minnie, who, it must be confessed, was quite ready to quarrel with her own shadow at that particular moment. 'I declare you're as bad as Horace. Heigho! I suppose I shall have to give up the dance, but it *is* a shame.'

She turned back towards the fire, and at sight of the drooping little figure in its pretty frock a stab of compunction smote Miss Parker.

'My dear,' she complained, 'I would have gone with pleasure, if that odious Louise had not disappointed me. But you would not have me make an exhibition of myself? One must have *some* pride.'

'Pride!' replied Minnie, with more bitterness than one would have thought her capable of exhibiting. 'You're all pride. I—I do believe

if the house was on fire and you were at an upper window you would not come down the fire-escape unless you were dressed in the latest Paris fashion.'

Aunt Martha tossed her head with some annoyance. Like all people, especially middle-aged ones, who indulge in the weakness of vanity, she was peculiarly sensitive to any allusion or vaguest hint concerning that very natural vice. 'Upon my word, dear,' she said, 'You are not very polite, I must say. I'm very sorry that you should be disappointed of your dance, but I don't believe you'd have cared so very much about it if you hadn't known you were wearing a particularly pretty frock.'

'It isn't that at all,' whispered Minnie, beginning to repent her hasty speeches and coming back to her Aunt's side.

'But it is,' retorted Miss Parker with vigour, 'A very pretty frock. And it suits you quite wonderfully.'

Minnie's soft arms were round the other's neck and a pair of warm young lips pressed to a faded cheek.

'Does it, Auntie?' she whispered, 'what I meant was that I go for the dancing—principally—I do love dancing. Auntie dear, don't you think you *could* manage.'

She paused, checking her speech as the echo

of a slamming door resounded through the house, 'Horace,' cried Minnie. 'Oh, there's Horace—at last!'

A moment later she was running forward to greet her fiancé, who came into the room, shivering in spite of the fact that he was warmly wrapped in a heavy fur-lined coat.

He did not respond very cordially to his little sweetheart's welcome, being in evident haste to reach the fireside, whilst he threw down a copy of his beloved *Astronomer* on the table in passing. 'Beastly cold,' he chattered, jiggling first on one foot then on another, whilst spreading chilled fingers before the welcome blaze. He did not appear to notice, that Minnie was dressed in any way out of the ordinary, in fact, he had scarcely bestowed more than a casual glance upon her, his chief concern being to get thoroughly thawed as soon as possible.

'Horace dear,' said Minnie half-timidly, 'I'm so glad you're here. We've been waiting such a time.'

'Waiting?' interjected Horace, gently rubbing his numbed fingers with the utmost solicitude. 'What for?'

'Why, for you,' replied Miss Parker tartly. She did not at all approve of such cavalier behaviour and knew intuitively that Minnie

was disappointed at his lack of appreciation of her new frock.

‘Have you got a cab?’ asked Minnie anxiously.

‘Cab?’ he asked, ‘what for?’ He had certainly returned in an obtuse mood.

‘You know very well,’ said Miss Parker, ‘that the horses are coughing.’

Horace began to clear his throat.

‘Coughing!’ he complained, ‘no wonder. Everybody’s coughing this beastly weather. *I’m coughing.*’

He cleared his throat again, provoking instant solicitude from Minnie.

‘Poor dear! How good of you to go out. When will it be here?’

‘What be here?’

‘The cab.’

‘I don’t know what you are talking of,’ he declared,—whilst the back he turned upon the questioner as he bent over the fire, expressed the additional, ‘And I don’t want to,’ with sufficient eloquence. Miss Parker had taken up her book again. ‘That odious Louise hasn’t sent home my dress,’ she explained. ‘But there, you two will be all right without me.’

She beamed at Minnie from over the open page.

‘Without you?’ questioned Horace proceeding to divest himself of his overcoat. ‘Oh yes, we’ll manage.’

He settled his collar more comfortably as he spoke, quite oblivious to the fact that Minnie was staring at him in horror.

‘Why, Auntie!’ cried she in dismay, ‘look—he isn’t dressed yet——’

Miss Parker laid down her book with a gesture of annoyance. Really there seemed no end to the evening’s troubles.

‘Horace!’ she exclaimed, ‘you’ll be late—of course you will. And it is a great deal too bad on Minnie. You’ll both miss ever so many dances.’

Horace stared in genuine surprise.

‘What on earth are you talking about,’ he demanded, crossing to the table and picking up the paper he had thrown down on first entering the room.

‘Do you mean to say you are not going to the Clarence’s dance?’ asked his aunt severely.

‘Certainly not,’ was the cool reply.

‘Oh, Horace,’ came from poor Minnie, unable to restrain the cry of reproach.

‘Surely,’ went on Miss Parker, ‘You are not going to disappoint Minnie?’

‘Please, Horace, please,’ pleaded Minnie herself.

‘ Besides,’ continued the spinster with decision, ‘ Mrs Clarence will be most offended if none of us go.’

‘ Well, then, go by all means,’ urged Horace, nothing moved by this combined attack. ‘ There’s nothing to prevent you.’

He looked genially from the one to the other, quite callous in observing the indignation on the elder lady’s face, and the piteous pleading of the younger’s.

‘ Minnie cannot go without you,’ said Miss Parker shortly.

‘ Why not?’

‘ Besides, you promised to take her.’

‘ Well, I’m not going out again to-night.

The last speech was accompanied by an obvious attempt to feign a cough. But the ruse failed this time.

‘ Oh Horace,’ cried Minnie reproachfully, ‘ how very unkind you are.’

Miss Parker’s indignation was expressed more eloquently.

‘ I call it perfectly mean—’ she exclaimed with vigour.

Her nephew had settled himself in the most comfortable chair by the fireside and spread out his paper.

‘ It is much too cold,’ he explained. ‘ Besides, I want to read.’

‘Never,’ declared his Aunt. ‘Did I know anyone so utterly selfish as you are, Horace.’

‘Well,’ he retorted coolly, ‘what price you? Why don’t you go?’

‘You know I can’t. I haven’t got a dress.’

‘Well, go without it,’ he suggested, regardless of the outrage to spinster feelings.

Miss Parker withered him with one word. ‘Horace!’

‘I mean,’ he apologised, with a suppressed chuckle at the scoring of a point, ‘You can easily find one that will do.’

‘I think,’ declared Miss Parker, ‘men are perfect fools. *One* that will do indeed! Now, don’t speak to me any more.’

‘Look here,’ replied Horace, roused by her last command into giving his reasons for self justification. ‘In spite of my frightful cough,’—he made another effort to affect this suggested complaint—‘I’ve been out in the bitter cold and snow to get this month’s copy of the *Astronomer*. It contains a second article about Life on the Planet Mars, and if you deign to take the least interest in what is of absorbing importance to *me*, you will remember how very enthusiastic I was over the first article on a similar subject, appearing in the last issue. I have been looking forward for *weeks* to reading this paper, and now, when at last I succeed in getting it after

an infinity of trouble, you refuse to allow me to enjoy it. Instead, you ask me to put on these dress clothes and go out again, thus running tremendous risks with my super-sensitive lungs and delicate—ahem—throat. And all for what? To see a lot of fools capering about and making idiots of themselves until four or five o'clock in the morning. I think you're most inconsiderate.'

He leant back, apparently exhausted by an eloquence which had not failed in impressing one listener.

As for his aunt, she was much too angry at such an exhibition of male egotism to retort.

'*Horace!*' was all she could say—but she managed to convey a good deal of her opinion in the single word.

But to her surprise it was Minnie, the little turn-coat, who took up the thread of her lover's complaint.

'Inconsiderate, unreasonable and selfish,' she cried, running to the poor martyr's side. 'You're quite right, dear. I—I didn't understand that you had anything particular to do.'

She bent over his chair as she spoke, smoothing the hair from his forehead with loving fingers.

'Now, there's a sensible little girl,' approved Horace, as he seated himself back with a sigh of satisfaction.

It was Minnie who placed the cushions in exactly the correct position for his perfect ease.

‘Now, do make yourself thoroughly comfortable,’ she urged, and even Aunt Martha could not detect the flavour of an underlying sarcasm in the words.

Horace was only too ready to obey the injunction, though he turned his head restlessly a moment later as though in vain search for something.

Minnie, lingering in the hope of receiving some tender little speech of gratitude, was eager to anticipate his want.

‘What is it?’ she asked. ‘What are you looking for?’

‘My cigar case,’ he replied. ‘I fancy I must have left it in my room.’

To Miss Parker’s great annoyance Minnie was off in an instant to fetch it, but hardly had she reached the door than Horace re-called her. ‘Wait a minute,’ he demanded. ‘Did I put it down as I came through the hall?’

He actually took the exertion to raise himself in the chair, as he meditated on the all-important question, whilst Minnie set off without delay to investigate the hall.

‘Wait! Wait!’ shouted an impatient voice from the library. ‘I’m not certain I took it out

with me at all this morning, in which case I expect it will be in my—'

'Study or bedroom?' queried Minnie, from the threshold.

'Study. But don't run about so, child, you make me giddy. *Do not run about.* Have a thorough search. And Minnie—'

'Yes, Horace dear.'

'Please shut the door—there is an abominable draught up my legs.'

The door closed gently behind Minnie's retreating figure.

CHAPTER V

AUNT MARTHA TRIES PERSUASION

THERE was a brief silence following on Minnie's departure. Horace Parker had settled himself back once more in his chair, when his aunt's accusing voice warned him that the time of peace had not yet arrived.

'Horace,' she said, gravely, 'you are going too far.'

Her nephew chuckled facetiously, wriggling down into a more comfortable attitude.

'Not I,' he retorted. 'I'm stopping at home.'

'You know what I mean,' went on Miss Parker, ignoring the sally. 'You go too far with regard to Minnie.'

'She's a dear little girl,' came the appreciative murmur.

'She is one in a thousand,' resumed his Aunt.

'She is, indeed.'

'And much too good for you.'

'I don't know about that,' was the critical reply. 'But—she's quite good enough.'

Miss Parker rose hastily from her chair.

'You are perfectly detestable!' she cried.

'Think so?'

'Yes. And you are growing worse every day. In fact, you are simply wrapped up in selfishness, egotism and conceit.'

The recipient of these drastic remarks slowly uncrossed his legs and then re-crossed them again.

'Simply,' he observed, apparently addressing the fire, 'because I prefer a quiet evening to myself and my books. Simply because I prefer scientific discovery to heartless frivolity! Absurd!'

His aunt came forward to the hearth, resting one hand against the mantel-shelf.

'You are forgetting your duty to the girl you are going to make your wife,' she continued accusingly, 'you seem to think that because she was adopted by your mother you have the right to order her about as if she were a servant.'

'You know you are talking absolute rot,' he declared, irritated by this home truth, but Miss Parker had only paused to take breath.

'You make her feel her dependent position, and I think that very unfair.'

‘Hang it all, Aunt Martha, she’s not dependent. My mother left her—’

‘Yes, yes, of course, I know. But everything she has comes from our family, and you never allow her to forget the fact. She considers that she owes you a debt of gratitude.’

‘Oh, well,’ struck in the irrepressible Horace, ‘I suppose if it comes to that she does!’

‘But you ought not to allow her to feel like that. You ought to try and win her heart?’

‘Confound it all, haven’t I won her heart? Aren’t we engaged?’

‘You ought to try and deserve it.’

He laughed softly, beginning to enjoy her rising anger now it turned in this direction.

‘Yes,’ he retorted, ‘but I *do* deserve it.’

‘Indeed,’ was the wrathful rejoinder. ‘And pray when are you going to marry her?’

‘Oh, that’s all right. There’s no hurry about that.’

‘No hurry! Horace, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.’

‘My dear aunt,’ he argued, ‘don’t you think you are very unwise to try and precipitate matters? Don’t you know that people who marry in haste very often—’

‘Yes,’ she interrupted. ‘You’ll have plenty of leisure for repentance shortly. But it will be for quite a different reason. Minnie will wake

up presently and see you as you really are. She is a most attractive girl, you'll be feeling pretty miserable when you've lost her.'

'Ridiculous,' scoffed Horace, sitting forward and fumbling in his pocket. 'Minnie knows when she is well off.'

He had succeeded in finding the cause of an uncomfortable pressure against his side and drew forth the offending article in triumph.

'Hullo, what's this?' he exclaimed, holding up the missing cigar case, 'I could have sworn I felt in that pocket.'

'Horace, you are hopeless. Absolutely hopeless.'

'That's a bit of bad luck,' went on Mr Parker, proceeding to help himself to a cigar, 'now, isn't it?'

'And how bad luck?'

'I might have been smoking all this time!'

He stretched out towards a box of matches lying on the table near, and began leisurely lighting up.

'There's nothing like a good cigar after all,' he added, with a sigh of content.

'There's nothing like a good wife,' retorted Miss Parker, who was pacing restlessly to and fro.

'Of course,' he reminded her, with an aggravating attempt at pleasantry. 'I don't know anything about that.'

'I believe you prefer the cigar.'

'To women? Well, in some respects I do.'

'What do you mean?' asked his aunt, pausing in her walk.

'Well,' he replied airily, throwing his match into the fender, 'You see a cigar does not talk—and when you've finished with one you can begin another.'

It was fortunate for both parties that Minnie entered at a critical moment. She was flushed with running about and looked prettier than ever.

'I can't find your cigar case anywhere,' she cried regretfully, then stopped short at sight of a thin cloud of blue smoke apparently rising from the depths of the easy chair. 'Oh, you've found it,' she added, with a little catch in her voice.

'In my pocket all the time,' he said lazily.

Minnie bit her lip to keep back a sharp retort. But she had already been reproaching herself for a previous little fit of temper and was determined not to offend again. So she crossed over to the delinquent's side, without looking at her aunt.

'There now,' she laughed, with a brave attempt after gaiety, 'are you quite comfortable?'

Horace fidgetted with the cushions which had slipped down. 'No, not at all,' he answered.

She replaced the cushions in their proper place, bending to bestow a light kiss on the top of a sleek black head.

But this last act of forgiveness was too much for Aunt Martha.

‘Don’t speak to him, dear,’ exclaimed the latter. ‘He doesn’t deserve it.’

Minnie raised a still bravely smiling face.

‘But, auntie, dear,’ she pleaded. ‘I must see that the dear boy is cosy, and then I think I shall go to bed.’

‘What! Give up the dance!’ cried Miss Parker in disgust.

Minnie flushed, with a wistful glance downward at the pretty frock she had put on with such delight an hour ago.

‘Never mind about that,’ she replied gently.

But Aunt Martha *did* mind, very much indeed, and turned to make a last indignant appeal to a self-centred lover.

‘Horace,’ she cried, angrily, ‘have you really the heart to allow Minnie to sacrifice her pleasure for you in this way?’

‘Auntie—auntie,’ pleaded Minnie eagerly. ‘Indeed, it doesn’t matter a bit, not the least little bit in the world.’

‘Don’t say that, dear,’ was the tart rejoinder. ‘I am extremely displeased with him.’

A groan came from the depths of the arm-

chair. Was a poor ill-used martyr never to hear the end of a rubbishing argument about this most trivial matter?

‘It is not I who am sacrificing her pleasure,’ declared Horace forcefully. ‘It’s you—entirely you, Aunt Martha. Why don’t you go?’

That last was the question which a tiresomely assertive conscience had been propounding for the last hour, and incidently had proved the goad which had driven Miss Parker on in her denunciations against her nephew.

‘You know I can’t,’ was her reply, whilst the colour came in a dull flush of resentment to faded cheeks.

But the weakness of the argument convinced her nephew that the shaft had hit its mark, and he proceeded to force it home without mercy.

‘There’s nothing on earth to prevent you,’ he added. ‘Except your absurd vanity.’

‘Oh Horace!’ cried Minnie, noticing how the elder woman winced under the accusation, ‘for shame.’

‘Vanity, indeed,’ echoed Miss Parker, rallying from the first shock of the charge, ‘how dare you?’

‘It’s perfectly true,’ resumed Horace. ‘It’s all this nonsense about a dress.’

His aunt straightened herself with an air of

resolution which would have become a yet more glorious act of self-renunciation. 'Very well then,' said she. 'You shall see. I *will* go I. . . . I don't care how I look.'

Horace lay back with a short laugh.

'I'm sure I don't either,' said he, 'so that settles it, I suppose. And I shall get a chance of reading in peace.'

'Minnie shall *not* be disappointed of her dance,' went on the heroic lady, determined to teach her lesson thoroughly, before putting her self-denial into practice. 'And just to prove to you, Horace, how deeply I feel your conduct to-night, I shall put on my yellow satin and look a perfect fright—so there!'

'I can quite believe you,' murmured Horace, preparing to settle down to his reading. But Minnie had run to her aunt's side laying her hand on the other's arm.

'Dear Auntie,' she cried, 'I've quite given up the idea of going to the dance. You really must not think of coming for my sake. I would far rather no more was said about the matter.'

'Then I don't at all agree with you, my dear. Horace shall see that I can be as good as my word.'

Who could read with such shrilly-voiced side-shafts metaphorically being hurled at one's head?

'Devil doubt you,' growled Horace, curling round in his chair.

'Please, please,' urged Minnie anxiously, 'You really must not let me inflict this on you, auntie. I am quite content to go to bed.'

'Content!' cried Miss Parker, who was now aglow with self-righteous pride. 'Oh yes, dear, I can quite understand your content. But you *shall* go to Mrs Clarence's to-night. Moreover you shall also go to as many balls and parties as possible. Youth is the time for enjoyment, and you can only be young once. So you shall go to Ascot, Henley, yes, and Goodwood and Cowes too. We shall have no difficulty in finding an escort, and you shall see plenty of new faces. I'll take good care of that, my dear child.'

She cast an indignant glance towards the easy chair by the fire.

'Vanity indeed!' she added beneath her breath, 'I'll teach him to accuse *me* of vanity!'

She was sweeping from the room, the very personification of outraged dignity, when the door opened, and Bella, the pretty parlourmaid, came hurrying in, carrying a large black box by a strap.

'From Madame Louise, ma'am,' she gasped, triumphantly.

Miss Parker's face was instantly irradiated

with smiles. What good fairy had thus rewarded her heroism ?

‘The dress !’ she murmured rapturously.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ chirped Bella with an answering smile.

‘What a relief,’ sighed the mistress, never heeding the echo of her words which came from the depths of a distant chair.

‘Oh, Auntie,’ cried Minnie joyfully. ‘I am glad.’

‘Madame Louise hopes it will be in time, ma’am,’ said the breathless Bella.

Miss Parker was too genuinely relieved to have even a word of rebuke for a faithless dressmaker.

‘You can say it was just in time,’ she replied graciously, “and take it up to my room at once, please, Bella.’

Both box and smiling maid vanished at once, and Aunt Martha turned to Minnie.

‘I won’t keep you waiting any longer than I can help dear,’ she said, with surprising animation. ‘You’ll be sure to find Horace such a delightful companion while I’m dressing. So witty and entertaining.’ Then, finding her sarcasms rather falling short of their object who had not turned his head once in her direction since the entry of Bella and the long expected dress, she drew Minnie closer to her. ‘Don’t

‘speak to him, child,’ she urged. ‘He’s a perfect bear to-night, and you will probably only get uncivil answers for your pains. He has not the least regard for any one’s feelings but his own. Not the least! I confess I am perfectly horrified at such a revelation of heartless selfishness.’

She purposely raised her voice at the conclusion of her speech.

But Horace paid not the slightest attention, he was apparently absorbed in his long anticipated article in the *Astronomer*.

CHAPTER VI

LOVE VERSUS SCIENCE

MINNIE sighed. Quite a weary little sigh. After all, had the going to Mrs Clarence's dance been worth all these arguments and recriminations? She was asking herself that question when Horace, laying aside his paper, raised himself in his chair.

'She's got the hump, I suppose?' he observed to Minnie with an expressive nod towards the door.

Minnie came slowly towards him.

'I think you must have said something to upset Auntie,' she replied. 'She isn't often like that'

'Good thing, too,' he retorted, lighting a fresh cigar.

'She'll be all right to-morrow,' added Minnie cheerfully.

Horace yawned.

'That's the worst of women. They're so illogical, aren't they?'

'I suppose they are.'

'You know,' he explained, laying down the cigar on the edge of the mantel-piece, and taking one of Minnie's hands in his. 'She thinks I ought to have gone with you to-night. Well, she only looks at the matter from her own standpoint. She's quite incapable of taking a broad view of the case.'

A dimple lurked in the smooth pinkness of his sweetheart's cheek.

'I suppose yours is the broad view?' she asked naively, as she perched herself on the arm of his chair.

'Yes, of course it is,' he assured her.

'How?' she asked smoothing a faint crease from his brow with caressing fingers, 'did you acquire this breadth of mind.'

'I don't know' replied Horace, never suspecting subtle sarcasm underlying so simple a speech. 'I suppose it comes naturally to the masculine intellect. One sees all round a subject. Now that is just what women can't do. They're circumscribed. They can't see over the hedge.'

She leant a little nearer, resting her cheek against his head. 'Do you think you could teach me to see over the hedge?' she asked wistfully, her eyes fixed on the glowing logs which burned on the hearth.

'I daresay I might be able to a certain extent,' he admitted.

'You might begin by explaining the broad view you took to-night then?'

'That was the simplest thing imaginable,' he replied. 'You see it was in this way. Aunt Martha wanted *me* to go because she didn't want to go herself. That was the only point of view she could see.'

'And you?'

'I? Oh, of course *I* looked upon it from an entirely different standpoint. You see I had already been out in the snow once to get this month's copy of the *Astronomer*, and there wasn't any reason why I should go out again. You may remember I explained that it contains an article about life on the planet Mars in which I am very interested. Well, it would not have done Aunt Martha any good to stop at home to read the article, because, being practically devoid of brains, she would not have understood a word about it. Then again, women ought to go to dances, which are got up entirely for their benefit, whereas men hate that kind of frivolity. So it was obviously her duty to go.'

'I see,' replied Minnie in a low voice; her blue eyes were still fixed on the heart of those glowing embers, but she was sitting upright

now, her cheek no longer resting against her companion's.

'You understand,' Horace continued, warming to his subject since he had so appreciative a listener. 'Aunt Martha couldn't take in all these points, because her mind is not broad enough to grasp them; the consequence was her views proved to be very narrow, and I fear rather selfish.'

'You certainly put it very clearly.'

'Yes. I'm glad you can appreciate my reasoning.'

'Oh I can,' said Minnie with tense conviction in her softly spoken words. 'But one thing I see most plainly—and that is you are both putting yourselves to inconvenience on my account.'

Horace laughed as he patted her hand.

'My dear, I assure you I'm not,' he owned frankly.

'That's true,' she answered, withdrawing her hand quickly under pretext of setting a truant curl back in its place. 'Thank you for reminding me. But I hate to think I should be so much trouble to you both. Of course I know I have no real claim on you. It—it isn't as though I were your very own sister.'

'I should think not indeed!' he cried emphatically. 'You're going to be my wife,—just think of that.'

She was standing now,—a slender, graceful figure in her white satin gown, the firelight gleaming on her golden crown of piled tresses, shewing too the sweet seriousness of blue eyes.

‘Horace,’ she said gently but very earnestly, ‘Tell me, *do* you love me? Really, really love me? Or—or are you going to marry me because it was your dead mother’s wish as you told me after our engagement?’

Horace laughed a trifle awkwardly, and, taking her hand again in his, lightly kissed the white fingers.

He had an idea that a woman found kisses a panacea for all ills—and certainly it was the least troublesome way of making love.

‘You mustn’t be angry with me,’ went on Minnie with that same quiet gravity. ‘Perhaps I expect too much. But I think I should be happier if you were just a little bit more—more loving in your manner. Oh, Horace! Horace! I don’t want you to marry me out of pity.’

She almost broke down over that last pitiful appeal—the appeal of a sensitive, loving nature for its rightful guerdon. There was fear too in the trembling tones—fear that she had been hoping for—accepting—something which he had never intended to give—perhaps did not even possess—namely, that love which was her right if she were to be his wife.

'My dear child!' exclaimed Horace, with all a man's horror of a scene. 'Don't be silly. Er—I can't imagine what you are driving at. But of course I love you. I love you most awfully—awfully. But I'm not what's called a demonstrative man. You know—but perhaps you don't know—though it's a fact—that few really scientific men are!'

'Do you know,' Minnie said, resolutely winking away the very foolish tear which trembled on her dark lashes, 'I'm almost sorry that you are such a scientific man.'

She was trying to laugh now, taking both his hands—somewhat against his will—in hers and looking down at him very tenderly.

'Minnie!' he cried, shocked at such an outrageous remark.

'Love and science,' she argued, 'don't seem to agree.'

'Oh yes, they do—but you don't understand,' he urged. 'I love you in a scientific way.'

'I think,' she said slowly, allowing his hands to drop, 'I like the old way best. But I suppose I'm silly and narrow-minded like Aunt Martha.' She stooped as she spoke, and, as though to take away the latent sting she was conscious of in those last words, kissed him on his forehead. 'There,' she added, 'we won't say any more about it. Are you quite comfortable?'

He sighed wearily—to be perfectly honest he was not at all enjoying the evening to which he had been looking forward for weeks.

‘No, not a bit,’ he groaned. ‘You might put the cushion a little higher—that’s right—just under my head.’

He lay back more restfully, hoping Aunt Martha’s toilet would not take much longer to complete.

‘Shall I put you out the whisky?’ asked Minnie, still hovering near, intent on ministering to his creature comforts.

‘What?’ he queried, having again opened his paper. ‘Whisky? Um! Yes—you may as well.’

She ran off, only too pleased to be able to do something practical to shew her devotion, and soon returned carefully carrying the little tray bearing whisky, syphon, glass and a box of biscuits.

‘There,’ she said triumphantly. ‘Now you have everything comfy.’

Horace watched, with a half smile on his lips as she set the things down on a little table, drawing it all closer to his side, and perhaps a vague sense of compunction pricked him.

‘Dear little girl,’ he mused, realising for the first time that evening, how perfectly her dress became her fair beauty. ‘How she does love

me! I must get her a ring—or a pin—or a thimble to-morrow. That will make her perfectly happy.'

'I'll pour you out a glass,' said Minnie, busy-ing herself with the stiff stopper of the decanter. 'Say when!'

Such solicitude must necessarily appeal to the most hardened heart.

'Upon my word,' replied Horace, with an unlooked for burst of enthusiasm, 'you're a perfect treasure.'

A bright flush heightened the prettiness of the eager face she turned to him.

'Oh Horace, do you really mean it?' she asked, pausing in breathless expectancy for some tender reply.

'Of course I mean it,' he rejoined, with a faint inflection of irritation in his voice, 'but go on pouring. Don't stop till—wait—now—*now!*' She was laughing, with no trace of a moment's disappointment as she handed him his glass.

'Don't sit up too late, dear,' she solicited. 'You must not work too hard or you'll strain your eyes.' A covert yawn escaped him. The warmth of the room after a cold walk was beginning to evoke a feeling of drowsy content.

'I shan't do that,' said he, 'but I shall want

some more oil in that lamp. You'd better tell Bella.'

He glanced as he spoke towards the lamp at his right side.

'Promise me you won't tire yourself. Promise?' urged his little sweetheart, resting her hand on his arm as she knelt before him.

'All right, dear,' he replied, anxious to cut short too many tender injunctions. 'I promise.'

'For my sake,' whispered Minnie, raising her face so that he could do no less than stoop forward to kiss it.

Perhaps it was not a great effort of self-denial to do this as the face was undeniably sweet and lovely—but there was no need to expatiate on that, and having kissed her he found he had nothing more he particularly wished to say or do except to be left in peace.

'I think,' said Minnie, rising from her knees with the tiniest of sighs half checked in the utterance, 'that I'll go and see how Aunt Martha is getting on.'

She had reached the door when Horace's voice recalled her. Had he found after all that he *had* something to say, the something for which she had waited a moment ago all expectant and happy.

'Yes?' she asked softly.

'I was going to say——'

‘Yes, darling?’

‘Don’t you forget about the oil.’

‘No—I—I won’t forget.’

And poor Minnie turned away again just as the door opened to admit Miss Parker. Madame Louise had exonerated herself for that tiresome delay in delivery by having surpassed her own art in the ‘creation’ in which Aunt Martha now appeared.

Although present day fashion decrees that white and the lightest, gayest colours are to be worn by those who have passed more than one decade since their *premiere jeunesse*, the fact remains unalterable that a black gown, if sufficiently well cut and made of some soft satin or velvet, is far the most becoming habit for those whose youth is passed. Miss Parker had realised this after some difficulty, and there was no denying that to-night she was looking her very best, with more of the middle-aged and still attractive married woman about her than the faint but pursuing old maid who tries to forget dead hopes when dressed in the gown which became her twenty years before.

‘Here I am, dear,’ she cried cheerfully, ‘Haven’t I been quick?’

‘Auntie!’ exclaimed Minnie, with the most sincere flattery, ‘you look a perfect picture. Indeed you ought to be framed——’

'And hung,' muttered Horace, casting a side glance at the tall, erect figure in its Parisian-cut gown.

'You little flatterer,' replied Miss Parker, with a pleased smile as she looked at her own reflection in the mirror, 'but I admit that I think it *is* rather nice myself. Put on your cloak, dear. Is the cab ready?'

Minnie hesitated, her fair face clouding as she looked towards the chair drawn close to the hearth.

'I don't know,' she faltered, 'I don't think—'

'What!' cried Miss Parker, following the direction of his glance, 'do you mean to say he hasn't ordered a cab? Horace! *Horace!*'

'Don't disturb him,' begged Minnie, 'He's so busy reading the *Astronomer*.'

'The *Astronomer* indeed!' cried his aunt wrathfully. 'He deserves to see stars and no mistake. Horace!' Do you hear me, Horace?'

A heartfelt sigh broke from the unfortunate scientist in the arm-chair. 'Oh, what is it? What is it?' he groaned.

'Have you ordered a cab?' demanded his aunt, clearly and slowly enunciating each fateful word.

'Cab?' he retorted querulously. 'No, I've not.'

'Well, why not? Horace, answer me, why not?'

‘Oh bother! Don’t interrupt.’

But Miss Parker could be masterful too, and, before Minnie could stop her or intercede, she had stepped quickly behind her nephew’s chair and, snatching his beloved *Astronomer* from his hand, flung it over her shoulder on to the ground.

‘Why,’ she again demanded, ‘have you *not* ordered a cab?’

Despoiled of his paper, ruffled in temper and inwardly consigning all women, particularly his aunt, to lower and less sociable regions, Horace sat up, very flushed and very obviously indignant.

‘Why should I order a cab?’ he asked defiantly.

Miss Parker was pink—positively pink—with anger, and she sniffed too, a trick of hers when seriously annoyed.

‘It is the very least you could do,’ she replied acidly. ‘Go and order one at once, please.’

‘Where are the servants?’ demanded Horace, not attempting to rise.

‘I won’t have any of the maids sent out on a night like this. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.’

‘Well, ring the bell.’

‘I shan’t do anything of the sort. Are you going?’

‘No.’

The monosyllable was decided.

So was the rejoinder.

‘Go at once. Be quick. We shall wait till you do.’

The last threat provoked fresh argument.

‘Now, look here, Aunt Martha,’ declared Horace firmly. ‘Thoroughly understand I am not going out in the cold again to-night. You seem to forget I’m in a very delicate state of health and if I were to venture out on such a night as this the consequences might be most serious.’

Such a statement could not fail to appeal to Minnie.

‘Don’t force ‘him, Aunt,’ pleaded the girl. ‘Let *me* go.’

She moved as she spoke towards the door, whilst Horace made haste to approve her suggestion from the warm shelter of the fireside. ‘There’s a sensible little girl, but there’s not the least occasion for anyone to go. Let’s send one of the servants. What else are they for?’

As if in answer to his query Bella appeared at the open door where Minnie still hesitated having been called back from her self-imposed task by Miss Parker.

‘A note, ma’am,’ said Bella, handing her

mistress a letter which lay on the little silver salver.

‘For me?’ questioned Miss Parker, then, seeing that it was so, she broke the seal, sighing portentously the while.

‘The selfishness of that man!’ she murmured in an undertone, ‘I never knew anything like it.’

She unfolded the note as she spoke, whilst, as she read, the annoyance faded from her face.

‘How very opportune!’ she cried, ‘and *how* kind. Listen, Minnie dear. “May I have the pleasure of taking you to Mrs Clarence’s dance.”’

Horace was the first to applaud the announcement.

‘Capital,’ he cried genially. ‘There’s your escort.’

“‘My carriage is quite at your disposal,’” read on Miss Parker, ignoring the interruption, “‘if I may presume to offer it.’”

‘Splendid!’ echoed Horace, rubbing his hands. ‘There’s your cab.’

‘Who brought the note, Bella?’ asked Miss Parker, still paying no sort of heed to her nephew.

‘The gentleman brought it himself, ma’am,’ said the beaming Bella with a sly glance towards Minnie, ‘he’s waiting in the carriage.’

‘Say we shall be greatly obliged, and show

him in at once,' commanded her mistress hurriedly. But Horace, who overheard the order, interrupted again.

'Don't you bring him in here,' he called after the retreating Bella, 'you put him in the hall.'

'Certainly not, Bella,' retorted Miss Parker, stepping out into the passage. 'Show him in at once. Hall indeed! I'll soon settle *that* point!'

Horace, not having heard the counter order was leaning back smiling in his chair as his aunt re-entered the room.

'And who is my preserver?' he asked ironically.

'Mr Dicey,' replied Miss Parker briefly.

The expression of Horace's face changed instantly. The smile faded, his jaw dropped, and he darted a suspicious look towards Minnie who was leaning against the mantel-shelf looking dreamily down into the fire.

'What?' questioned Horace sharply, 'Arthur Dicey? That Stock Exchange fellow.'

He might have added 'the fellow responsible for my engagement' as he looked at Minnie and recalled the stray gossip he had overheard at the Club.

'A charming young man,' said Miss Parker with emphasis.

'A brainless idiot,' growled Horace, his

jealousy gradually fanning into flame as he noted how Minnie, rousing from her reverie, crossed to her aunt's side and took the note from her hand, glancing down at its contents with a pleased smile.

'A thorough gentleman,' declared Miss Parker. 'With the most perfect manners—you should take a lesson, and follow an excellent example, my dear Horace. Besides, I hear he is enormously wealthy.'

She looked significantly across at Minnie as she spoke, but the latter was still reading Arthur Dicey's note.

'How very thoughtful of him, wasn't it, Auntie?' said the girl, oblivious of the two pairs of eyes watching her so intently. 'He always seems to be doing the right thing at the right moment.'

'Minnie,' said Horace sharply, sitting suddenly bolt upright in his chair, 'I don't at all care that you should go with this fellow to the dance to-night. He's not at all the sort of man I wish you to be seen about with.'

Mr Dicey's letter fluttered down from Minnie's hand, whilst her eyes, round with surprise, were fixed on those of her suddenly indignant lover.

'But, Horace,' she pleaded, 'I assure you he's most attentive.'

‘I daresay. Anyhow I don’t choose that you should go with him.’

‘Upon my word,’ broke in his aunt impatiently, ‘I never heard anything like this in my life. You won’t take her yourself, Horace, and you won’t let anyone else take her either.’

Horace rose to his feet. ‘I don’t care,’ he declared, assuming the dictatorial manner of one who determines to be master in his own house, ‘This is a point upon which I intend to be obeyed. In fact—’

‘You are really the most trying person I have ever had anything to do with,’ cried Miss Parker with an outburst of petulant anger, just as the door opened and Bella announced ‘Mr Dicey.’

CHAPTER VII

MR DICEY INTERVENES

A FAIR-HAIRED young man, clean-shaven, good-looking, and well groomed, entered the room, with a quick, pleased glance of admiration bestowed in Minnie's direction even as he advanced to shake hands with her aunt.

'This is exceedingly kind of you, Mr Dicey,' said Miss Parker with extra graciousness of manner, since momentarily expecting some less than polite remark to issue from the neighbourhood of the fire-place, where Horace, no longer comfortably settled for the evening's enjoyment of his scientific researches, stood shifting from one leg to the other and positively glowering upon the unconscious Mr Dicey.

'We are very, very much obliged to you,' added Minnie, adding fuel to a fire which she was still innocent of having kindled.

Mr Dicey grew rather red and confused under such effusive gratitude. 'Really,' he stammered,

'the pleasure will be mine, if you will allow me to escort you.

'You came in the nick of time,' went on Minnie, smilingly—her back was turned to Horace—'for somehow or other we had forgotten to order a cab.'

'Yes,' added Aunt Martha significantly, 'We *had* forgotten.'

'I was just going to run down the street and get one,' observed Mr Parker, disposing rather summarily of terminological exactitude whilst he continued to stare his aunt out of countenance.

'So of course,' Miss Parker continued, with biting sarcasm. 'My nephew is very grateful to you, aren't you, Horace? Now he'll be able to pursue his scientific studies without fear of interruption.'

Arthur Dicey turned towards the discomfited scientist in surprise.

'Why, aren't you coming with us, Parker?' he asked.

'I had not thought of doing so,' Horace replied, finding a growing difficulty in answering the question calmly.

'If it hadn't been for you, Mr Dicey,' laughed Minnie gaily, 'I doubt if we should any of us have gone. We were very near giving up the party altogether.'

The young man turned eagerly to her—quite too eagerly, Horace noted, and fumed afresh at this proof and confirmation of his suspicions.

‘Then I am happy to be of some real use,’ exclaimed Dicey. ‘I hope I may be allowed to claim an extra share of waltzes on the strength of it?’

‘You shall have as many as you like,’ Minnie promised him.

His thanks were eloquent, but cut prematurely short by Miss Parker’s need of assistance in putting on her cloak, whilst Minnie took the opportunity of going up to Horace.

She could see he was vexed but had not divined the reason. She was hoping vaguely that he regretted not going with them to the dance.

‘I wish you were coming, Horace,’ she said softly, ‘I don’t care to go without you.’

But he was adamant against beseeching eyes. ‘Apparently you have no waltzes left,’ he replied coldly.

‘Oh, yes, I have,’ answered Minnie, stung to swift retort at his unkindness. ‘For—for those who have the grace to ask for them.’

‘I thought they were all reserved for Mr Dicey,’ replied Horace, with a fine sneer.

‘Mr Dicey will have his fair share. He

dances beautifully, and our steps suit each other to perfection.'

'By which you mean to say you dance beautifully too!'

Minnie reddened but stood her ground.

'Oh no,' she answered. 'I leave that for others to say.'

'And I wish to be the first to say it,' cried Dicey, who had overheard the last remarks.

Mr Parker fixed a cold stare upon the audacious speaker. 'My aunt is ready, sir,' he observed loftily, 'if you will be good enough to accompany her. We will follow you later.'

'I thought you were out of town,' explained Arthur Dicey, with considerable embarrassment, 'Or I wouldn't have offered. But there's plenty of room in the carriage—won't you and your sister come with us?'

Minnie moved a step nearer to the speaker's side, indignant that so kindly a courtesy as he had shewn should receive so severe a snubbing.

But Horace's temper was thoroughly aroused now and utterly selfish as he was, he paid no heed to the fact of his guest's discomfort or his aunt and fiancée's impatience.

'Miss Templar is *not* my sister,' he retorted.

'I beg your pardon—your adopted sister, I should have said.'

'Yes, sir, and my intended wife.'

It was a bomb he had been longing to explode from the moment young Dicey had entered and he had caught that look of wistful admiration in the new comer's eyes.

The tale overheard at the club *had* had foundation after all then.

Well! He considered he had played his game of check rather skilfully.

Arther Dicey turned very pale, but he was not lacking in grit and quickly rallied from the undoubted shock.

'Forgive me, I did not know,' he said gently, as he turned to Minnie. 'May I offer you my congratulations.'

Minnie's eyes had grown perceptibly harder during the latter part of this conversation, and it certainly was not a lover-like glance she cast in Horace's direction. But she contrived to smile back into Dicey's white face, answering lightly and not a little scornfully.

'Thank you, it is rather early for congratulations yet, Mr Dicey. We laugh it over between ourselves sometimes in a brotherly and sisterly kind of way without seriously considering what marriage means. There's nothing settled about it yet. Will you kindly see my aunt to the carriage.'

Even Horace was surprised at the speech—he had never heard Minnie talk in that reckless

hard fashion before—and she was certainly most deliberately giving that young cub Dicey a very wrong impression as to their engagement.

But before he could expostulate his aunt had moved to the door followed by her escort, who still looked grave and puzzled as he bade his host good-night glancing wistfully from the latter to where Minnie stood, wrapped in a big blue cloak, the soft white fur round her throat setting off her childish loveliness to advantage.

No sooner, however, had the door closed on the other two than Minnie turned quickly towards Horace, whilst, pulling off her left glove she slipped the ring with its sparkling hoop of rubies and diamonds from her finger.

‘I think you will understand, Horace,’ she said, in a low, pained voice which vibrated with emotion, ‘when I say, “here is your ring.” You have given me a glimpse of such a love cheapening life that I have grown afraid. I believed in you, though I was never blind to your faults, yet I had hoped that I might help you to conquer them. Now, I realise that the task is beyond me. Without your love I should fail, and I see that you have none to offer me. The devotion of your life,—the devotion which alas, I hoped I had won—is for yourself, and yourself alone.’

Horace shrugged his shoulders.

‘And *all* this fuss,’ he complained, ‘simply because I don’t want you to go with that silly ass to this dance to-night.’

‘No,’ replied Minnie, a quiver breaking through the hardness of her tones. ‘It is because of your utter lack of consideration. I might offend my dear friend, Kitty Clarence, by not going to her dance,—oh! *that* was nothing. Might disappoint Auntie,—nothing. Give up my own pleasure,—nothing. Insult a visitor,—nothing, merely nothing at all.’

She laid the ring on the table, giving it a little push towards the man who stood regarding her in wondering perplexity, startled for once out of his supreme egotism. ‘There it is, Horace,’ she cried. ‘I can’t wear it. The . . . the gold seems to have gone out of it.’

She could not trust herself to further speech, but gathering up her long cloak in one hand ran from the room, pulling the door hastily behind her.

Standing where she had left him Horace heard the distant slamming of the front door, the wheels of the carriage rolling away down the street, the footsteps of Bella as she went back to the pantry.

Then, realising that at last he had his desire and was alone he flung himself down into his chair, with a gesture of petulant annoyance.

‘Well, there!’ he murmured, scowling towards the fire. ‘And that’s the girl I’ve been talking to about broad views. Broad views indeed! I’ve met *some* narrow-minded people in my life, but she is far and away the most narrow-minded of the whole lot. It is very disappointing—that’s what it is! very disappointing! Women are all alike—no liberality—no generosity. You think you’ve found an exception—you pour out all the wealth of your priceless love upon her—and the moment the shoe pinches there you are! I suppose she’ll want to make it up again to-morrow, so then I shall have to put my foot down and come to a thorough understanding. Confound that fellow Dicey! It’s all his fault. I ought to have gone myself. Damn his interference, offering his carriage, when I was just on the point of fetching a cab! Well,—now for this article. I suppose I had better read it, though I don’t feel a bit like it after the nerve racking time I have been through, first with Aunt Martha, and then Minnie’s foolish tantrums. I shall forbid that Dicey chap the house, damned if I don’t. He—er—he’s not a fit companion for Minnie. Heigho! I had better get to my reading and try for once to forget the confounded—I mean the eternal feminine. This may act as a sedative.’

He took up his beloved paper, and began to read, but found it difficult enough to concentrate his mind on the heavenly bodies when his thoughts inconsequently drifted back to a girl, standing, flushed, indignant, but wholly charming, opposite to him, her blue eyes flashing scorn and reproach instead of love into his, whilst the denunciation of her words rang clear, 'Without your love I should fail,—and you have none to offer me. The devotion of your life is for yourself alone.'

'Confounded rot,' he grumbled to himself, 'just like—a woman.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN WHO HAD 'GONE UNDER'

'PLEASE sir, there's a man wants to see you.'

And poor Horace had just succeeded in temporarily forgetting Minnie and Arthur Dicey in an absorbing description of a possible race of mankind inhabiting the planet Mars.

It was preposterous! Intolerable!

He turned, blinking indignantly in the direction of trim little Bella, who stood near the table.

'A *what* wants to what?' he asked, descending with difficulty to the commonplaces of earth.

'A man to see you, sir,' repeated the maid, in a higher key.

Her master frowned.

'What does he want?' he demanded, rustling the pages of his paper.

'I don't know, sir. He says he has a letter for you.'

'Then why the deuce didn't he give it to you?'

'He wouldn't trust it out of his own hand, sir. He said he must give it to you himself.'

'What sort of a man?'

Bella looked puzzled.

'Well, sir,' she replied slowly, 'he seems to think he's a respectable sort of man, but he's what I should call a tramp.'

'A tramp! Well, I can't see him then. I can't see him. Tell him to come again in the morning.'

'Yes, sir. I told him that.'

'And what did he say?'

'He said, sir, he was really a persevering kind of man,—but he's what *I* should call obstinate.'

'What do you mean?'

'He said he wouldn't go away till he had seen you, sir,—and I don't think he will.'

'It is too maddening!' groaned Mr Parker. 'I can't have one moment to myself. Very well then, Bella, show him in. Show him in.'

The maid hurried off, leaving her master to muse over his fancied wrongs.

Quite an imposing category of them he made, too, as he sat there, gloomy and despondent.

'No peace,' he complained, 'from the moment I came home this evening. First of all Aunt

Martha, then that fool Dicey, then Minnie, and now a tramp.'

He raised himself in his chair as the sound of shuffling steps approached the library. Whatever the tramp might believe concerning his own respectability there was no doubt that Bella had been right in her description. The fellow who stood just inside the door, twisting a ragged cap in his hands, was unequivocally a tramp and a vagrant. Ragged clothes clung to his thin and none too cleanly person, whilst the red scarf about his neck only served to accentuate the sallow unhealthiness of his face. Here was one who had 'gone under' in the great turmoil of existence, and who in his failure had yielded to a reckless despair.

That was the tale told by the saddened yet dissipated face of Horace Parker's strange visitor. Yet a close observer might have suggested that there were capabilities concealed under the broad brow, a fire of intelligence in the sunken eyes which wrote the man down as possessing much that others more fortunate might desire in vain. The gift of genius had possibly been once bestowed on this flotsam of human wreckage,—even though the gift had never been turned to account.

'Well, what is it?' asked Horace irritably, 'what do you want?'

For reply the man took a letter wrapped carefully in a piece of newspaper, out of the lining of his ragged cap.

'Mr Brampton told me to give you this, sir,' he said, and, crossing the room with shuffling gait, held out the envelope.

Horace took it gingerly and proceeded to open it with an expression of distaste on his face. 'Mr Brampton—of Coventry?' he asked.

'Yes, sir.'

The man was staring thoughtfully at the whisky decanter, and his lips twitched as he passed a dry tongue across them.

Horace read through the letter, frowning.

'Might be able to get him some work,' he said, re-reading an extract. 'I haven't any work to give you; what's this? "Clever workman—seen better days."'

'That's true enough,' broke in the tramp huskily. 'I never see any worse than what we're having now.'

His hands clenched to his side as he spoke, whilst again his tired eyes instinctively sought the whisky bottle.

'I'm afraid I can't help you,' said Horace, tossing aside the letter, and taking up his paper, 'Absurd of Mr Brampton to send you to me.'

But the man, thus summarily dismissed,

lingered, the fighting instinct which comes with despair urging him to a last appeal.

‘Don’t be hard guv’nor,’ he faltered, ‘I’m cold and tired. I’ve walked all the way from Coventry.’

‘Walked!’ repeated Horace sharply. ‘Why, Mr Brampton says here he has given you the money for your railway fare.’

‘Well, so he did, sir,’ admitted the man regretfully, ‘but I had a bit of bad luck with that.’

‘What? Lost it, I suppose,’ retorted the young gentleman by the fire, half laughing.

‘Not exactly, sir.’

‘What then?’

‘Spent it.’

The words were jerked out defiantly.

‘Eh? Drink I suppose.’

‘Yes,’ cried the other fiercely, ‘drink and meat. There’s no crime in that, is there? Even a tramp must eat.’

‘Yes, and drink,’ was the ironical rejoinder. ‘So when the money was gone—’

‘I had to walk—that’s all.’

‘Well, that’s what you’ll have to do now. I can’t help you.’

The man turned away with a groan.

‘Just my luck,’ he murmured, then, halting by the table as though finding it impossible to

pass the bottle which stood so invitingly near him. 'Beg pardon, guv'nor,' he muttered, 'You might stand us a drink before I go, just to keep out the cold.'

'Well, go on, help yourself.'

There was no need for a second invitation and his host sat watching with no little amusement the trembling eagerness with which the fellow poured himself out a stiff libation of spirits, draining the glass lovingly with gurgling rapture.

'Ah, that's good,' he whispered, setting down the tumbler, 'that brings back old times. You wouldn't think, guv'nor, that I was a prosperous man once?'

The colour crept to his sallow cheeks as he spoke, and he straightened himself, momentarily losing that droop of despairing misery.

Horace pointed significantly to the decanter. 'Sufficient explanation?' he queried.

The tramp shook his head.

'No, it wasn't drink as ruined me,' he replied. 'Drink may have kept me down, but it didn't throw me. I'm an engineer by trade, leastways I was, but I ain't worked at it now for these five years.' He passed a toil-worn hand across his brow. 'Thank you kindly for the whisky, good-night, sir.'

But Mr Parker had been amused, and was

willing to protract entertainment, troubling nothing at all as to the possible consequences to his unfortunate entertainer.

‘Care to take another whisky?’ he asked with cheap hospitality.

Instantly the trembling hands were outstretched towards the bottle. Again the dim eyes glittered with eager longing. Poison though it might be, it was a desirable poison, since it kept despair at bay and brought fresh fire unto chilled veins.

‘Your health, gov’nor,’ cried the man, as for the second time he drained the contents of his glass, and this time he was chuckling as he set it down. ‘You wouldn’t think there was much of the inventor about me, would you?’ he asked with growing confidence. ‘But I’ve got some ideas—good ’uns too. Only I ain’t got the capital to work them.’

‘Evidently not,’ replied Parker, crossing his legs in a more comfortable attitude.

‘See here, gov’nor,’ went on the tramp, moving nearer to the fireside. ‘I’ll let you into one of my ideas if you take it up. I’ll make your fortune.’

‘Thanks,’ smiled Horace, ‘I have all the money I require.’

‘Have you now? Well, I haven’t. You must be feeling pretty comfortable I reckon.

I was doing very well once, over there in the States.'

'In America?'

'Yes. They're pretty smart over there, but I showed them I was as good as they. I made a steam valve that's on most every boiler to-day. Yes—I—did, just me—' he caught back his breath in a hiccough. 'I had ten thousand dollars down before I got my papers out. But my partner got a-head of me.'

'Swindled you?'

'Just that. I never got another cent. I fought him as long as the money lasted. But it didn't go so far as the Law Courts. It was the Law as downed me, guv'nor. Drink only damned me.'

'Well, you must try again.'

'Not much chance of that, sir. One can't do anything without a little capital, and no one will trust me. No, I suppose I'll have to pick up a living how I can.'

'How do you pick up a living?'

'Anyhow, run after cabs.'

'Surely to goodness nobody pays you for doing that?'

'If I'm lucky I get a job to lift down the luggage.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Then there's a lovely fall of snow to-night.'

‘That’s not much of a God-send, is it?’

‘I may get a job in the morning, shovelling it, that is if I’m lucky.’

‘Why don’t you go back to your old trade?’
The tramp’s eyes glowed.

‘Why don’t I go back to my old trade?’ he echoed, breaking into discordant laughter. ‘Why don’t I? Aye! That’s it. Who’s going to take me on? Who’s going to give me a job? Will you?’

His tired voice rose shrill, already the whisky was beginning to excite him, loosening his tongue, and inspiring him to the telling a tale of his wrongs.

‘No,’ said Horace testily, ‘I tell you I can’t do anything for you.’

‘Then what’s the good of asking!’ demanded the man bitterly. ‘But it don’t matter. I’ve got nothing to live for now, nothing to save for. If it hadn’t been for the Law I’d have been a respectable man—but it broke me up and killed the missus—’

He passed his ragged coat sleeve across his eyes.

Horace was busy lighting a cigar. He was amused in an idle way, at the story of this vagrant’s life.

‘So you were married?’ he asked.

The man’s lips twitched.

'Yes,' he answered in brief monosyllable.

'Any children?'

'One. God forgive me.'

Horace puffed contentedly at his cigar.

'Care to take another drink?' he asked affably. 'A biscuit, too, if you like.' He conceived his own generosity to be great.

'Oh thank yer, sir,' cried the tramp, readily enough, and for the third time an empty glass was set back on the table.

'After my trouble,' he went on, 'I worked my passage back to England. To England! where I found the missus was dead, and the little un' gone.'

'Gone! How do you mean gone?'

'The people she was with had left and I could never find out what had become of her. Poor little Minnie.'

A tear trickled down the furrowed cheek, but Mr Parker's genial affability had suddenly undergone a change.

'Minnie,' he muttered, 'Minnie.'

'Yes, sir, that was her name.'

'Minnie!'

So perturbed was the speaker that he rose from his chair, standing, his hands clasped behind his back, before the fire.

'If I could have found her,' groaned the tramp huskily, 'I'd have been a better man.'

But I couldn't—so I took to the drink, it don't matter much now. Nothing matters—I've got nothing to live for, nothing to save for. So why should I care? Care indeed—' He broke into hysterical laughter, flinging one arm above his head, then, suddenly remembering where he was, trying to pull himself together, 'I beg your pardon, sir,' he muttered shamefacedly, 'but the whisky sets me talking and my story can't be of much interest to you. Good-night, sir. If—if I come back in a day or two perhaps you might hear of a job?' He shuffled towards the door, lurching unsteadily from time to time, but pausing on the threshold to look back wistfully towards the man standing on the hearth-rug surrounded by ease, luxury, warmth and plenty.

'No,' said Horace shortly, 'I tell you I can't do anything for you. Get out.'

The grey head drooped forward a little. So after all there was no hope for him here! No help from the man he had tramped all the way from Coventry to see.

Yet what right had such as he to complain?

'Good-night, guv'nor,' he muttered hoarsely. 'An'—thank you for the whisky.'

The next moment the door closed behind him; he had gone out into the bitter cold of a winter's night once more, without hope, home,

food, or lodging. Behind him stood a closed door.

But Horace Parker had turned to warm his hands before the blaze of the fire. The momentary draught from without had chilled him. He was still feeling vexed and annoyed.

'Minnie!' he murmured, as he rubbed his hands together. 'Minnie! How dared he mention her name. Minnie! Of course she could not possibly have anything to do with him, but it did give me a turn for the moment. Poor devil! I suppose I *was* rather rough on him. Never mind. Serves him right. I daresay he deserved it. Anyhow it will prevent him coming back again to-morrow. That sort of man ought not to be encouraged.'

He moved towards the table as he spoke, took up the tumbler and put it down with an exclamation of disgust.

'Confound him! he's used my glass, and I must take all the trouble of fetching another.' The trouble involved amounted to having to go to a small cupboard at the other end of the room and returning with a clean glass in his hand, but Mr Parker grumbled all the time he was fetching it and helping himself to whisky.

'It seems to me,' he complained in self-complacence, 'that I'm curiously unlucky. I wonder why people are so unfair to me! I'm

such a good sort—I don't know anyone who has a better temper, or a more open, generous disposition. I expect that is the secret of it.'

He drew the table quite close to the fire as he spoke, and settled himself comfortably in his chair, with whisky, cigar, and paper near at hand. 'Other people,' he sighed, 'are so mean, so selfish and unfair. I don't know a single exception—except perhaps Minnie. And Minnie herself was really very nasty to me to-night. Very nasty indeed. I had no idea she could be so inconsiderate. It's enough to sour the sweetest temper. I shall have to come to a complete understanding with her to-morrow. She must thoroughly learn to realise what her position in this household should be, then we may all have a little peace and quietness. So that's settled, and now for Mars. That's better! I really am comfortable at last.'

He snuggled down cosily in his chair, and opened his paper at the place where he had been reading when Bella interrupted him.

'Latest observations,' he read, half aloud. 'Ah yes, that's where I was. "Latest observations have revealed strange lights which some astronomers believe to be signals put out in the hope of attracting an answer from our planet." I don't believe a word of *that*. The thing's absurd. But I suppose it is within the bounds

of possibility if Mars is inhabited. Mars inhabited indeed! I wonder what the people are like if it is so. Are they savages, or are they ahead of us? They must be pretty far advanced if they can signal to us with red lights.'

He yawned over his contemplation, then sat up, frowning, the lamp by his side was beginning to go out.

'Confound it!' he growled wrathfully, 'that lamp's going out. I suppose Minnie forgot to mention about the oil. Very selfish of her—very selfish indeed. She thinks of nothing but her own pleasure and forgets all about a poor fellow left alone here in the dark while she goes out and enjoys herself in a blaze of reckless dissipation. However, it is no use trying to read in this light.'

He laid aside his paper with a sigh and turned over on his side, settling the cushion comfortably for his head to rest on.

'I'll just think over what the paper says about the inhabitants of Mars,' he murmured drowsily. 'Fascinating theory. I fancy I can think better with my eyes closed. I don't believe a word of it. Shouldn't believe it—if I were to see it—not sure if I should believe it then.'

The room was in darkness save for the red glow of the logs on the hearth. The warmth of

the atmosphere, the quietness and silence around all conduced to lull the drowsy scientist to rest. Already his reflections were becoming hazy and unreal. Thought became broken, elusive. On what did he mean to speculate? Inhabitants of Mars? Why—where was Mars, and how did the inhabitants get there?

‘Not certain that I should believe it—even then,’ declared a sleepy voice.

CHAPTER IX

A MESSENGER FROM MARS

HAD there been a challenge in those last words, hardly understood by the speaker as he lay drowsing in his comfortable chair? It must have been so, for, scarcely had they passed his lips, than the air seemed filled with strange and wild music. Voices too, crying aloud, though no words were distinguishable, and, through the turmoil of mighty sounds, a mighty rushing as of gigantic wings which cleft the air, swooping downwards—downwards, hovering over him as he lay, so that his heart beat fast, his pulses leapt, and a cold sweat of fear broke over him. What did it mean? What was happening? And then, breaking clear and incisive through that tangle of confused thought and hearing, came the sound of a voice. Deep, musical, commanding, unlike any tones Horace Parker had ever heard before, rousing him from his bewilderment and bidding him answer their call.

‘Man! Man!’

‘Not certain that I should believe it then,’ muttered Horace, raising himself into a sitting posture and staring round the room.

The lamp was out, the logs smouldered low on the hearth, and yet the room was no longer dark. A strange, phosphorescent light shone yonder by the window. What was it? Could he be dreaming or was that indeed a figure which stood there?

Horace shuddered, huddling himself in his chair. What strange presence was there beside him in this room? The light grew, more intense, more brilliant, long green rays athwart the gloom, and there, standing with his right arm flung across his breast in an attitude of superb command stood a gigantic figure, armour-clad, erect, magnificent, with an expression at once severe and tender on its finely-cut features.

A splendid specimen of manhood—a better and nobler manhood than the gazer by the fire-side had ever conceived to exist.

Yet, in spite of the supreme composure in this strange visitant’s eyes there was wonder too, mingled with contempt and pity.

‘Man of Earth,’ came the repeated call, and the sweet richness of the tones would surely have thrilled any other listener than he who heard them for the second time.

'Who are you?' muttered Horace in utter bewilderment.

'I am a Messenger from Mars,' came the reply, each syllable enunciated with slow deliberation.

'*A Messenger from Mars,*' repeated Horace, and essayed a short laugh, as he tried to shake himself free of the strange spell which threatened to overwhelm him. 'Come, you don't expect me to believe that?'

The figure, with its surrounding halo of green, translucent light, moved nearer. There was no smile on those sternly-set features and, in spite of his efforts, Horace was conscious of a sense of dominance from which he could not hope to escape.

'I am a Messenger from Mars,' rang out the bell-like tones.

'Are you really?' murmured Horace—he could think of nothing else to say—he was trying so vainly *not* to be compelled to meet the steady gaze of those penetrating eyes. 'Won't—won't you sit down?' he essayed feebly, and even rose to gingerly push a chair in his visitor's direction.

'No!'

The monosyllable was terse in its brevity.

'You're very polite,' murmured Horace, wondering desperately what was going to happen next.

‘I have come,’ replied the Messenger solemnly, ‘to save you.’

And for a moment the fleeting shadow of a smile, as though at the hope of some eagerly desired good passed across his face.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ observed Horace genially. ‘May I ask—from what?’

‘From yourself.’

‘I assure you that is quite unnecessary.’

The Messenger raised his hand.

‘Fool!’ was his contemptuous reply.

A brief silence followed the word. Horace was wondering in what miraculous manner this visitor could have arrived, and devoutly hoping he would soon show him the fashion of his return.

‘You have a delightful way of expressing yourself,’ he began, conversationally. ‘But I don’t quite see why you should assume these airs of superiority over me. The inhabitants of the Earth are probably quite as civilized as those of Mars.’

He tried to speak impressively, but had never experienced so much difficulty before in being both impressive and expressive—it was positively embarrassing to be fixed by so penetrating a stare as the one directed upon him by his visitor.

‘Civilized!’ cried the latter, his voice rising

to the clarion blast of a trumpet, 'Contemptible phrase!'

'Perhaps,' suggested Horace mildly, 'you are an exception. Probably you are the noblest of your race.'

He compelled himself to raise his eyes to the figure standing near the now open window. Certainly this inhabitant of Mars was good to behold—his glittering dress, majestic mien and beautiful features gave him the appearance of some fabled god of old Olympus suddenly descended to earth, an Apollo, with the majesty of Jupiter and the strength of a Hercules.

Yet the noble head was bowed as the Messenger answered sadly,

'Alas, I am nothing of the kind. I am one of the poorest, weakest, least honoured among my fellows. To confess the truth I am but a criminal.'

'A criminal?' echoed Horace, in some relief. 'Why, what did you do?'

'I sinned in vanity,' was the reply, whilst a heavy sigh broke from the sternly-set lips. 'A dear companion and myself had composed a hymn of praise. He died, and I gave it forth as entirely my own.'

Horace chuckled. Such an admission lessened his fear of this awe-inspiring visitant. He even began to take a certain interest in him. After

all, here was an unique opportunity for studying the customs and manners of the Martians without a vast amount of trouble.

‘That was rather smart of you,’ he observed.

‘Did you make much out of it?’

‘It was chanted by many.’

‘Then it paid pretty well?’

The Messenger frowned. ‘In Mars,’ he said, gravely, ‘we do not write for gain.’

Horace coughed gently behind his hand.

‘No? Was it humorous?’

‘Humorous? What is that?’

There was evident perplexity in the enquiry:

‘Witty—funny,’ ejaculated Horace, with some impatience. ‘Have you no sense of humour?’

The other shook his head solemnly.

‘None whatever,’ he replied.

‘Then you take yourself seriously?’

‘In Mars we take everything seriously.’

‘And you have no comic songs?’

‘None.’

‘No comic papers?’

‘None.’

Mr Parker took a deep breath, and gazed at the gleaming figure opposite with kindling enthusiasm.

‘You’re miles ahead of us,’ he exclaimed.

‘We are an inferior race altogether. Go on.’

I'll listen to you all night at this rate. I'm all attention, believe me.'

'For five days,' continued the Messenger, standing with bowed head and one hand shading his eyes as though in shame; 'I suffered the bitterest remorse. Then I confessed my crime and was sentenced to pay a visit to this miserable planet, which you call Earth.'

'And what do you call it?' enquired Horace, with curiosity.

'Pardon me, if I do not tell you. The word is never mentioned in Mars. It is a monosyllable and begins with a capital H.'

Again Horace cleared his throat, but he did not feel sufficiently well qualified to undertake the championship of his native sphere, and so remained silent.

'I am not allowed to return,' added his visitor, 'until I have accomplished my mission here. Therefore, I have come to you.'

Horace curled the ends of his moustache with nervous fingers.

'Why single *me* out?' he demanded plaintively.

'Of all countries yours seemed the most desirable.'

'Bravo!' chuckled the listener, sotto voce. 'Rule Britannia!'

'Of all cities, this is the largest, the most intense.'

‘Good old London.’

‘Of all her citizens you are the most striking example—’

‘Charmed, I’m sure!’

‘The most contemptible—the most eaten up with greed and selfishness.’

At these last words Horace sprang to his feet, an angry exclamation on his lips.

‘Hullo!’ he cried furiously. ‘I say! I’m not going to stand this.’

He would have made a rush forward, but the Martian flung up his right hand.

Instantly the room seemed to rock as though under the influence of some galvanic shock. Chairs were overturned, the sofa tottered and crashed over on its side, pictures fell from the walls, whilst Horace himself, as little capable of resistance as a child, was flung across the table from which decanter and syphon had been swept on to the ground. Paralysed with terror the unfortunate scientist lay, his arms spread wide, his hands clutching and clawing at empty space, his face grey with fear and that strange electric shock which seemed to convulse him. Even when the harrowing sensation had passed he lay there, panting and sweating in his dread, till the voice of the terrible Messenger roused him.

‘You evidently know nothing about dynamics,’ quoth the Martian, with more con-

tempt than mockery in his tones. 'No inhabitant of Mars would have been upset by a little current like that.'

Very slowly Mr Parker picked himself up, looking in dismay around his dismantled room, then feeling himself all over very carefully as though fearing to discover broken bones. The Messenger watched him, calm, inscrutable as ever—yet, perhaps, pity was paramount in the expression of his eyes.

'I say,' faltered Horace, abjectly, 'please don't do that again. It hurts.'

'Sit down,' said the Messenger, pointing a lean forefinger towards a chair.

Horace glanced nervously in the direction indicated, but remained standing.

'Sit down,' was the repeated command, and this time it was obeyed, though his victim merely perched himself on the extreme edge of the chair. 'Listen to what I say,' continued the inexorable voice, 'And keep quiet.'

'It wasn't I who made the room go round like that,' explained Horace, meekly.

'That was nothing.'

Horace coughed deprecatingly.

'Indeed? Wasn't it really? Well, please go on, I'm all attention.'

'You are, of course, aware that Mars has but half the diameter of Earth and an exterior orbit.

Consequently the planetary lifetime of Mars must be brief compared with Earth. And yet we Martians are as superior to you as you imagine yourselves to be to the cattle that you breed.'

Mr Parker grew very red and bit his lips viciously. But he took care to exercise considerable control over himself.

'I won't argue with you,' he muttered. 'You—er—have such a playful way of enforcing your ideas.'

'But you must admit the truth of what I say,' retorted the Messenger sternly.

'I say I will not argue with you,' maintained Horace; adding sotto voce, 'At the same time, I've a right to my own opinion.'

It appeared that the Martians were keen of hearing amongst other things, for as Mr Parker finished speaking the Messenger waved his hand slightly, and the next moment the unfortunate habitant of Earth was sprawling once more across the table, his legs, arms and head all working convulsively.

'You're right' gasped Horace, as soon as he could articulate the words. 'Quite, quite right.'

'Good!' said the messenger calmly, 'I am glad you doubt no longer.'

Mr Parker sank back exhausted into the nearest chair, wiping his perspiring brow with

his silk pocket handkerchief. 'No,' he murmured faintly. 'I—don't doubt.'

And he closed his eyes.

'Do you know,' continued his visitor, 'the reason of our superiority?'

'Something to do with dynamics, isn't it,' replied Horace hastily and with much conviction.

'Don't trifle,' was the stern rebuke.

'I wasn't wishing to trifle—I was trying to guess the right answer the first time, indeed, indeed I was.'

'Listen then. The answer is Self—Self—Self. That is the curse of this wretched world, self is the cause of all the ills with which the earth is burdened. Crime, misery, hunger, sin, are all of them the necessary outcome of self-seeking, self-interest, self-love.'

'I *quite* agree with you there'; interjected Horace. 'There is nothing I detest like selfishness.'

He spoke with the greatest sincerity, but the messenger took no notice whatever of the remark. 'No war has ever wasted Mars,' continued the latter. 'Nor could it. The element of self was eliminated long ago. At the very beginning of Time—the mask was torn off.'

Horace looked surprised.

‘Mask?’ he questioned. ‘What mask?’

‘Self has a million masks, each one of which has the appearance of a virtue. The soldier’s glory, the statesman’s aim, the painter’s touch, the poet’s dream, all hide the hungry, pitiful features of Self. Even your children are becoming egotists, the most pitiful sign of all.’

‘Sad but true,’ quoth Horace, shaking his head lugubriously over the sins of a saddened world, ‘but may I ask what on earth has all this got to do with *me*?’

‘You have been selected.’

‘Yes—but why?’

‘Because you are without doubt the most selfish man in the world.’

Mr Parker tried to spring up.

‘Oh nonsense!’ he cried indignantly.

But it was no use to expostulate, a force stronger than his own flung him back into the vacated seat, whilst a spasm of pain set his features twitching.

‘Woe is me!’ cried the Messenger, raising his hand solemnly above his head. ‘I am condemned to save you. To bring you to a better, purer mind. Until that end is achieved I may not return to Mars.’

There was something awe-inspiring in that pathetic figure of noble manhood, something

akin to despair in the beautiful eyes fixed on the man who sat huddled in the chair opposite.

But Mr Parker was not in the mood for favourable criticism on this unwelcome visitant from another sphere. His body still tingled and pricked with the memory of recent experiences, and he was conscious of growing anger against the adverse comments on his character.

‘I assure you I am alright,’ he said petulantly. ‘You had better go home at once.’

‘My judge in passing sentence,’ went on the Martian mournfully, ‘Said he felt it his duty to inflict the severest punishment known to the law.’

‘So he told you to go to—earth?’

‘My friends wept when they bade me adieu.’

‘Why did they do that?’

‘Because, alas, the sentence was thought to mean eternal banishment.’

‘And they expected never to see you again? Thought you had gone for good, eh? Yet they wept? Well—if it only depends on *me*—’

‘It only depends on you.’

‘Why then you can—’

‘I *can*. Yes, and I am going to! The task is a gigantic one I admit. Still I do not despair.’

‘How, gigantic?’ I really do not understand what idea you have got into your head, or what you are driving at. I assure you—’

‘Considering your opportunities you are the basest man in the whole world.’

Mr Parker sat up to expostulate, but, meeting the Martian’s glance thought better of it and leant back again.

‘My opportunities?’ he mumbled. ‘Why, I’ve never had any.’

‘Blindest of the blind,’ said the Messenger sadly. ‘You could not see them, but they were there. In this very house there lives a girl whose natural impulses are more than half unselfish. Yet you could not spare one evening to make her happy.’

‘Ah, you are talking of Minnie. But you do not happen to know the narrow view she took—’

‘Silence! and shame on you for the words. Then there is your aunt.’

Horace shuffled uneasily on his chair.

‘Oh!—she’s awfully narrow, too.’

‘Silence, I bid you.’

‘If you’d lived in the same house as long as I have with aunt—’

‘*Silence.* You were too lazy even to call a cab.’

‘You don’t make any allowances.’

‘You deserve none. Then think of that poor fellow who in a weak moment confided to you his life’s tragedy. You turned a deaf ear to his

story. You had no pity for one who had tramped for days and nights through the bitter cold and snow of winter weather in the vain hope of the help you could have so easily given.'

'You can't make me responsible for every dirty tramp's condition.'

'You might have saved the one who came to your door to-night. You would have been blessed a thousand fold had you done so.'

'How do you mean?'

'Think of it! There before you stood a genius—and you drove him out to die. A great inventor perishing of want in the very heyday of invention worship.'

'Do you mean to say that fellow's ideas are good for anything?' asked Horace in amaze.

'You call yourself a man of science,' retorted the Martian contemptuously. 'You, who know nothing at all. I tell you there is more genius in that man's little finger than in your entire carcase.'

'Do you really mean it?'

'I do.'

'By Jove!—then there's money in it,' cried Mr Parker, so far forgetting his position as to rub his hands gleefully together. 'I'll hunt him up to-morrow and pump him dry!'

'With what end in view?'

‘Oh, I know what you mean! But I’ll show you that I am not the selfish beast you take me for. I’ll treat him with the greatest liberality.’

A gleam of pleasure shone in the Messenger’s eyes.

‘Is it possible?’ he breathed in those deep, musical tones of his. ‘Is the lesson bearing fruit already?’

‘I’ll tell you what I’ll do,’ cried Horace, aglow with pride at the thought of his own munificence, ‘I’ll give him two and a half per cent on all my profits. There!’

With a gesture of infinite disgust his listener turned away.

‘Was there ever such a mean hound?’ he asked bitterly.

‘I don’t think you can quite have realised what I said,’ replied Horace in a louder key. ‘I said I’d *give* him, mark—give him two and a half per cent!’

For reply the Messenger flung out his arm beckoning sternly towards the speaker, whilst with his other hand he pointed to the open window from which the heavy curtain had been torn aside.

‘Get up!’ he commanded. ‘You train your dogs with hunger and a whip. I must try the same system with you.’

Horace rose but shrank back, shivering. He

had not noticed the open window, only now did he realise how bitterly the wind blew in on them, bringing driving snow-flakes beating down over the chairs and carpet.

A winter's night—icy cold, with heavy snow falling. On such a night—this very one—he had driven an old man out to die of want and exposure. Yet it was not of the miserable tramp who had the brain of an inventor that he thought now—but of himself.

‘What are we going to do now?’ asked Mr Parker, backing towards the hearth.

‘You must come with me.’

‘What! Out into the snow?’

‘Out into the snow.’

Horace clutched at the mantelshelf as though in the vain hope of resisting the command in that calm, dominant voice.

‘Do let me explain,’ he pleaded. ‘The fact is I’m in rather a delicate state of health and if I were to venture out on a night like this the consequences might be *most* serious.’

‘You are wasting your breath,’ replied the Messenger quietly. ‘Come!’

The green phosphorescent light glowed around his towering figure, imparting a death-like pallor to the lofty features, which were as firmly set as though cut in marble.

‘Do you really mean it?’ moaned the

unhappy Horace, relinquishing his hold on the mantelshelf.

‘I do.’

‘You will let me get my coat—and hat?’

‘Put them on.’

‘Be—before we start.’

He snatched as he spoke at the heavy, fur-lined coat which he had flung over the back of a chair on his return home that evening, then, twisting a long muffler round his throat, he placed his hat well over his ears, thrust his hands into his pockets, and remained standing on the hearth-rug, the very picture of a mutinous child who longs to—yet dare not disobey its nurse.

‘We may find that useful,’ quoth the Messenger, looking thoughtfully at the fur coat. ‘Now come!’

Again he pointed to the open casement.

‘You’re in such a hurry,’ complained Horace, stamping his feet as though in anticipation of approaching chill. ‘You—er—don’t give me time.’

He spread out his hands lovingly before the blaze with a reproachful glance over his shoulder towards the inexorable figure near the window.

‘Make haste,’ came the curt command.

Horace sighed drearily.

‘I’m not starting out with any comfort at all,’

he groaned. 'I don't think I should be wise to venture out to-night. Not at all wise,' he coughed slightly, and proceeded to a lengthy blowing of his nose. 'It is so *very* sharp outside.'

'You had better come,' replied the warning voice.

A chill blast seemed to sweep the room scattering the white ashes from fallen logs.

'No,' cried Horace defiantly, as he shivered in the cold. 'I—I'm damned if I do.'

He was soon to repent his temerity.

Again that galvanic shock appeared to paralyse the whole room; chairs, tables, sofa reeled and crashed—there was the sound of cracking glass, followed by splintering wood, whilst in the midst, crouching on his knees in abject terror, lay the master of the house—no longer defiant, but reduced to the humblest submission.

'You shall know,' cried the vibrant voice of the Messenger from Mars, 'What it is to suffer. On to your punishment, man of earth! Come!'

CHAPTER X

A FIRST LESSON

‘NINE, ten, eleven!’

Clear upon the night air rang out the chimes, followed by a brief silence.

Yet, are London streets ever silent save for the briefest of spaces?

Almost immediately after the last echo of the chimes had died away came the sound of shuffling feet and a raucous voice muttering in an undertone, whilst the light of a lantern carried by a night watchman gleamed across the pavement.

‘Eleven o’clock,’ grunted the fellow, yawning sleepily. ‘I must hurry up or I shall miss my last drink.’

And away he hurried, more wakeful as presently he neared the neighbourhood of a public-house.

But in the Square behind him all was quiet again, though lights shone behind the corners

of closely-drawn blinds in the house facing the watchman's box.

The snow lay thick on the roadway and already covered the doorstep and pavement which had been swept so cleanly an hour previously for the convenience of Mrs Clarence's arriving guests.

It was the padding of the snow which muffled the footsteps of another man—not a watchman this time—who presently darted up the road and paused, listening as he glanced round the empty Square.

It was Mr Horace Parker, the well-known scientist who had vowed not many hours since that neither wild horses nor the pleadings of his pretty fiancée should drag him forth from the cosy comfort of his own fireside. Yet, to look at the ease-loving gentleman now, one might well have supposed him to be a criminal escaping from the arm of the law.

Seeing the Square so empty and deserted, Horace drew a breath of relief.

'I do believe I've given that fellow the slip,' he murmured in self-congratulatory tones. 'I shouldn't wonder if he's an impostor after all!' He chuckled gleefully at the thought, though the glance he cast behind him was nervous.

'Now if only I can find a cab and get quietly

home,'—he murmured, 'nobody will be a penny the wiser.'

He stamped his cold feet on the ground as he spoke, beating his breast with his arms to keep warm as he hurried to the corner of the street where he had spied the tall figure of a policeman.

'Good-evening, policeman,' he observed cheerfully — really considering everything he felt wonderfully cheerful.

'Evening, sir,' replied the man, eyeing his accoster curiously.

'Seen any cabs about anywhere?' asked Horace.

'No, sir. Very few out, sir. It's a bad night.'

'By jove, you're right there,' agreed Mr Parker warmly. 'It's the worst night I ever had in my life.'

And again he looked over his shoulder.

'There's a cab stand in the Bouverie Road,' went on the official vaguely. 'You *might* find one there.'

'But you don't think I shall?'

'Well, Sir, it's doubtful.'

'Look here,' said Horace, producing a half-crown from his pocket. 'I wish you'd get me a taxi, or a hansom—in fact anything, I don't care what it is. Here's a half-crown and if you

bring a conveyance back here in ten minutes, I'll double it.'

The policeman's face relaxed into a broad grin.

'Thank you, sir,' he said, accepting the tip without demur. 'Will you wait here?'

'Here or hereabouts' replied Horace, again glancing over his shoulder.

'All right, sir.'

'Bring it to this corner anyway,' called Horace after the retreating figure. 'And tell the man to wait till I come up.'

'Right, sir.'

'Certainly, very much all right,' mused Horace to himself as he turned to pace down the road again. 'Splendid force, the police! Now where can I hide so that this gentleman from Mars can't find me? Aha!—a watchman's box, this will do splendidly.'

He took a step towards it as he spoke, but paused, noting how the snow across his pathway had suddenly taken on a faint greenish tinge. What was that? Not a lantern's light surely—not a lantern's light. . . . His heart beat fast, then seemed to check suddenly, such as happens in a moment of shock, whilst, raising his eyes he spied, standing in the shadow of his proposed hiding-place, the towering shape of his strange visitant and mentor.

'The Messenger from Mars.' he gasped.

The other looked at him very thoughtfully, as though intent on inspecting some new and curious species which he found it difficult to class.

‘Trying to hide?’ he asked pityingly.

Horace leant back against the area railings of Mrs Clarence’s house, gasping.

No orchard thief could have looked more guiltily self-conscious.

‘No—no,’ he murmured, ‘I—I was looking for you everywhere, I was—er—trying to keep warm until you were ready.’

The Messenger’s face hardened. Seen out here in the open air he appeared yet more commanding in mien and stature, more god-like in feature and expression.

‘The policeman won’t be able to find you a cab,’ said he, ‘I have taken care of that.’

Horace groaned.

Of what use was it to try and deceive one whose faculties were so superior in every way to his own?

‘You cannot escape me,’ warned the Messenger, as he folded his right arm across his breast looking down at the trembling Horace with the stern gaze of a Radamanthean judge.

‘Escape you?’ replied Mr Parker with forced geniality. ‘I—I wasn’t wishing to escape you. I was just saying to myself only a moment ago,

"I do hope I shan't miss that—er—nice man from Mars. He—er—is such an interesting companion—and so instructive."

'Do you see where you are?' asked the Martian, ignoring the flattery.

Horace turned, glancing up at the house against whose area railings he was leaning.

'Why, that's Mrs Clarence's house, isn't it?' he asked, in genuine surprise.

'You refused to come here to-night to please Minnie,' said the Messenger sternly. 'So I have brought you now.'

'What for?' asked Horace, stamping his feet in the snow and thrusting his hands deep into his pockets.

'To give you a lesson. Your first lesson in Otherdom.'

'*Otherdom*? What's that?'

'You do not understand. It is a characteristic of your race that while all that is vile and ignoble is well contained in the expression "Selfishness" your language has no word to signify the opposite.'

'Pardon me,' observed Mr Parker mildly, 'we *have* a word.'

'Indeed? What is it?'

'Altruism. I am aware that very few people know the word, and still fewer understand it; but it's used sometimes in the *Daily Telegraph*.'

‘We have no *Daily Telegraph* in Mars.’

‘Ah! You are very unlucky people.’

‘We use the word “Otherdom”—a word which even you must be taught to understand.’

‘Thank you,’ murmured Horace, who was now amusing himself—save the mark!—by scraping the snow into little heaps with his feet. ‘I—er—will bear it in mind.’

‘Much more than that,’ sounded the slow musical tones of his mentor. ‘You must give me some proof of it in your actions.’

‘Yes, I will, I promise you,’ Mr Parker assured the speaker very earnestly. ‘Now, please, may I go home? I’m feeling so very chilly.’

‘That is only because your heart is stone cold.’

‘Excuse me—but it is my feet.’

The Martian frowned. ‘No,’ he declared authoritatively, ‘you may *not* go home. Look yonder! Someone is coming. Speak to her.’

Horace looked up the street. Along the road, wandering aimlessly in their direction, came the figure of a girl, a slender, attenuated figure, in a shabby black frock, a dark shawl flung over her head, concealing the face from view;—one hand—white and delicately moulded though almost clawlike in its thinness,—held the shawl in place across her breast, the other clasped two

bunches of purple violets. There was infinite pathos in the drooping poise of the shawl-covered head upon which the snow-flakes drifted, forming a white shroud to the living creature sheltering beneath the folds of threadbare cloth.

‘I don’t want to speak to her,’ exclaimed Mr Parker, indignantly, as he moved aside to make room for the passing of this poor outcast whose touch he seemed to fear as though it were leper-tainted. ‘Why *should* I speak to her? I—I’m going.’

‘Stay!’ commanded the Messenger.

And Horace, inwardly fuming and raging, obeyed.

‘You know,’ he ventured to expostulate. ‘You’ll have a crowd round you in a minute if you go on like this.’

‘I am invisible and inaudible to all but you,’ was the reply.

Mr Parker glanced up; angry though he was he could not help being impressed by the lofty grandeur of the face which shone white and colourless amid the surrounding gloom.

‘Well!’ he said irritably, annoyed at his own grudging admiration. ‘I’m off.’

‘Stop! You cannot stir,’ said the Messenger quietly.

It was true. Rooted to the spot by some

mysterious power, Horace Parker stood staring from his dread companion to the girl, who had become the object of their discussion.

‘Thank goodness,’ he muttered. ‘She is going the other way!’

‘I will bring her back,’ was the grim rejoinder.

‘I do wish you would not suggest the carrying out of such extraordinary things,’ groaned Horace despairingly. ‘You see you don’t understand the customs of Earth. Just fancy if anyone in that house opposite were to see me, at this time of night talking to—oh, confound it all!—she is coming back!’

It was true; the girl had turned and with slow, hesitating steps was approaching Parker, who still stood immovable in the middle of the road.

A gust of wind had blown back the threadbare shawl revealing the face beneath.

A face of silent tragedies, yet not without its beauty, a pitiful beauty which haunted the dark eyes and broad white brow over which the black hair lay damp and matted; but the cheeks which should have still possessed the rounded curves of youth were thin, hollow and colourless, the lips of the sensitive mouth were parched and swollen with cold and frost-bite—she was so cold—standing there in her thin

rags, which she tried to draw more closely round her as the bitter wind swept up the street.

'It is a cold night,' she whispered huskily, fixing her dark eyes in wistful appeal on Horace's face.

But he turned away, frowning and contemptuous, mentally giving her an ill name.

'Speak,' commanded the Messenger sternly.

But though his victim heard plainly enough he was not minded to obey.

'Speak,' rang out that clarion call.

There was no help for it.

Horace turned very slowly back, meeting the girl's pleading glance without an iota of pity or softening in his own.

'Very cold,' he retorted.

The girl drew nearer, encouraged by his words, though Heaven knows there was little enough encouragement in them.

'Can you spare me a trifle, sir,' she faltered, 'to get some food?'

There was no answer to this humble request, certainly no shred of compassion in the listener's heart.

'Speak to her—answer her,' commanded the Messenger, drawing nearer to Parker's side, so that the latter, without raising his eyes, saw the tinge of greenish light reflected on the snow at his feet.

'Why don't you go home?' demanded Horace venting his spleen in scornful reproach.

The girl shrank back as though she had been struck.

'I cannot go home without money,' she moaned, 'my landlady won't let me in.'

A sardonic smile curled Parker's lips.

'So you've got to stop out in the cold,' he retorted. 'So have I.'

And he looked defiantly across to the spot where the Messenger stood, stern and sorrowful, his right arm folded across his breast.

'I don't owe so very much,' said the poor child—she was little more—with a sob.

'*Help her,*' came the command for which Horace had been waiting.

'How much is it?' he asked reluctantly.

'Only twelve shillings,' she moaned, shivering with cold.

'Help her,' came the command again, but Horace was looking past the Messenger to where the burly figure of his friend the policeman was seen returning.

Had the latter got the taxi after all? If so would there be *any* possibility of escaping his persecutor?

'Do go away!' he cried petulantly, as the flower-girl raised her bunches of purple violets

as though appealing to him to buy. 'Here's someone coming.'

'Oh sir,' she entreated, 'don't be hard.'

'Confound you!' snarled Horace, who saw in the approaching constable a possible rescuer, 'will you go away?'

He had raised his voice over the last words on purpose and immediately the constable came hurrying up.

'Here,' cried the latter gruffly, as he seized the shrinking girl by the wrist. 'Come here! I shall be taking care of you. Come along with me, young woman.'

'What for?' cried the poor creature, struggling to free herself, whilst the violets fell from her trembling fingers to the ground where they were speedily trampled into the snow under her captor's heavy boots. 'Please, I've done nothing.'

'Speaking to a gentleman!' replied the representative of the law with righteous indignation. 'Come along now.'

And in spite of piteous protestations he proceeded to drag her off, leaving Horace looking after his innocent tormentor with far more of satisfaction than pity in his gaze.

'Save her,' quoth a deep voice close to his ear, and turning he found the Messenger standing beside him.

For a moment Mr Parker hesitated, but something in the Martian's glance warned him that it was not a time for trifling. The night wind brought an echo of the girl's broken sobbing to their ears as it swept moaning past them.

'It's all right, policeman,' shouted Horace, 'I spoke to her first.'

The constable hesitated, then let the girl go, with a parting injunction to be 'quick and move on.'

'Sorry I can't find a cab, sir,' he added, recognizing the gentleman who had sent him on a fruitless errand. 'I went all down Bouverie Road but there wasn't a sign of a taxi or a 'ansom.'

'Never mind,' said Horace, with an affability which surprised himself, 'it can't be helped. Here you are, all the same.'

And he proffered the man his promised 'tip' to the recipient's no small surprise.

'Thank you, sir, thank you,' said he, saluting, as he continued his beat.

Horace stood staring after his retreating figure, purposely disregarding of the Messenger who stood close to the watchman's box at the side of the road.

'Splendid force the police,' murmured Horace, and tucked his hands once more into the depths of his pockets.

The girl, saved from the fear of arrest, stood leaning against the area railings of one of the houses near. She was still sobbing spasmodically, unable to recover from her recent terror, broken too by cold and misery and hunger.

'Help her,' sounded the inexorable voice of the Messenger.

Horace shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of utter disgust.

'Um,' he grunted, and began shuffling his feet in the snow, raking it into tiny hillocks and then stamping viciously on them.

'Help her,' echoed the command.

'I can't. I've given all my silver to the policeman.'

'Then give her gold.'

Mr Parker paused in his struggling to stare in genuine alarm and perplexity at the speaker. Such a demand was beyond the limits of credulity.

'Give her *gold*?' he cried. 'Absurd, ridiculous rubbish; give her gold indeed! I shan't! I won't!'

He found a bunch of the trampled violets beneath his heel as he spoke, and stamped them underfoot, crushing the bruised blossoms out of all recognition.

Vaguely he wished that he could somehow be stamping thus on the Messenger from Mars.

'Give her gold,' went on the deep voice of his mentor, 'or —'

He flung out his right arm warningly and in an instant Horace's defiance was gone.

'Don't you do that,' he said nervously, and thrust his hand into an inner pocket.

Then, hurrying to the girl's side, he pushed the golden coin roughly between her clenched fingers.

'Here's something for you,' he said abruptly. 'Now you can go home. I wish to Heaven I could.'

And he turned away with a groan.

But the girl followed him, holding out her hand so that the lamplight fell on the glittering coin which lay in its palm.

'A sovereign!' she cried joyfully. 'Do you mean it? Oh thank you, thank you, sir. A sovereign. I can go home now. Go home and get warm. Oh, thank you, sir, and bless you for your goodness.'

She hurried off as she spoke, eager to be back in the poor, bare garret which she called home, a very Elysium too as it had seemed to her in her despairing wanderings about the cold, dark streets.

Horace could hear her brief exclamations of gratitude and joy as she crossed the road and hurried into the wider, busier street beyond.

But it brought no thrill of joy to his selfish heart to know that one starving waif in that great turmoil of life would be blessing him that night as she laid down to rest at last.

'Is it not blessed to give?' asked the Messenger, his voice vibrating with emotion.

Horace shrugged his shoulders. 'I expect you find it so,' he observed sarcastically. 'It must be very blessed to give away someone else's money. *You* gave it, you know—not I.'

'In that case,' was the cold rejoinder, 'you cannot expect any blessing.'

'No,' scoffed Horace. 'It strikes me I'm getting the worst of the bargain all round. I say, though, how much longer is this going on? You'll never bring me to your way of thinking if you try till Doomsday.'

'So they all said in Mars.'

'You'll never get back there if it depends on me,' continued Mr Parker spitefully. 'So where, in the meantime, do you intend to put up?'

'I shall stay here.'

'Come,' urged Horace with playful sarcasm, 'even I can suggest something better than that. There's the Moon, for instance. I'll make you a present of it. You can take it and put a fence round it. *I* don't want it.'

'The Moon is not yours to give.'

‘That’s why I make you a present of it. I’m simply taking a leaf out of your book. You give away my money, so I give you somebody else’s Moon?’

He tried a sniggering laugh at the effect of his own wit.

The Messenger looked at him in calm contemplation—as though still trying vainly to class this unique specimen of a lower humanity.

Yet his reply was spoken gently—almost pityingly,

‘You cannot give away the property of others.’

‘Oh, can’t you,’ retorted Mr Parker bitterly, ‘it seemed to me that you found no difficulty in doing so. In fact I thought perhaps that was what you meant by your Otherdom.’

‘Your stupidity is something marvellous,’ quoth the Messenger quietly. ‘Self! Self! Self! That is the ruling passion of your miserable world. That is the burden you are laying upon yourself—a burden that crushes every noble instinct, every honourable thought. In Mars it is quite different. We work upon another system—set a totally dissimilar goal before our eyes. In Mars the prevailing cry is “Others, others, others.” Nobody studies his own private interests. Everyone works for the welfare of his fellows. That is what I meant by Otherdom.’

‘And you practise what you preach?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘And you want to convert me?’

‘I do most earnestly.’

‘With what object?’

‘I may not return to Mars until I have brought you to a better mind.’

‘Aha,’ cried Mr Parker slyly, ‘Self, self, *self*! Who’s selfish now, eh?’

‘It is for your sake, and for your sake only, that I am here; I can prove it.’

‘Nonsense! Your motive is an utterly selfish one.’

‘It is for your sake only; I can prove it.’

‘How?’

The Messenger moved forward, facing the house which Horace had noticed before as that belonging to Mrs Clarence.

Somehow the very thought of the latter lady heightened Horace’s annoyance at his present position.

‘Stay,’ he cried, stretching out his hand as though to check the Messenger. ‘Allow me to consider it proved. I’ll agree with whatever you like to say about that matter. Now please may I go home? I’m nearly always in bed by a quarter past eleven and I know I shall be quite ill if I break through my regular customs in this way.’

'No,' was the calm response. 'Your lesson is only just beginning. Have you forgotten Minnie?'

'Forgotten Minnie?' echoed Horace scoffingly. 'I should think not indeed! She is a dear little girl, and so awfully fond of me.'

'She *was*.'

'Was?'' In spite of himself the listener was startled. 'Do you mean to say that her love for me is dead?' he asked anxiously

'You shall judge for yourself,' replied the Messenger, and laid his hand for an instant on Horace's forehead.

CHAPTER XI

WHAT MR PARKER OVERHEARD

THE low, sweet strains of distant waltz music gradually growing nearer, louder. The dazzling brilliance of electric light, the murmur of voices and the soft swish-swish of gowns mingled with the tread of dancing feet. Where was he? Horace Parker asked himself. What had happened? In curious, sub-conscious fashion he remembered the past, how he had been standing outside in the snow with that grim Messenger from Mars enshrouded in phosphorescent light beside him.

And now? Why, he was surrounded by warmth and pleasant comfort, the sound of waltz music in his ears, low laughter and murmuring voices drifting to him from an adjacent room. Then, without any conscious effort on his part, he was within that room itself, watching the dancers as they whirled past, neither seeing nor noticing him any

more than if he had been a fly upon the wall.

Yet how many of these faces were familiar to him. Ah! amongst others there was Kitty Clarence herself, Minnie's friend. In hazy fashion he recalled that this was her dance—the dance he ought himself to have attended. Well, here he was, though how he got here he could not conceive. Stranger still, though he was here no one took the least notice of him. But he did not puzzle over that problem long. He wanted to see Minnie and find out how she was getting on. Of course she would not be enjoying herself without *him*. Had she not said so herself? Unseen, unnoted he passed through the gay crowd of dancers till he came to an alcove in the corner.

There were two ladies here, chatting together, but as Horace stood there, unseen in the shadows, two men entered and one lady, resting her hand on her partner's arm passed out into the ballroom beyond.

The other two remained, and, in the girl resting on the couch, Horace had recognised Minnie herself. How pretty she looked, the soft flush on her cheeks, the sparkling light of pleasure in her blue eyes. A pang of jealousy shot through the heart of the unseen watcher as

he noticed that the man who now stood by her side was Arthur Dicey.

'This is our dance, I think,' the latter was saying, as he bowed, offering his arm.

Minnie rose. 'What a capital ball, isn't it?' she replied. 'I am so enjoying myself, and, and so delighted we were able to come.'

'So am I,' said Dicey, and Horace longed to have the chance of punching his head at the earliest opportunity, as he noticed the earnest significance of the reply.

'It is a pleasure for which we are indebted altogether to you,' Minnie laughed, whilst Dicey stooped to pick up her fallen fan. 'I haven't thanked you half enough. It was so good of you to bring us.'

'Please don't,' urged the other, colouring to the roots of his hair. 'The pleasure is all on my side. It—er—was awfully good of you to come with me.'

They both laughed together over the ingenuousness of the reply.

'Is Mr Parker often like that?' asked Dicey curiously. Minnie pursed her lips, fiddling with a button on her glove.

'He is—rather peculiar,' she replied, and Horace felt his pulses quicken in sudden indignation.

Was this his Minnie,—his humble, loving,

obedient little sweetheart—*daring* to call him *peculiar*? But, though he made an effort to move forward and interrupt the conversation he could not stir but must remain, as silent as he was an invisible listener to what those two said.

‘Peculiar,’ laughed Dicey scornfully, ‘That seems to me a very mild epithet to apply to him.’

Surely now Minnie would take up the cudgels in his defence, and snub that insufferable young puppy as he deserved? So certain was Horace of this that he even smiled to himself waiting for the discomfiture of his rival.

‘I am almost inclined to agree with you,’ sighed Minnie.

Could he believe his ears?

Horace Parker was not sure that he might.

‘He’s a selfish beast,’ cried Dicey with enthusiasm, egged on by Minnie’s obvious sympathy in his denunciation.

‘I am afraid,’ Minnie replied, ‘that he is rather selfish. Do you know, he refused to come to-night, after he had promised,—promised faithfully.’

‘Pearls before swine,’ sneered Dicey, as Horace ground his teeth with impotent rage. Did that young cub dare allude to *him*,—Horace Parker—as ‘swine’? Worse still, did Minnie stand listening, tacitly agreeing by her

silence? It was insufferable! Yet it had to be suffered.

‘And then,’ said Minnie with an outburst of confidence, ‘he wouldn’t even fetch us a cab,’

‘Not fetch you a cab? Why, he said he was just going out to call one.’

Minnie laughed, toying with her fan.

‘Oh, that was only because you were in the room, and I suppose he felt ashamed,’ said she.

‘Ashamed! I don’t wonder.’

‘But he had just declared most positively that nothing should induce him to fetch one.’

‘Poor fellow,’ said Dicey compassionately, ‘There is only one explanation possible. He must be off his head. All the same he gave me one terrible fright.’

‘Did he?’

‘Only for a moment. He said something, and all the beauty of life seemed to shrivel up and die away. Then somebody contradicted what he had said,—and in a moment the cloud was gone, whilst the whole world seemed even brighter and happier than it had been before.’

As he spoke the two were moving from the alcove towards the ball-room beyond, a soft curtain fell back into its place behind them.

Horace was alone.

Yet was he? Or,—His eyes were suddenly riveted on a faint tinge of green which lay

athwart a white satin cushion. The next moment he was conscious of that towering presence standing over him on the opposite side of the alcove.

The Messenger was here.

Horace tried hard to rally himself. At any rate the power of speech of which he had seemed to be bereft had returned to him. He would show this interfering Martian that his *proof* had failed to impress him.

'All that did not interest me in the least,' he began.

The Messenger looked at him steadily, without a shadow of a smile on his set face.

'Yet it was unpleasant, was it not?' he asked, 'But you'll have to hear much more yet.'

'That fellow thought he was making love,' muttered Horace, his anger rising in spite of assumed nonchalance. 'It made me sick to hear him. But Minnie will never listen to all that high flatutin' rot.'

'She will.'

'I give her credit for better taste.'

'Ought not a suitor to be just a little loving in his manner?'

Mr Parker shrugged his shoulders.

'Minnie knows I love her,' he retorted. 'But she doesn't want to be reminded of the fact every five minutes.'

‘You are making a great mistake. Women hate to be taken for granted. Now listen again and understand.’

The Messenger moved back as he spoke, into the shadows by Horace’s side.

Minnie had re-entered the alcove with Dicey beside her, they were talking together very earnestly as they seated themselves on the couch.

Horace had tried to spring forward as they appeared, but an invisible force held him back.

‘Miss Templar,’ he heard Dicey say, ‘Minnie! May I call you Minnie?’

‘Certainly not,’ she replied and hid laughing lips behind her fan whilst her eyes gave the invitation her lips refused.

Horace had never known his quiet little sweetheart could play the part of coquette so skilfully.

‘Minnie, I love you,’ whispered Dicey—obeying her eyes rather than her words.

‘Hush! You must not say that.’

‘Though I know I am not worthy of you.’

‘That’s the first sensible thing he’s said yet,’ muttered Horace,—but only the Messenger heard.

‘Yet I’ll try to deserve your love,’ added Dicey, taking an unresisting little hand in his.

‘Have you ever said that?’ asked the Messenger, turning to Horace.

The latter scowled, 'Of course not,' he retorted. 'I've deserved it all the time without trying.'

'Oh Minnie,' Dicey was saying, emboldened by the fact that her hand lay passive in his. 'I would devote my whole life to you. Your slightest wish would be a command. Your happiness would be all in all to me.'

For answer Minnie held out her other hand. 'I think you mean what you say,' she answered simply.

'Darling!' cried Dicey joyously. 'Is it possible that you really love me? I did not believe such happiness possible. Tell me, Minnie, for I cannot be convinced till I hear from your own lips the tale which will be the sweetest the world can hold for me.'

Maddened at such a spectacle before his very eyes, Horace turned to his invisible companion. 'If you keep me here there'll be murder committed,' he said, 'And you'll be responsible. To think that that is the girl whom I honoured with *my* love!'

The Messenger looked pityingly down on him. 'Selfish as ever,' he murmured, 'did you ever prize *her* affection or consider its priceless value? The punishment is just. You now see it is given to another.'

Even against his will Horace found his eyes turning back to watch those two on the couch

near, the two who so little dreamed that invisible witnesses stood there in the shadows.

‘I want to make a confession,’ Dicey was saying, ‘will you forgive me beforehand?’

She laughed at him, her face animated with a glow of perfect happiness.

‘Arthur!’ she cried, reproaching him.

‘Well, it’s this. I bought you a ring ever so long ago—in hope. Perhaps I ought to have said despair; and whenever fortune seemed most cruel, whenever my chances appeared most remote, I used to take the ring out of my pocket and look at it. Am I forgiven?’

‘You are silly,’ whispered Minnie, her eyes downcast.

‘May I put it on at last?’

He suited the action to the word, slipping the ring on to the third finger of her left hand.

Minnie gave a little cry of pleasure. ‘Oh Arthur,—how lovely! What a beauty. It is ever so much prettier than—than any I’ve seen before.’

‘And you will wear it for my sake, my dearest?’

He was bending towards her, her lips near his. With a groan Horace turned aside. He would not watch that sealing of a troth which ruined his own hopes.

He—

A cold blast seemed to strike through his limbs.

Where was he? Why! out in the cold again. The cold and drifting snow of the street outside Mrs Clarence's house.

Yet the vision, if vision it were, remained with him as intense reality.

'Just like a woman!' he cried, turning in a sudden tempest of rage to the Messenger whom he found still beside him.

'Of course the diamonds were bigger. That settled the whole thing!'

'Never mind,' replied the calm, dispassionate voice. 'You said you were going to buy her a thimble to-morrow. What is a diamond ring to a thimble?'

'I meant a present. I didn't particularize. So I simply called it a thimble. But I'll buy her a star to-morrow, an enormous diamond star. That'll make Mr Dicey sit up. The miserable, sneaking, cur.'

'That's so like a man,' echoed the Martian thoughtfully. 'He thinks if the diamonds are bigger, that will settle the whole thing.'

'Of course,' argued Horace. 'This is all nonsense. Minnie would never marry a brainless idiot like that fellow Dicey. Aunt Martha would see to that. After all, Aunt Martha is a sensible woman.'

‘ Though somewhat narrow-minded ? ’

‘ She can’t help that, poor thing. But Aunt Martha would never sit still and see Minnie sacrificed.’

‘ Quite true. She would not. You shall hear what she has to say about it.’

Again the Messenger gently touched Horace on the forehead.

CHAPTER XII

AUNT MARTHA'S OPINION

ANOTHER part of Mrs Clarence's house, a snug sitting-room, close to where refreshments were being served to the evening's guests. Horace had entered alone; though he had no idea why he should have come to this particular room, or how he had reached it. Outside the merry chatter of the guests mingled with the jingle of glasses and clatter of plates.

Unseen, invisible, Horace moved forward as one impelled by some strange spirit-force which dominated his will.

Sitting in two comfortable chairs were Miss Parker and her pretty young hostess Mrs Clarence. They had been eating ices, and the empty plates lay on a little table near. 'I'm so sorry Horace was not able to come with you to-night,' Mrs Clarence was saying with conventional politeness, since Mr Parker had never been a favourite of hers.

'So am I,' replied Horace's aunt severely, 'for his own sake.'

'What did you say was the matter with him?' asked Mrs Clarence. 'Influenza was it not?'

She pushed back the little table as she spoke, but, though she faced Horace himself as she did so, she did not appear to see him.

'Did I say that?' demanded Miss Parker with a sigh. 'Well, I suppose influenza is as good a name for it as any other.'

'That sounds rather as if Master Horace had been naughty.'

'My dear Kitty, I'm very much worried about him. I am indeed. Worried and anxious.'

'Why, what is the matter with him?'

'My dear, he has taken a turn for the worse,'

'I am so sorry. But what does the doctor say,—does he consider the case serious?'

'I have not sent for a doctor.'

'Not sent for a doctor! Then surely he cannot be very bad. Men are always so nervous. I am sure when I had Jack ill with lumbago—'

'My dear Kitty, the complaint Horace is suffering from is a moral not a physical one. He thinks of nothing but himself. He is quite neglecting Minnie.'

‘You don’t say so! what a shame!’

‘Yes, and I can’t bear to sit still and see Minnie sacrificed.’

‘I should think not indeed. How pretty she looks to-night. Horace is engaged to her, isn’t he?’

‘No, I am glad to say that is broken off. He has nobody to thank either but himself. Minnie’s patience was marvellous, but there are limits even to a woman’s endurance. And this evening I am glad to say she shewed her good sense and courage by giving him his congé.’

Mrs Clarenee smiled.

‘So *that* is why he could not come to-night,’ she murmured. ‘Ah! influenza has a lot to answer for. You’ll excuse me one moment, won’t you?’

She rose as she spoke, hurrying off to speak to some of her other guests, leaving Miss Parker alone.

Horace watched her as she sat, apparently lost in some reverie of other days, he longed to speak to her, to demand what she meant by her unwarrantable accusations against him for selfishness. *He* selfish! He—the most martyred of mankind. Raising his eyes he saw before him the mysterious Messenger who haunted and persecuted him so persistently. The sight of that lofty and serene countenance inspired further

irritation. He would not shew this nonsensical fellow that he was chagrined by what he had overheard.

'The conversation did not interest me in the least,' he observed.

'Your friends do not seem to have a very high opinion of you, do they?' replied the Martian.

'I don't care two straws for their opinion.'

'You surely value the praise of your fellow-men?'

'Of my fellow-men—yes; but not such creatures as these. Men of the world, men of business, hard-headed men of science. Ask *them* their opinion of me, and I'll venture to think they'll speak of me with respect, and very possibly admiration.'

'There is evidently someone who holds you in high esteem.'

'Certainly there is.'

'Ah, but we have not finished with Minnie yet,—nor with Aunt Martha. Listen.'

He pointed as he spoke to where Arthur Dicey approached Miss Parker's chair with Minnie beside him.

'I have brought Minnie back to you, Miss Parker,' he said, then, with a lingering look of affection at his companion, he bowed and left the room.

Minnie seated herself in Mrs Clarence's vacated chair, sighing a little as she leant forward, her chin resting on her hand.

'Are you tired, dear?' asked Miss Parker kindly.

'No Auntie, not a bit.'

'Then why are you not dancing?'

Minnie flushed, drawing her chair nearer to her Aunt's side.

'Because I want to have a little talk with you,' she answered softly.

'With *me*, you silly child? Why, you can talk to me all day long. Don't you think you are wasting time?'

'But I have something to say to you—something particular. Oh, Auntie, I hope you won't be vexed?'

'No, dear. Of course I shan't be vexed.'

'I don't think I *can* tell you.'

'Yes, do, dear.'

'Then let me whisper—close to your ear.'

She knelt now by Miss Parker's side, her bright, girlish face all crimson with blushes, close to the spinster's faded cheek.

Aunt Martha was smiling as she listened, and when the tale was told she kissed the speaker tenderly.

'My dear! You really mean it! I am

very, very glad. He is charming—quite charming.'

Horace turned to the Messenger.

It was his turn to triumph now.

'*Me!*' he observed, pointing to himself. 'You hear her? I am quite charming.'

But the Messenger's gaze was fixed on the two women seated near the flower-decked hearth.

'You know,' Minnie was saying, as she perched herself on the side of her Aunt's chair, 'I never really cared for Horace.'

Miss Parker nodded.

'It was a mistake,' she said, 'a very great mistake as I said all along. Horace never cared for you—as you deserved to be loved, my dear little girl. In fact, there is only one person he has ever been in love with and who, I fear, will continue to be his only love to the end of the chapter—himself.'

'I know that now. I was giving everything. He was giving nothing.'

'That's the way with the men, my dear,' replied Miss Parker with spinster wisdom. 'They expect that. They are all alike.'

It is a peculiarity of old maids that they always speak as though they must have had at least a dozen husbands, from their intimate knowledge of the sex.

But Minnie refused to permit so sweeping an assertion.

‘Oh, not *all*, Auntie. There’s Arthur.’

‘Of course. Arthur is the exception, at least I hope he is.’

‘Of course he is. How dare you doubt him, Auntie, darling? Arthur is very very different from Horace.’

‘I should hope he was,’ muttered the invisible Mr Parker, who was well nigh choking with suppressed choler. ‘I should just hope he *was*. And you’ll find out the difference soon, my young lady.’

‘You have had a very narrow escape,’ observed Aunt Martha, sententiously. ‘I am thankful to think you have found out your mistake in time. Of course, Arthur is a good man. I feel sure of that. As for Horace, he is a *pig*.’

She emphasized the last word with surprising energy for so charitable and kind-hearted a woman.

Even Minnie seemed a trifle shocked. ‘Oh, Auntie, don’t say that,’ she pleaded. ‘He—he may not be so bad after all.’

‘A pig,’ declared Miss Parker, evidently so pleased with her summing up that she wished to repeat it.

‘I do say it. I will say it. It describes him so exactly. Horace is a pig.’

She rose as she spoke. 'There, dear,' she added, 'that is quite enough of an unpleasant subject. I want to find your Arthur now, and congratulate him on having won the dearest little sweetheart in the world.'

They passed out of the room together.

CHAPTER XIII

A STREET ACCIDENT

‘WELL?’ said the Messenger, quietly, ‘as you observed, Aunt Martha is a sensible woman after all.’

They were standing together in their old place out in the street. The snow had ceased to fall, but to Horace the cold seemed more piercingly bitter than ever.

‘She is a perfect fool!’ he cried, pacing rapidly to and fro in the vain attempt to keep his feet warm. ‘That is what *she* is. Women are all alike; mean and selfish, sly and narrow-minded; oh, fearfully, fearfully narrow-minded. I’m jolly well out of it, and jolly glad to be so jolly well out of it. One thing I know, I’ll never speak to another woman again as long as I live. So much for your teaching and proving, my friend. I assure you I am most grateful, most sincerely grateful.’

‘Ah,’ replied the Messenger, sadly. ‘You are still devoted to self, and that in spite of the opinion of your friends.’

'It strikes me,' said Mr Parker, emphatically, 'you are talking about a very great deal of what you don't understand. It seems to me there's a lot of guess work about you altogether, and, what is more, you are making some uncommonly bad shots.'

'Go on,' was the tranquil rejoinder, as Horace paused to take breath.

'I *am* going on. You've pitched on me as an example of selfishness. Now I am not selfish. It's the other people who are selfish—not I.'

'Sublime conceit!' replied the Messenger raising his head with a gesture of weary despair.

On the other side of the deserted Square came the sound of childish voices singing a Christmas carol.

Sweet and clear rang out the words of the time honoured melody on the cold night air :

Good King Wenceslaus looked out
On the feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay round about
Deep and crisp and even ;
Brightly shone the moon that night,
Though the frost was cruel,
When a poor man came in sight,
Gath'ring winter fuel.
'Hither, page, O stand by me,
If thou know'st it telling
Yonder peasant who is he?
Where and what his dwelling ?'

But neither the sweet voices of the singers nor the message of Christmas love and charity appealed to Horace Parker. He was cold, angry, impatient of everything and everybody at that moment.

'My goodness,' he growled, 'there are the Waits. Where's a policeman? I'll have them moved on!'

'Why?'

'*Why!* Listen to them! That's why.'

'They are singing for charity; what they receive they give away.'

'Nonsense! I know better than that. They are singing because they like it.'

'They are singing to help others.'

'Well, they are making a jolly row about it.'

'Have *you* ever done anything for others?'

'For others? That depends on what you mean. What I do is to fill my place in the framework of Society. Society has hit upon a new principle—the Division of Labour. Everybody can't do everything. One person does one thing and one another. I happen to be intellectual, so I study science. Aunt Martha happens to be almost entirely without brains, so the poor thing can only talk scandal. Minnie goes to a ball and flirts. It's all beautifully arranged. Some people go to business, some write books, some attend to charities.'

'Go on with your list. Some people do the eating, some do the starving. Oh yes, it is beautifully arranged.'

Horace shrugged his shoulders. Whenever he really began to get impressive and eloquent this fool of a Martian was sure to catch him up with some such ridiculous twaddle as this. He had no patience with the fellow!

More than ever he longed to escape from the nightmare of this midnight walk, but, as he turned his head in the direction of the main road which ran along the bottom of the Square, a shriek was heard followed by shouts, cries, and all that sudden hubbub which attends the happening of some accident.

'What is that?' asked the Messenger significantly.

'Accident, I suppose?' replied Mr Parker carelessly. 'May as well go and see.'

He crossed the road and walked briskly down towards the spot from whence the noise proceeded. The Messenger followed him.

A crowd had gathered in the path. Horace pushed his way forward between the ranks of bystanders, and after a brief glance at the little group bending over something which lay in a huddled heap in the centre, stepped back to the side of the Martian.

‘Yes, man run over,’ he said briefly. ‘Silly ass to get in the way. Drunk probably.’

He thrust his hands into the pockets of his fur-lined coat and, turning his back on the crowd, moved back up the Square.

‘Can’t you help?’ asked the deep, melodious voice he had already grown to dread.

‘Certainly not,’ he snapped, ‘there’s a crowd round him already. It’s all right. They’ll take him to the hospital.’

‘Surely you might give some assistance.’

‘No, no. I should only be in the way. I’m not a first-aid man myself. The police will attend to it. It’s their business, and I don’t believe in interfering in what is no concern of mine at all. Oh, confound it though! They’re bringing him up this way.’

It was true.

A group of shabbily dressed men and women, followed by several newsboys and the customary loafers who always go to swell the ranks of a crowd were coming slowly up the street bearing the helpless figure of a man between them.

But the deep fall of snow, the dead weight on their arms, unaccustomed to the science of carrying, above all the groans of the poor sufferer himself, made his bearers stumble and stagger, halting at last almost opposite to where Horace

Parker stood on the steps of a house so as to avoid contact with the passers-by.

‘Put him down,’ suggested one of the crowd, —a coster by his dress, with a kindly, weather-hardened face.

A groan echoed the words, bursting from the twisted lips of the injured man.

‘Yes, set me down,’ he panted. ‘Set me down for mercy’s sake.’

His glazed eyes, roving wildly around, encountered for a moment the contemptuous glance of Horace Parker.

‘We can’t put him down in the snow,’ retorted the man who held the sufferer under the arms, supporting his head and shoulders. ‘Lend a coat, someone.’

‘Lend yours,’ said the Messenger in Horace’s ear.

‘Mine!’ cried the latter, starting back. ‘No, I can’t. This coat cost fifty pounds.’

‘Take it off.’

Slowly, very slowly and reluctantly, Mr Parker prepared to obey. So deliberate indeed were his movements that the first button had scarcely been unfastened before another coat, thin and threadbare, was flung hastily down in the snow. ‘Here’s mine,’ cried the donor, a blue-lipped youth who stood shivering now in his shirt sleeves, ‘take it and welcome.’

With a sigh of relief Horace re-fastened the top button of his own fur-lined and costly coat. 'There's no need now,' he explained to the Messenger whose face had grown yet sadder and sterner as he watched him.

'Gently,' cried the bearer as he helped to lower his groaning burden upon the coat, 'gently does it, mates.'

The injured man gave a sigh of relief as he was carefully laid down on his comfortless resting-place. 'Where's Polly?' he asked faintly. 'Polly—that's my missus you know. She was with me when it 'appened.'

A young woman, poorly but respectably dressed, came and knelt down by his side. She had been weeping wildly before, but now, seeing her husband's need, she restrained her own grief, even essaying a pitiful little smile as she bent over him.

The lamp-light flared down on the scene—a common enough one for London, yet not lacking in pathos for those who had eyes to see it.

The group of rough but kindly hearted sympathisers all ready to do their poor best for their fellow-creature—stranger though he was—the poor little tatterdemalions of newsboys, pushing and edging in morbid curiosity to see the 'cove that was hurt,' and then the injured man himself, lying there on the thin coat of

some poor Samaritan, his eyes fixed yearningly on the woman at his side. Poor Polly! She might have been a pretty enough lass once, but the tale of hard times and days of want were written on a face which should have been still in the full bloom of early womanhood. Under her shabby hat one could see the untidy coils of ruddy hair lying loose about her neck and straggling down her back. But though the tears were wet on the careworn cheeks she smiled—an heroic smile.

‘Here I am, Jim,’ she cried bravely, taking his cold hand in hers. ‘Here I am, dear.’

His lips, all twisted by pain, quivered now in irrepressible grief. ‘Oh Polly! What will become of you—and the children?’

‘Never mind me, Jim. Never mind me. We—we’ll get on somehow. Don’t you worry, dear.’

She was pillowing his head against her breast as she spoke, bending to kiss the pale forehead where the dews of suffering were gathered so thickly.

‘Here is your opportunity,’ said the Messenger, and his voice was almost harsh in its stern command. ‘You can help them.’

Mr Parker edged away as far as he could from the speaker. He had been regarding the little drama with impatience and distaste. People of

their condition should not be allowed to block up public thoroughfares in this way, he considered, besides being a complete nuisance to passers-by.

‘Help them,’ reiterated the Messenger.

‘I assure you, I should not be justified,’ retorted Horace coldly. ‘This sort of thing is all properly provided for. Of course you cannot be expected to understand, coming as you have done from another sphere where it is evident things are not conducted on business principles. But I assure you it is all right.’

Rapid steps were heard approaching at this moment, and a gentleman wrapped in a heavy overcoat, the collar drawn up closely round his ears hurried towards the spot.

‘Here’s the doctor,’ cried the coster eagerly. ‘It’s Doctor Chapman,’—this last in a tone of intense satisfaction.

‘It was the driver’s fault, sir,’ cried another, as the doctor went straight to the injured man’s side, kneeling down in the snow and taking his wrist between forefinger and thumb. ‘I see it all. They ought to have copped him—that they ought, scorchin’ along as he was. It’s allus one of those taxi fellows—’

He broke off, seeing the doctor’s attention was being given solely to his patient. Jim lay back, his head still resting on his wife’s breast as she crouched behind him heedless of

her own cramped and painful position, but his eyes were closed now, his face deathly in its pallor.

‘Poor fellow,’ said Dr Chapman pityingly. ‘Poor fellow. I am afraid I can do little for him here. He ought to be moved to the hospital at once; where’s the ambulance?’

‘The police have gone to fetch it, sir.’

At the mention of the word ‘hospital’ Jim had unclosed his eyes and looked up into his wife’s face.

‘Oh Polly, Polly,’ he moaned. ‘What’s to come of you an’ the kids? How’s all you goin’ to live till I’m about again. An’ this bitter weather with little Alfie ill too—an’ no money for the rent—’

‘Don’t you take on, Jim,’ cried Polly bravely, ‘We’ll pull through somehow. Summat’ll turn up—it allus does. Don’t you fret about us. It’s you I’m thinkin’ of.’

More than one rough hand was brushed hastily across eyes where tears of ready sympathy glistened. But Mr Horace Parker was not in the least touched by the pathos of this roadside tragedy. He did not in the least care how Polly and her children were going to live during the long weeks whilst the breadwinner of the family was away, but he did care very greatly that he was being kept out here

in the cold and snow to witness the scene of their misfortunes.

‘Help them,’ said the Messenger gravely.

‘I can’t. I have nothing but notes.’

‘Give them to her.’

‘What? You don’t understand, I have nothing less than a tenner. *A ten pound note!*’

‘Give all that you have.’

Mr Parker stared, completely nonplussed at the extravagant folly of such a command.

‘All that I have?’ he queried. ‘Absurd! I can’t. I won’t.’

‘How much have you?’

Horace slipped his hand into his pocket and took out a small, red morocco pocket-book which he very slowly opened and began to count.

He was usually a quick arithmetician—but to-night he was as slow as a child who learns its addition for the first time. He hoped that in the meantime the ambulance would arrive and these tiresome people would go. Had not extra deliberation saved him his coat?

But no amount of hesitance would save him now.

‘Fifty—and twenty—and ten. Let me see. Eighty pounds in all,’ he said reluctantly.

‘Give them to her.’

There was neither pity nor yielding in those inexorable tones. Yet Mr Parker still held back. This act of folly surpassed all others that this ridiculous Messenger from Mars had insisted upon.

‘I don’t mind giving her the tenner,’ he said grudgingly.

‘Give them all; she will need them.’

‘Suppose—er—suppose I give her fifty.’

‘Give them all.’

‘You don’t understand. In Mars it might be all right, but on Earth we consider that indiscriminate charity is the most utter rot—I mean unpardonable *selfishness*—possible. She’ll probably drink the money away, and in consequence half murder her children.’

‘She will not. She is a good and honest woman. Give her all the money you have in that book.’

‘Mayn’t I keep the tenner, just the tenner, in case you feel thirsty?’

The Martian flung out his right arm, pointing menacingly towards the group standing in the snow near them.

‘You have a heart of stone,’ he thundered. ‘Give them all as I bid you, and be quick, or you shall lie on the ground mangled as yon poor fellow is.’

Very reluctantly, yet no longer daring to

disobey Horace descended the steps and made his way to where the woman still crouched beside her husband whilst the doctor busied himself in straightening and setting his injured leg.

‘Here,’ said Mr Parker, thrusting the little sheaf of notes into her hand. ‘It’s for you, whilst—er—your husband’s in hospital.’

He spoke jerkily as though the words were being dragged out of him, whilst not one kindly inflexion could be traced in his tones, not one spark of pity in the scowling glance he directed towards the astonished recipient of his bounty.

Luckily Polly was too confused by grief and the tension she was forcing upon herself to ‘keep smiling’ for her husband’s sake to notice the ungracious manner or harshly spoken speech.

The fact of the gift was sufficient for her, and, as she slowly unfolded the notes, staring down at them in startled amazement and wonder, a cry broke from her lips.

‘Sir!’ she stammered. ‘Sir, what do you mean? This for us? *All* for us. All this money! Why, it’s more than ever I seed in my life before. An’—an’ you mean to give it us. *Give* it us.’

The uncontrolled tears rolled down her cheeks as she spoke. She had been braver in despair

than she was in that moment of relief and gratitude. So black the future had looked as she smiled down into Jim's eyes, bidding him 'not to worry, as something would be sure to turn up.'

And now that assurance in which she had had so small faith herself was realised far, far beyond the bounds of possibility.

'For me?' she gasped. 'All that.'

She clutched the notes tightly as she spoke.

'I suppose so,' grumbled Horace. 'I mean yes, they are for you.'

He was aware that the Messenger stood on the path near him.

'Oh, sir,' cried Polly, sobbing wildly, 'you are good. God bless you, sir. I can't believe it yet, but I'll pray Heaven to bless you every day, for saving us.'

The words fell on unheeding ears.

Mr Horace Parker was in need neither of poor Polly's blessings or prayers, so he told himself angrily, as he moved away.

But the crowd had closed round him, and standing, wedged in as he was, by the burly coster, the coatless youth and a couple of ragged newsboys, he was obliged to listen to the sequel of his generosity.

Laughing through her tears Polly was bending over her husband.

'Jim! Jim!' she cried shrilly. 'Do you hear? The gentleman has given us money, fifty — twenty — ten — he's given us eighty pounds. Eighty pounds, Jim. *That'll* pay the rent and buy Alfie's medicine won't it my lad? And plenty over for many a long day after you're safe home and well again. Eighty pounds! Why, it's a fortin'. No need to worry now, be there, old man?'

She covered his forehead with kisses, still sobbing and laughing together, whilst Jim, trying to raise himself, looked towards Horace.

'God bless you, sir,' he said with earnest simplicity. 'He'll reward you!'

It was too much for the nerves of a sorely tried and dispirited egotist.

'Don't thank me. Oh, don't thank me,' groaned Mr Parker, with a sincerity which all mistook for the modesty of a genuine philanthropy.

'The gentleman's give her eighty quid!' cried the officious coster, patting Horace on the back in the excess of his admiration. 'Bravo, gov'nor!'

'Eighty quid!' grunted another stander-by. 'Gosh! Why wasn't I run over?'

'There's some good in these stuck up swells, after all,' replied a third. 'Three cheers for

the gentleman, mates! Three cheers for him, say I.'

And so said the rest, judging by the heartiness of those three cheers which went echoing up to the dark vault of the heavens above. Cheers of gratitude for the fellowship and sympathy—as they supposed in their ignorance—of a fellowman.

But Horace Parker moved away as quickly as he could, feeling no shame in accepting that which he in no wise deserved, only conscious of bitter resentment at having been forced to give what he wished to keep for himself.

The arrival of the ambulance distracted the attention of the crowd. Very carefully the injured man was raised from the ground and under the supervision of the doctor carried to the waiting conveyance.

Horace drew a deep sigh of relief when the tinkling of bells died away in the distance and the crowd, after lingering for a few moments on the pavement gradually dispersed, each going his separate way in that great city of mystery and tragedy. Polly had gone with her husband; and only one of all the the throng remained to speak to the man who had played so unexpected a part of benefactor in the little drama of life.

It was Dr Chapman, a kind-faced, middle-

aged man with that slightly harassed look which a busy practitioner so soon acquires.

'Is it a bad case, doctor?' asked Mr Parker sententiously, as Dr Chapman came slowly across the road towards him.

'Nothing worse than a broken leg,' replied the other, 'but that is bad enough, poor fellow. A most respectable, hard-working man too, I know him and his wife well. They are thrifty and deserving, though a man with a wife and four children cannot hope to save out of a pound a week. But for your generosity it would have been a terrible business for the poor woman.'

He held out his hand, gripping Horace's in an iron clasp.

'Good-night, sir,' he said with emotion. 'Let me shake you by the hand. You've done a noble action to-night. You—you're a brick, sir. Thank God! we have such men as you in England still. Good-night, sir, good-night.'

Again he wrung an unwilling hand and hurried off. He was a busy man in a large and desperately poor parish. And there would be no bed for him that night.

Horace stood staring after him with sullen fury at his heart. His fingers still tingled after that strenuous hand-shake, and the doctor's

words had roused his still further resentment. To give eighty pounds to a woman whose husband had merely broken his leg! It was preposterous. He should tell Chapman so too, when next he met him. Curious thing, by the way, that the doctor had not seemed to recognise him. Yet he had often come to his house. His Aunt Martha knew him well—was always eulogising him in fact, holding him up to her nephew as an example of a good man.

Ugh! He had had enough of good examples for a long time to come.

‘What did he say?’ demanded a voice beside him.

And Horace turned round to confront his relentless persecutor from Mars.

‘He? The doctor?’ he queried. ‘He said I was a brick. You called me a stone. There is not much difference!’

‘You have done a good action at last,’ replied the Martian gently. ‘But, alas! I fear you did it against your will.’

‘Look here!’ cried Horace, irritated beyond endurance, ‘How much, longer is this going to last? You’re simply robbing me of all I have! Eighty and one—and five shillings for the policeman. Sum total, eighty-one pounds, five shillings, since I came out with you. It is the most expensive evening I have ever had in

all my life. I've got one penny left—one solitary penny! I expect you'll have that before long.'

'Will nothing move you?' asked the Martian in tones of pitying despair. 'Will *nothing* melt your heart? A woman's cry of anguish—the contempt of your friends—a fellow creature's mortal agony—these have all failed to touch you. Then I must try even stronger measures. You shall learn pity as the poor learn it—by needing it yourself!'

CHAPTER XIV

RUIN

‘WHAT on earth are you going to do now?’ asked Mr Parker nervously. ‘I should have thought you had caused enough unpleasantness for one evening to satisfy even an inhabitant of Mars! I—I’m hanged if I’ll ever look at your dirty little planet again.’

He kicked the snow viciously as he spoke, sending a cloud of white, feathery particles high into the air.

The Messenger from Mars appeared wholly unmoved by this outburst of childish spleen. ‘See who comes here,’ he said quietly. ‘You know this gentleman, don’t you?’

Horace nodded. ‘It is Ferguson, my solicitor, what is *he* doing here? Going to the dance?’

‘Apparently so.’

The little elderly gentleman who had sprung from a taxi at the bottom of the road, came

hurrying to where they stood, and, not noticing either of them, rang the bell of Mrs Clarence's house. Whilst waiting for the footman's response he turned round, stamping first one foot then the other.

'Street's up I see,' he muttered, glancing towards the watchman's box. 'What a nuisance.'

The door was opened, and Mr Ferguson hurried in.

'I'm glad he didn't see me!' remarked Horace devoutly.

'Why?'

'Why? Confound it all! He'd have wondered what on earth I was doing out here at this time of night, and I couldn't have told him seeing I don't know myself!'

'You still do not know? I do.'

'What's that!' cried Mr Parker sharply, as the shrill tones of a newsboy's cry was heard echoing down the neighbouring street. 'Paper? Ten o'clock edition, eh?'

He started off down the road calling loudly to arrest the lad's attention. Perhaps he expected his companion to stop him, but the Martian remained standing where he was, his right hand folded across his breast, a shade of expectancy on his immobile features.

The echo of the cry drifted up through the quiet streets of the square.

‘Paper! Extra! Ten o’clock edition! Great bank failure in the City. Terrible panic. Awful losses. Paper! Paper!’

But the Messenger of Mars waited, silent, expectant, stern.

Presently Mr Parker came back. He had unfolded his paper, and hurried to the nearest street lamp to read it. He was a trifle pale but tried to appear unconcerned as he met the Messenger’s eye fixed on him.

‘Thank goodness I had that penny left!’ he remarked genially. ‘That’s the only money I’ve spent to-night for which I’ve received any value. I suppose, however, even this is a swindle. These things generally are. Oh! here it is, whatever it is. Good Heavens! Impossible!’ He staggered back, leaning for support against the lamp-post, whilst he gripped at the fluttering sheets of paper. His face was as ashen as poor Jim’s had been, and his breath came in laboured gasps.

‘What is the matter?’ asked the Messenger.

‘The United Kingdom Bank! Gone!’

‘Well, what of that?’

‘*What of that?* You don’t understand. I’m ruined. Utterly ruined!’

‘Never mind. There are thousands of people who are not. Let that console you.’

Mr Parker turned on him furiously. Had not all his misfortunes dated from the coming of this mysterious visitant from Mars?

‘You scoundrel!’ he gasped. ‘I expect this is your doing. *Yours*. Great Scott! To think of it! The United Kingdom Bank gone! It is too awful. Too awful.’

He was utterly overcome at the thought.

‘Ah,’ replied the Martian sternly. ‘You can pity yourself. When anybody else was in trouble it didn’t matter, did it? But for your own misfortunes you have quite a tender heart. I suppose your friends will be sorry, too, will they not?’

‘Sorry!’ groaned Horace. ‘They will be terribly distressed. Do you not understand? I *am ruined!*’

‘Exactly. So you have explained. But I think we had better hear what those friends of yours say.’

He laid his hand upon Horace’s brow very gently, and immediately as it seemed to the latter, the snow-covered streets, the empty square, the whole wintry scene had disappeared and he stood once more in Mrs Clarence’s house.

Waltz music reached him from afar, dreamy, inviting, alluring; warmth and comfort surrounded him. He could already have believed that his past experiences were part of some hideous nightmare, had it not been for the towering form of his remorseless guide beside him. The Messenger from Mars was still with him, but why and for what fresh torment had he brought him back to this house which he already detested?

Before him on the hearth stood Mrs Clarence herself, talking to the latest arrival amongst her guests—Mr Ferguson.

A strange guest too, thought Horace, to invite to a dance,—an old, grey headed man like that. He should have thought Ferguson too sensible a fellow as well as too busy a one to attend such a function.

‘Is Mr Parker here to-night?’ the lawyer was asking his hostess as they stood there totally unconscious of their unseen listeners.

Mrs Clarence laughed lightly in what Horace chose to call her most affected manner.

‘Oh no,’ she replied. ‘He doesn’t care for frivolities of this sort, but his aunt, Miss Parker, is here, and Minnie Templar too.’

‘I am sorry not to find Horace here. He was not at home either. Poor fellow!—I have some bad news for him.’

‘Bad news, have you really?’ questioned Mrs Clarence, seating herself. ‘Dear me! what can it be? But there!—a little adversity might improve his manners.’

‘Very likely. He has led a very selfish life. Of course everybody knows that. But this is a terrible blow. I can’t help feeling just a little sorry for him.’

‘Indeed? Oh, Mr Ferguson, how very charitable of you. What has happened?’

‘The United Kingdom Bank has gone. He is utterly ruined.’

Mrs Clarence stared, then, laying the tip of her fan lightly to her lips, burst into a peal of laughter. ‘Ruined?’ she exclaimed merrily—as though to be ruined were the best joke in the world. ‘Quite a new experience for dear Horace!’

Mr Parker gritted his teeth in impotent rage. ‘What a horrible woman!’ he thought. ‘She is simply amused.’

But he did not look towards his companion.

Meantime Mrs Clarence had quickly become grave again. ‘I do hope it will not seriously affect Miss Parker, or Minnie?’ she asked curiously.

Mr Ferguson shook his head.

‘No, I think not,’ he replied. ‘At least not seriously. They both took my advice some little

time back and reinvested their money. But Horace was pig-headed and obstinate.'

'Of course I can readily believe that—in everything.'

'He thought he knew better than men who had made that sort of thing their life study. And now he has got to take the consequence.'

'And I can't say I am sorry,' declared Mrs Clarence heartily. 'Especially as Miss Parker and my dear Minnie are all right. Ah, in good time now here comes Miss Parker herself. You had better break it to her gently, though I don't think she'll be very unhappy.'

With a slight inclination of her head to Mr Ferguson, Mrs Clarence moved away.

'You are meeting with a great deal of sympathy,' said the Messenger, and Mr Parker started from an unpleasant reverie to stare glumly at the speaker.

'It is just what I told you,' he replied bitterly, 'It is the other people who are selfish, not I. May I suggest that you take Kitty Clarence in hand. She *is* selfish, if you like.'

'Compared with you, she is an angel. But wait, we are to hear the opinion of others now, as to your misfortune.'

He pointed across to where Miss Parker had

taken her hostess's place on the hearth beside the grey-haired old lawyer.

Though both the Martian and Horace had spoken to each other quite loudly it was evident that they had been unheard as they were also unseen by the other occupants of the room.

'Good evening, Miss Parker,' said Mr Ferguson, shaking hands cordially with the lady in question. 'Mrs Clarence tells me your nephew is not here to-night. I am sorry to say I have bad news for him and in fact followed him here from his own house from which he was absent.'

'I think,' said Miss Parker with asperity, 'that there was some mistake about that latter fact. Probably Horace, with his innate selfishness, made the servant tell a lie and say he was from home simply because he did not wish to be disturbed. We left him reading in the library and he told us that under *no* consideration would he go out again this evening, he was far too interested I believe in studying a paper relating to the habitation of Mars. He is most anxious to convince himself that there is Life upon that planet.'

Horace groaned.

His anxiety in this direction was apparently more than satisfied.

‘And what is your important—or did you say bad news, Mr Ferguson?’ continued the spinster. ‘I fear my nephew will not be welcoming our return this evening as we too have news for him which he will probably find distasteful.’

‘The United Kingdom Bank has failed,’ replied the lawyer gravely.

Miss Parker gave vent to a startled cry.

‘You don’t say so,’ she gasped, ‘The United Kingdom Bank.’

‘I am so glad,’ he said kindly, ‘you and Miss Templer both took my advice about your investment.’

Tears came into the old lady’s eyes, ‘Oh, Mr Ferguson,’ she cried, ‘how can I ever thank you properly? Then *my* money is quite safe?’

‘Perfectly?’

‘And Minnie’s?’

‘Yes, quite.’

‘What a relief!’

‘What infernal selfishness,’ muttered her unseen nephew shaking his clenched fist in her direction.

‘And poor Horace!’ continued Miss Parker, after a pause, ‘what about him?’

‘I am afraid he is utterly ruined.’

‘Surely it is not as bad as that, is it? He only had a few thousands in the Bank.’

‘Ah, but that is just what I tried to explain to you before, The United Kingdom is an unlimited concern.’

‘Unlimited? You mean?—’

‘There is no limit to his liability! He’ll have to go on paying up call after call to the creditors until every farthing that he has is gone. He cannot escape. He is a ruined man!’

But already Miss Parker was recovering from the shock of the news and able to bear with becoming equanimity the thought of her nephew’s destitute state. It is always comparatively easy to moralise over the misfortunes of others.

‘Well then,’ she replied cheerfully, ‘he will have to work. A little adversity will do him good.’

Just the very words Mrs Clarence had used! Was there no sympathy, no pity for him? thought Horace with growing bitterness in his heart.

‘It is very brave of you, to face your trouble in this way,’ were Mr Ferguson’s parting words to his client as he bade her good-night.

‘Damn it!’ muttered Horace, the sweat breaking out in great drops on his forehead, ‘It is *my* trouble she is facing,—not hers.’

And he glowered vengefully towards his aunt, who leaned back comfortably in her chair, with closed eyes, enjoying the warmth of the fire which blazed on the hearth near, since this was Mr Clarence's little sanctum and not thrown open to his wife's guests of the evening.

'What a good thing Minnie broke off her engagement when she did,' mused Miss Parker drowsily. 'Lucky girl. She was only just in time. Well, I suppose now I have had my interview with Mr Ferguson I had better join the others. I don't think I shall tell Minnie till we are on our way home. I don't want to bring the shadow of a cloud to mar the happiness of this evening. Dear child! how very much in love she is;—and Arthur is a good man.'

She rose as she spoke, blinking a little and trying to suppress a slight yawn, though she would not for the world have confessed to sleepiness. But, before she could reach the door it was flung open rather abruptly and Arthur Dicey and Minnie entered.

It was evident that they had heard the news, for Minnie looked pale and startled whilst young Dicey's manner was excited and perhaps incredulous.

'Say, Miss Parker,' he burst out, 'have you heard the news?'

'About Horace? Yes, Mr Ferguson has just told me.'

'Poor Horace,' said Minnie pityingly. 'I am so sorry for him. What will he do?'

Horace glanced in triumph at the Messenger. 'There's Minnie!' he said defiantly, 'She's true—she's true after all.'

But the Messenger was looking at Minnie and did not reply.

'What will he do?' asked Miss Parker sharply. 'Why, work, I suppose—like other people.'

'But he can't, poor boy,' cried Minnie, clasping her hands. 'He doesn't know anything.'

The Messenger raised his eyes to meet Horace's glance,—his own expression was significant.

As for Horace he was speechless.

'What on earth does she mean?' he muttered to himself, 'Not *know* anything indeed!'

'Well, dear,' Aunt Martha was saying, 'he is rather a fool, of course, but there are lots of fools who manage to earn their own living. And I see no reason why Horace should not earn his like the rest.'

'It is quite evident,' explained Horace for the

benefit of the Martian, 'that these people are not capable of recognising brain when they meet it.'

Minnie had slipped her hand within Dicey's arm. 'You'll help him, won't you, Arthur dear?' she asked.

Mr Dicey hesitated.

'Well, I don't know,' he replied, doubtfully. 'Mr Horace Parker hasn't made himself particularly pleasant to me.'

'But Arthur—for *my* sake—please?'

The young man smiled, patting the little hand which rested so confidently on his arm. 'That's enough,' he said, gaily. 'Your slightest wish is law to me, Minnie. I'll get him a berth with some friends of mine in the City. They'll take him on as clerk to oblige me. But he'll have to learn type-writing.'

'I'm damned if I do,' growled the listener, beneath his breath.

Minnie, however, was thanking Mr Dicey rapturously for so munificent a promise.

'Oh, Arthur, you're a darling,' she cried. 'That will be splendid. And oh! how pleased poor Horace will be.'

She raised her face towards her lover's as she spoke. 'I thank you again and again,' she whispered.

But Horace had turned away. How could he

endure seeing Minnie offer such thanks for such a gift to 'poor Horace?'

Poor Horace, indeed! Was nothing left to him? nothing?

He fell to cursing in his despair.

CHAPTER XV

THE LAST STRAW

‘WHY do you persist in torturing me? How much longer is this *experiment* of yours to continue? I warn you that you will never attain your purpose. Having ruined me, can you not leave me; broken, hopeless, and forsaken that I am?’

‘It is only your pride that is hurt,’ replied the Messenger, quietly. ‘Your heart is as hard as ever.’

Mr Parker groaned, whilst with head sunk on his breast, and hands deeply buried in his pockets he paced to and fro over the trampled snow.

There, on the path before him, lay a bunch of withered violets. He kicked them fiercely away. Was it only an hour or so since that a girl had come begging for a few shillings to keep her from starving? An hour or so ago! An eternity more like, as he

gloomily reviewed the happenings of that fateful night.

Then he had turned from a fellow creature's piteous appeal. How long would it be before he was in a similar case?

But he steeled himself against pity, and bade despair keep back from his side. He was *not* hopeless after all, and would yet fling his defiance at yonder grim shape who in some occult fashion was answerable for all the calamities that had befallen him.

'I am not beaten yet, if that's what you think,' he cried, scornfully. 'I may be ruined financially, but I've got pages and pages of notes at home that I've been taking the last twelve months.'

'About what?'

'Why, about the planets, and about Mars in particular. And, with all the information you've been kind enough to give me this evening, I'll write a book that will make the public fairly sit up. They won't believe it. But they'll buy the book. You can't knock an Englishman out in one round.'

The Messenger did not respond to the challenge, he had raised his head and appeared to be listening to some far-off sound.

It was moonlight now, the snow had ceased to fall, overhead the stars shone too. Seen in

that white translucent light, with the greenish halo surrounding him, the semblance to some fabled god from Olympic heights was more than ever apparent in this mysterious visitor from Mars.

‘What is that?’ he asked, alluding to a sound of bells coming gradually nearer and more distinct, accompanied too by the noise of galloping hoofs and rattling chains.

‘That?’ questioned Horace, carelessly. ‘Oh, only a fire engine. There’s a fire somewhere, I suppose.’

‘A fire! Can’t you do something to help?’

Mr Parker laughed. These constant suggestions of mixing himself up in the affairs of others were becoming very tedious.

‘How absurd you are!’ he scoffed. ‘The firemen will attend to it. That’s what they are made for. You can’t expect me to bother about it. It is not my business.’

‘In Mars,’ responded the Messenger. ‘We do not mind our own business.’

‘No,’ said Horace, sarcastically. ‘I can *quite* believe that.’

Again that clear tinkling of bells, rattling of chains and galloping hoofs could be heard.

‘Listen,’ went on the Martian, ‘Another fire engine. It must be something serious.’

‘We shall see all about it in the papers tomorrow. Now please may I go home?’

‘Not yet. See, who is this who comes down the steps of your friend Mrs Clarence’s house? Your solicitor, is it not? And who accompanies him?’

Horace drew back close to the shelter of the watchman’s hut.

‘That?’ he queried, watching the taller of the two gentlemen who passed by on the opposite side of the pavement. ‘Why, that’s Sir Edward Vivian, the great astronomer.’

‘Do you know him?’ asked the Martian curiously.

‘I know of him,’ replied Mr Parker, enigmatically. ‘And he knows me. In fact, he has a very high opinion of me. He told a friend of mine last year, that I was the coming man.’

‘Ah, then it will be interesting to hear what he says. Come, let us follow them and listen to their conversation; without doubt it will concern you seeing what has just happened.’

Horace hung back. ‘I could not take the risk of his seeing me,’ he said. ‘You do not understand, it would be considered a despicable thing to do to follow a friend for the purpose of overhearing his opinion of one.’

'Strange,' mused the Martian. 'Yet, you inhabitants of the Earth think nothing of robbing both friends and acquaintances of their characters behind their backs. However, do not fear to follow. They will not see us. Come.'

He waved his right hand commandingly in the direction taken by the quickly disappearing figures and, reluctant though he was, Horace obeyed his injunction.

'At least,' he muttered as he hurried along, 'I shall now be able to convince him that there *are* people,—and those who are numbered amongst the greatest intellects in the land—who hold me in respect and esteem.'

Already he and the Messenger had reached the side of the two gentlemen who were walking briskly along down the Square towards the main thoroughfare.

'It is a very sad thing, indeed,' Ferguson the lawyer was saying, 'Mr Parker is a client of mine. He refused to take my advice when I offered it some time ago, so he's ruined.'

'Poor young man,' Sir Edward Vivian replied. 'I am sorry for him.'

'I am sure I do not know what he will do,' went on Ferguson pityingly, 'unless he can

turn his scientific abilities to some good purpose.'

'I am afraid he cannot do that,' said the great astronomer, with quiet conviction, and poor Horace felt his heart leap at the unexpected words.

'Why?' asked Ferguson in surprise.

It was the very question which the unseen listener himself wished to put, whilst he waited breathlessly for the reply.

'Because,' replied Sir Edward, with a scarcely perceptible shrug of his shoulders. 'He has none.'

'You surprise me,' cried the lawyer in genuine perplexity. 'I understood——'

Sir Edward laid his hand on the other's shoulder. 'My dear sir,' he explained, 'his science is all fudge. Very praiseworthy in a wealthy man, of course. That sort of thing has to be encouraged amongst the rich, it is good for trade. But as far as any practical value—why! the thing is simply absurd.'

'Poor Parker,' murmured Mr Ferguson. 'This will be a terrible blow to him.'

He little dreamt how true a prophet he was at that very moment.

'I may give you one instance,' continued Sir Edward confidentially. 'He has some fantastical idea about life on the planet Mars. Now, all

scientific men of any standing are quite agreed on this point. There is no such thing as life on the planet Mars.'

Horace stopped short. He had heard enough, and already the great astronomer and his companion had crossed the street before them and hailed a belated taxi.

Horace looked wistfully at the vehicle, then back at his inexorable mentor. He could not escape—even if another taxi were in sight—which it wasn't——

Slowly therefore he re-traced his steps. The Messenger seemed bent on continuing his 'lesson' outside the house of that detestable Mrs Clarence.

Horace could have found a yet stronger adjective to apply to the latter lady. As to her house he never wished to see it again after to-night. The very bricks of which it was composed seemed to mock him and his own impotence.

'And this,' quoth the Messenger ironically, 'is your science?'

'Not mine,—his,' retorted Horace, trying to regain some of his lost self-confidence. 'At any rate we know *who* was right about Mars. Eh? If the scientists had been correct about there being no life on your amiable planet, I should have been snug and comfortable at home,

enjoying my paper without a care in the world. Heigho! I wish to goodness they *had* been right for once.'

'Who comes here?' asked the Martian, pointing to where a woman, a cloak flung over her dress and white apron, came stumbling hastily along through the snow, her breath coming in the gasping sobs of one who has been running fast. 'It is your servant, is it not?'

Horace looked. Yes, it certainly was Bella, though he had some little difficulty at first in recognising the usually bright and smiling face of the little maid, so drawn and fear-stricken did it seem.

'What can *she* want?' he ejaculated in some anxiety.

The girl had run up the steps of Mrs Clarence's house, and pealed at the bell. From where he stood Horace could hear her panting breath and the sobs which from time to time broke from her lips.

What could be the matter?

He was soon to hear.

A footman had opened the door and Bella stepped inside. 'Is Mr Parker here?' Horace heard her ask.

The man shook his head.

'Mr 'Orace Parker? No—he's not.'

‘Miss Parker, then,’ cried the frightened girl.
‘Quick! Tell her the house is on fire.’

The footman made a movement to close the door.

‘Come in, please,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell Mrs Clarence.’

CHAPTER XVI

DESPAIR

THE door was closed. But not before Horace Parker had heard and understood the import of his servant's words.

'The house is on fire,' he echoed in dazed fashion.

Stretching out his hands with the groping movement of one who does not see. '*My* house is on fire. Did you hear?'

'Never mind,' replied the messenger slowly. 'The firemen will attend to it. You will see all about it in the papers to-morrow.'

'My house is on fire,' repeated Horace wildly. 'Let me go.'

'Oh, no,' was the calm reply. 'You would only be in the way. By the by, it is insured, of course?'

'Curse you!' cried the unhappy scientist. 'It is none of it insured—no, not for a farthing. And all my papers will be destroyed. I'm done.'

I'm beaten. Kill me outright, fiend that you are. It would be a kindness.'

'Kill you?' echoed the Messenger. 'Oh, no! Think of your complicated society and its wonderful organisation. Think of your division of labour. It is so beautifully arranged. Come! do not despair — you, a man, strong, young, active. See how your aunt, a weak woman whom you half despise, receives the news of the disaster.'

He flung out his hand towards the house before them and Horace was aware of the fact that his aunt stood in the room facing out into the street where he himself stood shivering in the bitter cold of that winter's night.

How calm and smiling she looked, as though indeed this dreary world were full of the peace and goodwill of which those foolish carollers had sung. Her nephew shuddered, drawing his thick coat closer around his shivering limbs, whilst, against his will, he listened to what passed in the warmth and comfort within that cosy room. Suddenly a disturbing element had broken upon the serenity of his aunt's placid conversation with some acquaintance he did not recognise, and Mrs Clarence, white-cheeked and perturbed, hurried in.

'Oh, Miss Parker, dear,' she cried. 'Such terrible news! Your house is on fire.'

Horace looked towards the figure in its immaculate black gown. *Now* aunt Martha would suffer as he had suffered—he was glad of it.’

Yet how quietly she rose, pushing back her seat, showing no symptom of the hysterical terror he had expected.

‘On fire, Kitty?’ she asked briskly. ‘How do you know?’

‘Your servant is here—she has brought the news. She says the house is completely gutted.’

Even at these dreadful tidings Miss Parker showed no violent emotion.

‘Where is Minnie?’ she questioned, moving towards the door, ‘we must go at once.’

Mrs Clarence tried to detain her.

‘But you cannot do any good,’ she urged. ‘Won’t you stay here?’

‘Thank you ever so much, dear; but one can always do something on these occasions, and I must see if the servants are all safe.’

‘But come back here! I can easily put you up and shall be so delighted to do so. Your servants too, poor things. What a terrible time they must have had. Now you must promise to return. I shall be so glad if I can do anything to help.’

The door opened, and Minnie, rather pale and startled, but quite collected, ran in.

'Auntie,' she cried. 'I came as soon as I heard. *Poor* Bella, she is in the hall, and so dreadfully upset.'

'Thank you so much for all your kindness, Kitty dear,' said Miss Parker, kissing her young hostess. 'Now Minnie, we have not a moment to lose! Quick.'

The light seemed to fade—those outside in the street could see no more.

In the distance, as though in very mockery of his agony, Horace could hear the glad voices of the carol singers :

'Bring me flesh, and bring me wine,
Bring me pine-logs hither ;
Thou and I will see him dine,
When we bear them thither.'

'Everything gone!' groaned Horace. 'Everything!' His chin sank on his breast, his attitude was one of despair.

'Where is your pluck?' asked the Messenger sternly. 'Aunt Martha has ten times the courage that you possess.'

'Don't speak to me,' cried his victim bitterly. 'What will become of me?'

For a long moment the Messenger stood gazing at him, his piercing glance seeming to read deep down into the other's inner consciousness.

This Horace Parker might be ruined, disillusioned, despairing, ready to curse the hour of his birth and to inveigh against the harsh decrees of Fate—but his heart was untouched, his sole thought for himself and his own grievances.

Was it then impossible to teach that lesson of Otherdom to such an one?

‘What will become of you?’ cried the Messenger, his wonderful voice ringing in clear, denunciatory tones. ‘I will tell you. You shall henceforth know what it is to have to beg—you shall learn what it means to tramp the streets in the perishing cold of a winter’s night. An outcast! A pauper! Stand forth, poor shivering wretch; a beggar—and in rags.’

Horace staggered back, a low cry of horror breaking from him.

Round the corner of the square came a piercing blast of easterly wind, tossing the light particles of frozen snow so that they spun round in shroud-like eddies, it struck the man too, who stood ankle-deep in snow in the centre of the road. Ankle-deep, because his broken boots were heel-less, almost soleless. He shivered, drawing his thin and tattered rags around him. Rags? Ah! where was the fur-lined coat which had cost fifty pounds? Where were the warm muffler and thick suit

he had been wearing? He had been cold, even in those many wraps and comfortable garments—and now he had only rags. Only rags! Standing there, bareheaded and shivering, Horace began to realise the awful truth.

He was a beggar—and hungry too.

A hungry beggar, ragged, cold and penniless in the streets of one of the greatest and wealthiest cities of the world, where, only a few hours ago, he had himself been one of its wealthiest citizens.

And now—

The carol singers had ceased to sing, within the house near the music had stopped. The only sound was the soft thud, thud of snow as great lumps of it slid from the tiles of the houses and fell to the ground.

‘I am starving,’ muttered Horace Parker.

But there was no one to answer, no one to heed—or care.

Of what concern to the warm and comfort-loving dwellers in those houses near could it possibly be that a man in thin and tattered garments wandered homeless and starving in the streets? Certainly the organisation of Society was beautifully arranged—for them. So beautifully arranged.

CHAPTER XVII

A STRANGE 'MATE'

It does not take one long to realise such plain and forceful facts as hunger and cold. Horace Parker, for the first time in his life, had taken full cognizance of these painful truths as he paced for the twentieth time—as it seemed to him—back along the pavement of the Square.

Now, for the first time, he was to encounter a fellow creature, not a very distinguished one indeed, but apparently a companion in misfortune who came limping along, footsore and weary, beating his arms across his chest in the hope of creating some small degree of warmth.

With a strange thrill at his heart Horace recognised the tramp who, after walking from Coventry in the hope of a job, he had himself turned from his doors earlier in the evening.

That same evening too. What a mockery that reflection was. It might have been twenty years instead of a few short hours. Was it indeed *possible* that it was only this evening that he had come home, intent on reading that article in the *Astronomer* by the snug comfort of his fireside?

Comfort! Fireside! The irony of the words stung him. Could he *ever* have been that Horace Parker who had never known the meaning of cold and hunger?

A gleam of green light fell athwart the snow, and he shuddered.

The Messenger from Mars was still there, watching his despairing pupil.

But Horace was too heart-sick to curse now; he only wanted to be warm, and less hungry. The tramp came shuffling along, with head bent, his whole bearing that of a very weary man. What wonder? Had he not walked from Coventry?

Horace felt a sudden vague stab of remorse. After all he need not have turned the poor devil out to freeze on such a night—such a night!

The tramp raised his head, he did not see the gleaming figure of the Martian, but his eyes became fixed on Horace's face.

But he did not seem to recognize him. Was it likely?

‘Know anything?’ asked the tramp, coughing fitfully, as he came to a halt opposite Horace.

‘Nothing. But I’m hungry. Are you?’

It seemed to Horace that the thought of that hunger was paramount, transcending everything; he had never been hungry before.

The other began fumbling in the pocket of his shabby coat.

‘Hungry, are you?’ he queried, ‘Here, I’ve got a biscuit left.’

And he held out one of the very biscuits which Horace had given him.

It was a gift not to be despised, yet as Horace stretched out eagerly to receive it a hand came swiftly between and took the biscuit from the donor.

It was the Messenger.

With a groan Horace fell back. The loss of that biscuit seemed to break his spirit more completely than the loss of his fortune had done.

But the tramp, never suspecting the miscarriage of his gift, went garrulously on.

‘It was given to me by a swell to-night,’ he said. ‘A real tip-topper who let me have a good pull at the whiskey too. I think it amused him to see the likes of me could drink—and eat. But that sort of chap doesn’t know what hunger is.’

'Doesn't he?' asked Horace, and raised his eyes, with a defiant gesture of his head, to glance towards the Messenger.

The latter was looking at him sternly, but was it fancy to imagine that a softer look of pity even now began to dawn in the severity of those calm eyes?

'Don't know a place to doss in, do you?' asked the tramp, taking Horace familiarly by the coat sleeve.

'No.'

The other sighed.

'Tough, ain't it?' he queried.

'Yes, very.'

'Know where you can get a job in the morning?'

Horace put his hand to his throat—something seemed to be choking him, and a queer stinging sensation came to his eyes.

'Wish I did,' he replied fervently.

'There's lots of snow to shovel,' said the tramp, glancing round.

'Lots.'

'But we ain't got no shovels.'

'Worse luck.'

The tramp looked up quickly.

'What are you?' he asked, and Horace shrank back a little.

'Nothing—just a tramp,' he admitted.

'Same as me. Seen better days?'

'Yes.'

'Same as me again. Well, I likes the looks of you ; you seem a good sort anyhow.'

'Do I? You are the first that has said so to-night. I've heard nothing but—but the contrary opinion of late.'

The old man wagged his head wisely.

'Ah, I see ; you've got a wife that nags.'

'No, it isn't that. I've got no wife.'

'Same as me again. I had a wife once ; but she's dead and gone. I had a little daughter too, but I don't know what became of her. What's on here? A party?'

He jerked his thumb in the direction of Mrs Clarence's house, the door of which was opening to allow departing guests to pass out.

The road being up a short way had to be traversed on foot before the line of waiting carriages and motors could be reached.

'Going away, are they?' mused the tramp, his natural instinct for a possible job coming to the fore.

'Come on. Some of the toffs might want a cab called. Now's our chance, mate.'

He started off at a brisk hobble, but Horace drew him back.

He had seen his aunt come out of Mrs Clarence's house, with Bella beside her, whilst

Arthur Dicey and Minnie followed close behind.

'It's no use,' said Horace huskily, 'they—they've got their carriage.'

Aunt Martha was already entering Mr Dicey's conveyance which luckily headed the long procession of vehicles.

'Come along, Bella,' they could hear her calling. 'This way, quick.'

'Come along, Minnie,' echoed Dicey's voice as he offered his fiancée his arm, helping her across the slush of the pavement. 'Here we are.'

Horace felt the arm he held suddenly tremble.

'Minnie!' gasped the tramp, swaying as though a fit of giddiness threatened to overcome him. 'Did he say Minnie? Look, look, mate. There's *my* Minnie. My darling little Minnie.'

He pointed a trembling forefinger in the direction of the slender, blue-cloaked figure which Arthur Dicey was helping into the carriage.

Horace stared round in amaze.

'Where?' he asked, not realising at once the other's meaning.

'There!' cried the old man passionately, 'walking with that swell. It's Minnie. It's

my daughter. My little lost girl wot I never expected to see again. I'll swear to it. She's the living image of her mother. Come on! I've got to speak to her. My Minnie!

'No, no!' replied Horace, gripping him more firmly—and that too in spite of the other's struggles. 'Think how you will disgrace her.'

'Disgrace her!' scorned the tramp. 'What, *me*? Why! she'll be proud of her poor old father.'

'See,' urged Horace with a new-born earnestness which surprised himself, 'she has someone to care for her, someone to look after her. Don't interfere. You've forfeited your claim.'

'Not much I haven't,' was the fierce retort. 'She's in luck. Look at her. She could give me a lift, and then I'd keep you too. Come on.'

He threw the bait cunningly, but Horace only shook his head, whilst tightening his hold.

'Not if I die in the gutter,' he replied. 'It may be your right, but if you have any love for her don't drag her down to your level—and mine.'

The tramp turned round to stare in surprise at the speaker's pale face.

'Well, you are a rum 'un,' he ejaculated, not

without a grudging admiration in his tones. 'No wonder you're down on your luck if that's the way you take things. A man must think of himself a bit in this world. But you're a good sort, mate, as I said afore. I won't speak to the girl—blamed if I do—even though she is my daughter. There !'

He gripped Horace's hand, whilst in silence the two men watched the carriage drive away.

Close by, invisible to all but one, stood the Messenger from Mars, and the shadow of a smile was visible on his stern face, softening it to an expression of wondrous sweetness.

'Thought for another,' he murmured, raising his eyes to gaze in wistful yearning towards the glittering panoply of stars overhead. 'I shall cure him, after all.'

'See here now,' the tramp was saying cheerily, and it was a wonder indeed that cheeriness was possible on such a night and in such a position. 'I've got an idea.'

The ghost of a smile played round Horace's lips.

'I know you have,' he rejoined. 'Lots of them.'

The other straightened himself, regarding his companion with a prolonged stare.

'Why, how did you know that?' he queried suspiciously.

'I—I guessed it,' was the hurried response, whilst Parker turned aside.

He recognised that he had made a slip. 'I only hope he won't remember me,' he thought to himself.

He need not have worried. There was no connection at all in the tramp's mind between the 'tip-top toff' who had given him whisky and biscuits, and afterwards sent him about his business with a curt refusal of help, and this 'mate' who wandered about London streets as destitute and hungry as himself.

'The people will be goin' home now,' went on the tramp, forgetful of an inadvertent remark. 'Let's get to work and clear the snow for 'em so that they can walk to their carriages without gettin' in a muck! We might earn a few pence that way.'

'Capital,' cried Horace, enthusiastic for the first time in his life, at finding work to do. 'But we've got no shovels.'

'Never mind about the shovels. Look round a bit and see if you can't find a bit of board to scrape with.'

He set off as he spoke towards the place where the road was up and several barrels and planks lay around the watchman's box.

'A bit of board to scrape with,' mused Horace. 'I recognise the inventor in that speech.'

Meantime his companion had seized on an empty barrel and began rolling it along in the snow.

'Look here,' he called briskly. 'What's the matter with this barrel?'

Horace did look, and mentally admitted a superiority of intelligence.

'Lord,' he muttered. 'I never should have thought of that.'

'Look out for the bobby,' went on the inventive tramp as he began tearing the loosened staves out of the barrel.

'There you are. Nice and handy. Couldn't have come in better, now could it? Right oh! You start on the steps, I'll have a go in here.'

Very gingerly Horace knelt down in the snow, unable to repress a shudder at the cold dampness which speedily penetrated his thin rags.

Already the other was scraping vigorously away on the pavement beneath.

The stave was an awkward implement for unaccustomed hands, and Horace could not help the bitter reflection of what Mrs Clarence would say could she see him now.

Perhaps she would laugh as she had done when she first heard from Mr Ferguson of his ruin and remark that 'a little of such adversity would do him good.'

'Hillo,' cried a reproachful voice. 'What are you doin' up there? What are yer doin'?'

Horace started and looked down.

The tramp had risen and was shaking the snow from his shoulders much as a Newfoundland dog would have cleaned his coat.

'I was starting on the steps,' explained Mr Parker, meekly.

The tramp chuckled.

'It seems you're startin' on me,' he observed. 'Get down to it, my lad. Get down to it.'

Horace apologized in mumbling tones, and again dropped to his knees. He had tried stooping before in the vain hope of keeping his legs dry.

But at best it was back-aching work, and his fingers were chilled to the bone. Yet he dared not commiserate himself, since the job before him claimed all his attention.

The tramp, having speedily cleaned part of the pavement, paused in his labour to regard his partner.

Evidently the latter was a novice at snow-clearing.

'Don't scoop it, mate,' he urged with a

hoarse chuckle of amusement. 'It ain't soup.'

Horace groaned, the very mention of soup unnerved him.

'I wonder how much we shall make,' he muttered.

'Sixpence or two, if we're lucky,' replied the other cheerily. 'Halves, partner.'

'Right you are. Halves, partner, halves.'

In spite of his discomforts Horace was beginning to enter into the zest of the task.

Sixpence would at least buy him some of that soup which his new friend had so tantalizingly mentioned.

'Seems to me,' said the tramp reflectively. 'I've met you somewhere before.'

The barrel stave fell from Horace's hand with a clatter, and he took care to keep his face averted from the other's curious stare as he stooped to pick it up.

'Thunder,' he groaned. 'He's going to recognize me.'

The shame of the thought maddened him.

'Didn't I see you last August?' pursued his questioner, 'down Margate way with a piano organ and a monkey?'

Mr Parker shovelled snow more vigorously than ever in his relief.

'Very likely,' he replied.

'I thought I'd met you somewhere,' said the tramp triumphantly. 'Ah, mate, you've come down a bit since then.'

'Yes,' said Horace. 'I—have come down since then.'

He looked towards the Messenger from Mars as he spoke. It seemed even to his dazed vision that the latter regarded him with pity—almost with tenderness.

CHAPTER XVIII

A PROFITLESS 'JOB'

'THERE'S someone coming!' muttered the tramp, and struggled hastily to his feet.

Horace Parker involuntarily shrank back as he noticed the opening door.

Would they be friends of his who came out?—and if so could they possibly recognise him—Horace Parker—in the vagrant who scraped the snow from their hostess's door-step?

The ignominy of the thought caused him the keenest agony, and it was with a heartfelt feeling of relief that he saw two strangers—a gentleman and a lady—step out on to the newly swept pavement.

The tramp was already at their side, begging with true professional whine.

'We cleared the snow for you, lady—made a nice path, sir.'

'Cleaned all the snow away,' echoed Horace, trying to copy the whining plea, but failing

utterly. 'Made—er—made a very nice path, sir.'

The gentleman turned, frowning.

'I tell you I haven't got any coppers,' he said shortly. 'Go away.'

They followed. The tramp eager, Horace reluctant.

'Shall I call the carriage, sir?' urged the former.

'Call a cab, sir,' added Horace, not to be out-done by his partner.

'No,' was the sharp retort. 'Go away.'

They turned away, disappointed and discomfited.

'That's a frost!' remarked the tramp. 'Better luck next time though. Here's another lot.'

He hurried forward, Horace following more slowly this time; in the lanky red-haired young man who paused on Mrs Clarence's threshold with a lady beside him, he recognised a casual acquaintance, Mr Shillingford.

Yet surely in his present kit he himself was safe enough. No one would think to see Horace Parker the distinguished scientist in this guise.

'Beg pardon, sir,' the tramp was saying. 'Look what we have done, sir! Ain't it nice and handy for the lady?'

Young Shillingford glanced carelessly at the

path which had caused such an infinity of toil to these poor night-birds and shrugged his shoulders.

'Got my gloves on,' he drawled, 'or I would.'

And he handed his companion down the steps.

At the corner of the pavement he met Horace, bent on success and determined to brave possible recognition.

'Look what we've done,' whined Horace, in valiant imitation of his new confederate. 'Ain't it nice and handy for the lady?'

Shillingford gave a gesture of annoyance.

'Get out of the light, do,' he snapped, then, turning to the lady beside him.

'What a nuisance these loafers are,' he added.

Horace sighed as he came slowly back to re-join his comrade.

'I've said the same thing dozens of times myself,' he muttered.

The tramp was trying his old game of beating warmth into his half naked body with his arms. He grinned feebly at Horace as the latter came up.

'We ain't making our fortunes, are we, partner?' he remarked.

'Stingy brutes,' growled Horace. 'Come, we must try again. We—we can't stay out here all night.'

Again the door opened. It was Sir Roland Wright this time, a well-known figure in society and a personal friend of Horace Parker's.

But the latter was past the fear of recognition now. He was desperate. So was the tramp.

The latter spoke first, a pitiful fluttering in his high-pitched tones.

'Beg pardon, sir. We—we cleaned the snow away for you, sir. Can't you spare us a trifle?'

Sir Roland glanced from one to the other of the haggard faces, there was no shadow of recognition in the eyes which rested for a moment on Horace Parker's face.

'Nonsense,' retorted the great man. 'The servants cleared it.'

'No, sir,' urged the tramp. 'They didn't stir. We done it—me and my partner.'

'Yes,' added Horace huskily. 'We done it, me and my partner.'

His head drooped forward as he spoke. Sir Roland paused. He was a great exposé of fraud, on the part of the lower classes.

He had taken to the thing and made it a kind of hobby, for the benefit of foolishly charitable people who committed the absurd mistake of not spending their money on themselves.

The case in hand was flagrant.

'You couple of imposters!' he cried angrily, 'Why, where are your shovels?'

The suspicion, coming hard on the heels of disappointment after strenuous labour, was too much for Mr Parker.

'We cleared it,' he cried indignantly, 'And if you don't like it, you can bally well walk in the snow.'

As he spoke he thrust his shoulder against that of Sir Roland, pushing him off the pavement into the piled slosh of snow.

Sir Roland floundered, gasping inarticulately in his rage.

'Confound your impudence,' he cried, when after several ineffectual plungings he managed to regain the path. 'Here policeman! policeman! These blackguards have assaulted me.'

A policeman had come in sight, and was turning his bull's eye lantern on the little group before him.

Now he stepped threateningly towards the tramp and Horace who cowered back at the thought of possible arrest.

'Here—come out of that, you two,' cried the representative of the law, angrily, 'I know you, you're old hands, you are. Be off, both of you, if you don't want to be took to the station.' Then, as the two slunk off in nervous trepidation at his threat, he turned to Sir Roland who was dusting the snow from his trousers.

'Cab, Sir?' he asked, saluting respectfully.

‘Thank you, policeman. Yes, call a cab.’

And Horace, watching from the distance, saw the glint of silver passing into the ever ready hand of the ‘arm of the law.’

‘Splendid force, the police,’ came the echo of a voice from where, near the watchman’s box, a gleam of greenish light lay athwart the snow.

CHAPTER XIX

'HALVES, PARTNER, HALVES'

THE tramp leant back against the area railings, his eyes were half closed, and his breath came in jerking sighs.

'My ideas don't seem to come to nothing, mate,' he murmured. 'I'm a failure, and a bad 'un at that.'

He slipped as he spoke, lurching yet more heavily against the rails.

Horace, who was standing near, black despair at his heart, noticed how the older man's lips twitched and how grey a pallor overspread his face.

'I've been feeling pretty bad all day,' went on the poor fellow hoarsely, 'and this has about done for me.'

He loosed his grip on the railings and slid in a heap on to the path.

With a swift pang of pity Horace knelt beside him.

'You mustn't lie there,' he urged. 'There will be others coming out soon. We are sure to pick up something. We're sure to get *some* help.'

A feeble movement of the grey head negatived the hope.

'I only wants burying, partner,' muttered the exhausted man, faintly. 'And—they'll *have* to—do that for me, damn them!'

'Nonsense!' retorted Horace, trying to inspire a courage he was far from feeling. 'You must pull yourself together;—we're sure to find someone.'

He looked round anxiously, and there, before him, his right hand folded across his breast, an expression of aloof meditation on his impassive features, stood the Messenger from Mars.

Horace Parker moistened his dry lips, speaking with difficulty.

'*You*—you can help him,' he whispered.

Very slowly the Messenger inclined his head.

'You cannot make me responsible for that dirty tramp's condition,' he replied.

Horace gave a gesture of despair.

'Don't mock me,' he entreated, 'I'm beaten. I give in.'

'Yet, if you had your money again, you would just go your own way and leave him to die.'

'Should I? I can't believe it. Anyway if

that is the case, I'd rather be without it. But the question is what to do with him now. I'd—I'd give anything to save him.'

The Martian pointed to the opposite door.

'Ask there,' he suggested, 'at the house.'

Horace hesitated, his pale cheeks flushing in shame.

'But they know me there,' he stammered.

'What of that?'

'I—I shouldn't like Mrs Clarence to see me like this.'

'Your friend is dying.'

Like a solemn knell the words sounded,—their truth was reflected on the ghastly face of the unconscious man who lay huddled upon the path.

It was a pitiful sight,—and its pathos stirred the gazer into a stern resolve.

Slowly he rose to his feet and without faltering climbed up the steps of Mrs Clarence's house.

One moment's hesitation with his hand on the bell, one backward glance to where his fainting partner lay stretched in the snow, and then the summoning peal rang loudly.

It was speedily answered by the footman, who yawned languidly at sight of the shabby figure standing without.

'What do you want?' he gaped, hesitating as

to whether or no he should re-close the door. But Horace thrust a half shod foot forward, preventing him.

‘There’s a poor fellow here,’ he began breathlessly, ‘dying, yes, dying for want of food and warmth. Will you ask Mrs Clarence if she will help or shelter him?’

The footman yawned again, with a supercilious stare of enquiry. This beggar hardly spoke, like the ordinary vagrant, and he had used his mistress’s name, still—

A rustle of silken skirts sounded behind him. It was the lady of the house herself, come to enquire the reason for the open door, since all her guests had left.

‘Ah!’ cried Horace, catching back his breath in a sigh of relief. ‘Mrs Clarence.’

She came forward, hearing her name spoken, and stood peering out into the darkness. How gorgeous a figure she seemed to the tattered beggar on her doorstep, a very queen in her silken gown, the sparkle of jewels in her dark hair and about her white throat.

‘Who is there?’ she asked, and her voice sounded harsh and metallic.

‘There’s a poor fellow here—dying,’ cried Horace, clasping his hands.

She looked at him without recognition.

‘Take him to the hospital,’ she replied coldly.

‘He is dying for want of food and warmth.’

The lady drew back with contemptuous scorn, gathering her skirts about her as if in fear of contamination.

‘John, shut the door,’ she commanded.

Far away across the square came the voices of the singers, chanting over the last verse of their carol as they wended homewards :

‘In his master’s steps he trod,
Where the snow lay dinted
Heat was in the very sod
Which the saint had printed.
Therefore, Christian men be sure,
Wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor,
Shall yourselves find blessing.’

‘Mrs Clarence!’ cried Horace passionately.
‘You must not refuse me.’

Something in the tone, the repetition of her name, arrested her attention.

‘You?’ she questioned, leaning forward to look into his face. ‘Why, who are you?’

‘I am Horace Parker, ruined, as you know, a tramp, as you see.’

Her scorn was superb in its wordless indifference. ‘John, shut the door,’ she repeated.

And the man obeyed.

He was shut out.

That was the answer to his wild appeal on

behalf of another's need, another's life. The woman he had once called his friend had commanded her footman to shut the door in his face.

Utterly broken, too miserable to care what befell him now, Horace Parker stumbled down the steps and reached the side of his humble friend.

The tramp had recovered consciousness and had even succeeded in raising himself a little, his head resting back against a block of frozen snow.

'Never mind me, partner,' he muttered, noting the misery on the other's face, and making a brave effort to rally himself. 'You're a good 'un, I knew it. I said it all along.'

'Come, old man,' said Horace huskily, kneeling down and slipping one arm under the prostrate man. 'You musn't lie there. Put your arm round my neck. I can lift you up. We *must* get shelter somewhere.'

A gleam of green light fell across the snow which had drifted round the area railings. Close beside them stood the Messenger from Mars.

Horace looked up in mute appeal.

The stern look of the judge had disappeared from the Martian's noble face, and been replaced by one of wondrous tenderness and joy.

‘Feel in your pocket,’ he said gently.

‘My pocket?’ muttered Horace, first hesitating and then slowly obeying. ‘Why, what’s this?’ A light shone in his eyes, the colour rushed to his cheeks, his heart beat fast.

‘What’s this!’ he cried, ‘A coin! A shilling!’ He rose to his feet and stumbled towards the nearest lamp-post.

‘No!’ he cried. ‘A sovereign! A sovereign!’

Back he came, sobbing, laughing, wholly rejoicing as he fell down by the side of the half-conscious tramp.

‘Look!’ he cried, bending low over his friend.

‘A sovereign! Halves, partner, halves!’

The tramp looked up, a faint smile twitching his lips.

‘Halves?’ he muttered.

‘Aye—halves! It’s all right now, old friend. It’s all right now, partner.’

The Messenger raised his head, looking upwards towards the glittering glory of the skies.

After all, his exile was to be ended. Yonder in the firmament gleamed the red light of the planet Mars.

Then he looked down to where a ragged tramp crouched laughing and sobbing in his joy over one yet more ragged and forlorn.

‘Well done, my pupil,’ he murmured. ‘Farewell to earth and you.’

But in the ears of Horace Parker rang the echo of other words, chanted again and again by the sweet voices of girls and boys.

Therefore, Christian men, be sure,
Wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor,
Shall yourselves find blessing.

It was the Christmas message of peace and good-will to all.

CHAPTER XX

THE AWAKENING

'Halves, partner, halves!'

Horace Parker was repeating the words again and again as he awoke.

Where was he? Certainly not kneeling by the side of a fainting tramp in the bitter cold of a winter's night, himself clothed in the rags of a beggar.

Slowly the astonished dreamer sat up.

Where was he? Why! in his own library at home, seated in the most comfortable chair beside a still glowing fire, the lamp burning brightly, a table with whisky decanter, syphon and box of cigars, set handy for his use. On the floor at his feet, where it had slipped from his knee, lay the paper he had been reading before . . . before . . .

He stretched his arms wide, yawned, blinked, and at last began really to believe that he was where he found himself.

Yet so vivid were the impressions of his dream that he kicked the paper several yards from him. He was certainly in no mood for the *Astronomer*.

Perhaps whiskey and soda would be more to his taste, yet he was particular as to the cleanliness of his glass. Had he not given a drink to a certain loquacious tramp? or had that been part of a dream too?

No, he was sure the fellow had been here, talking of his inventions or some such trash, and he had given him a sovereign. No, he could not have done that. Yet what words had been on his lips when he awoke? That was to say if he had *really* been to sleep!

‘Halves, partner, halves.’

And the poor chap had been dying, too.

‘A dream!’ he muttered, passing his hand across his forehead. ‘I wonder how much of it is true? Not all of it, at any rate; for the house is not on fire to begin with.’

He laughed; rather a hollow little outburst of merriment, in self-mockery. But he checked himself a moment later as the sound of bells rang out, clear, dominant, warning, with the rattling of chairs and sudden shouts from without as a fire-engine sped on its way down the street.

Mr Parker sat up, his confusion greater than

ever. It had all been so vivid; the coming of that awe-inspiring Messenger and the practical lessons which had been so very hard and bitter to learn. Had he learnt them though? That remained to be proved.

At the moment he was suffering from perplexity of mind, and that strange re-action which follows violent emotion of any kind.

'By jove!' he said, aloud, 'there *is* a fire engine! But it isn't this house, anyhow. My coat hasn't disappeared either!'

His glance fell on the fur-lined coat which lay over the back of the chair, just as he had flung it down when he first came home that evening.

That evening! Could it really be the same evening in which he had quarrelled with Aunt Martha and Minnie, about going to Mrs Clarence's dance?

He was conscious of feeling decidedly antagonistic to Mrs Clarence, after having heard all the unjustifiable things she had said against him. But stop! *Had* she said them, or was that part of the dream too?

He rose to his feet, a sudden uncomfortable memory tugging at his heart, and crossed towards the chair over which his coat hung. He was following a somewhat disjointed line of thought trying to unravel the tangled skeins of real and imaginary happenings.

'Fancy giving away eighty pounds to a woman in the street,' he groaned. 'Indiscriminate charity; isn't that what they call it? It's an awful lot of money! I never gave away so much money in my life before, and—er—I never will again.'

He said the last words with so much conviction that he had to repeat them, as though wishing to impress their meaning on himself.

Afterwards, there came a pause in his meditations, and he stood still, feeling in his coat pockets in abstracted fashion whilst staring into the glowing heart of the coals.

It was warm in here, warm and cosy. Outside the cold was bitter.

'I don't know,' he said, aloud. 'Poor woman, she wanted it badly enough; still, I don't think I should like to do it again. Certainly not. Though I won't say I regret having given it. I've no feelings of regret about it; still, I don't think I should ever do it again.'

He had found what he had been looking for, and laid down the coat whilst he hastily unfastened the clasp of the red morrocco pocket-book he held in his hand. Within lay three bank notes tucked snugly away. One for fifty pounds, another for twenty, another for ten!

Mr Parker stared at them, counted them over

singly, studied them closely, whilst a slow, sly smile of intense pleasure broke round his lips.

'Dash it all!' he cried in amaze. 'I haven't given them away after all. Here are the notes! I—I suppose I can't be thoroughly awake yet.'

And, as if afraid that he might be tempted to do anything indiscreet whilst in a state of somnambulism, he very carefully fastened up the book and stowed it away in an inner pocket.

His reflections, still confused, were further disturbed by the sound of a second fire-engine coming down the street.

Horace hastened to the window and drew back the heavy curtain. The noise of the bells and galloping horse-hoofs was already growing fainter, but a lurid glare lit up the darkness without.

'Another engine,' muttered the watcher, craning his neck to see where the red glare appeared to be broadest. 'It must be something pretty serious. By Jove! what a blaze! I wonder where it is? Seems close by, too. Poor people! Heaven help them, whoever they are.'

He let the curtain drop back into its place, glad—for some indefinable reason—to shut out the sight of that terrible conflagration.

Slowly he re-crossed the room to his special seat. It was very cosy here, very warm and

cosy, whilst without the snow lay thick,—a bitter night. And some would be either burning and freezing out there.

‘I wonder if I could help them,’ thought he to himself, as he sat down, resting his feet comfortably against the fender. ‘I suppose not. The police always keep one back from entertainments of this kind.’

And he raised his glass of whisky and soda to his lips.

The door opened, and Bella, very pale and anxious looking, peeped in. She seemed relieved at finding her master awake and advanced timidly into the room.

‘Please, sir,’ she ventured, ‘there’s a fire.’

Horace set down an empty glass. He was quite awake now, and the appearance of Bella helped thoroughly to convince him that the Messenger from Mars had been part and parcel of a singularly haunting nightmare.

‘Do you know where it is?’ he asked the maid.

‘Yes, sir. It’s Carbury buildings, at the corner of Irving Street.’

‘What! The lodging house?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Horace sat musing.

‘All poor people, aren’t they?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Her master frowned and glanced round the room; he thought it better to change the conversation as well as the tenor of his thoughts.

'I say, Bella,' he observed, 'did you remember about the oil for the lamp?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Very odd! I don't remember your coming in.'

'No, sir—you were reading—and I didn't like to wa—I didn't like to interrupt you, sir.'

He looked at her thoughtfully.

'Quite right, Bella, quite right,' he commended.

'And I brought in the evening paper too, sir,' added the girl, taking the paper from the table where it had lain unnoticed by Horace and giving it to him.

'The evening paper, yes, of course!'

He had taken it quickly, with a nervous glance at the right hand corner which was marked 'Extra 10 o'clock Ed.'

Surely he had seen this very paper before, and had read in it the tale of his own ruin. Hurriedly he unfolded the sheets, scanning their contents.

There was not a single headline with the announcement he had dreaded to see. Yet he trembled, unnerved by the fear he had conjured up.

The maid, noting his agitation, lingered, not liking to leave the room without making further enquiry. Her master really looked as though he were going to faint. She never remembered seeing him look so ill.

‘What’s the matter, sir?’ she ventured to ask. ‘Aren’t you well?’

He looked at her in a dazed fashion for a moment.

‘It isn’t true,’ he whispered. ‘What a relief!’

Then seeing how startled Bella looked, he pulled himself together.

‘The nightmare again!’ he laughed. ‘But it’s true about the fire, Bella?’

‘Quite true, sir. They say it’s awful.’

‘And where did you say?’

‘Carbury Buildings, sir, at the corner of Irving Street.’

‘Poor things! Poor things! I hope no lives will be lost. You look tired, Bella, you had better go to bed.’

She hesitated, though obviously grateful for the permission.

‘Don’t you think the mistress will want me, sir, nor Miss Minnie?’

‘No, I’m sure they won’t. You don’t look well.’

‘It’s nothing but a headache, sir, thank you.’

I think it was the fright about the fire brought it on. It makes one's heart bleed to think of all those poor souls, and this bitter night too, to be turned out into the streets.'

'Very shocking. Well, you get to bed as soon as you can, Bella, and don't worry about what after all is no concern of ours. I'll let your mistress in. I shall be sitting up to finish my reading.'

'Thank you, sir. Good-night, sir.'

'Good-night.'

Mr Parker re-settled himself in his chair and took up a magazine. He had had enough of the *Astronomer* for the present.

But somehow he could not settle down, whether it was his dream, or the fire, or those last remarks of Bella's about the homeless folk turned out into the streets, he could not say, perhaps a little of all three.

Presently he got up and went to the window again, drawing aside the curtain. The glare against the sky was broader and redder than when he had looked before, he could even fancy he heard piteous cries echoing from afar, mingling with men's shouts.

After all he *might* do some good by going and he felt he could not remain here. Every corner of the room seemed haunted by the towering, majestic figure of the Martian crying

denunciations against him for a selfish egotist.

And he might do good over there. Had not Bella said they were all poor people? Poor people whom the fire would render homeless, destitute, wanderers in the cold streets of that implacable city of the selfish?

'I'll go,' he muttered, 'I shall be back again before Aunt Martha and Minnie return, and if I go out by the back door I can easily let myself in again without disturbing anyone. Even if I can't do *much* I may do some good. Every little will help on such a night and at such a time. The police can't be expected to do miracles. It's one's duty to go. Yes—a duty.'

He slipped on his fur-lined coat as he spoke and snatched up his long muffler and a thick coverlet which lay on the sofa.

'These may come in useful,' he thought. 'I wish I knew what would be wanted. Anyhow I'll go and see first.'

He hurried out, without further hesitation. It was easier to go than to remain in there haunted by the knowledge of a duty he had not altogether relished the idea of performing. The back door closed behind with a bang—somehow the sound recalled that dream moment when Mrs Clarence had shut him out from life and hope.

But the scene was changed now. It was he who went to bring succour, not turn away from help refused.

Though the wind was bitter as it swept round the corner of the street that thought helped to warm his heart with a glow which he had never experienced—before to-night.

CHAPTER XXI

LOCKED OUT

'DISGRACEFUL of Bella to go to bed before we returned!' stormed Miss Parker, shivering in spite of her warm cloak as she stood on the door-step of her home.

'Shall I go round and throw stones up at Mr Parker's window?' suggested Arthur Dicey who had brought Miss Parker and her niece home from the dance in his carriage. 'Not Horace's,' exclaimed Minnie with some concern. 'But if only we could make Bella hear!'

'There's a light in one of the upper windows,' replied Dicey who had been surveying the house from the road. 'Ah, I think someone is coming down at last.'

'About time too,' retorted Miss Parker severely. 'I shall certainly give Bella notice to leave after such culpable careless-

ness. Enough to give us all our deaths of cold.'

'Indeed I hope not,' replied Arthur Dicey with an eloquent glance in Miss Templar's direction. But Minnie did not see it, for her gaze was fixed on the red glare which now illumined the whole scene.

'What a terrible fire there must be somewhere,' she said, with a shudder. 'Just look! it seems quite near.'

'A fire always looks a great deal nearer than it really is,' Dicey re-assured her. 'Probably it is miles away.'

The bolts of the front door were being hastily withdrawn by this time, and Bella, minus cap and apron, appeared.

'I'm sure, ma'am, I'm very, very sorry,' she apologised in answer to Miss Parker's angry scoldings. 'But Mr Horace told me to go to bed. He said he was sitting up reading and would let you in. So I went, and——'

'Of course Mr Horace forgot all about it and went to bed himself! Of all selfish, inconsiderate——'

'Please ma'am, I don't think he's gone to bed, his room door's wide open, and the light's burning just as I left it when I took up his

hot water. He must have gone out, I think ma'am unless he's gone to sleep again in the library——'

'No, he's not here,' said Minnie, who, followed by Arthur Dicey, had entered that room first. 'But his coat has gone. I think he must be out. Perhaps to see the fire——'

'Ah, the fire!' exclaimed her aunt going to the window, 'that must have been the attraction. Though, if so, Horace has only gone to view it as a spectacle, he is far too selfish to want to help, and would stand by, I am convinced, with his hands in his pockets, even if he saw his fellow-creatures perishing before his eyes. Where is the fire, Bella?'

'It's the lodging house at the corner of Irving Street, please ma'am.'

'Poor people,' cried Minnie pityingly as she knelt to warm her cold fingers at the fire. 'What will they do?'

Arthur Dicey smiled as he crossed to her side. 'Don't you fret,' he said easily, 'they'll be looked after all right. The County Council will see to that.'

'The County Council!' sniffed Miss Parker, whose untoward home-coming had served to render very aggressive. 'What! At this time of night?'

'I believe there is no hour of the day or night when the County Council is not ready to interfere,' retorted Mr Dicey.

But his genial remark missed its aim since Miss Parker had quitted the room.

'How awful it is,' murmured Minnie, rising from her knees and coming to the window. 'I never saw a big fire before,'

'It's a grand sight, isn't it?' replied Mr Dicey, leaning against the head of the sofa, and looking less at the red glow which rose skywards over the stacks of chimneys, than at the girl who stood leaning against the window-frame, her sweet face illumined by the glare which seemed to stain her white frock with crimson streaks.

'Oh, it is terrible,' she moaned, 'terrible. Could not you do anything to help the poor, poor people?'

Her companion shook his head.

'No, I don't think so,' he replied decidedly. 'The firemen will attend to it. It's their business, you see. They understand that kind of thing. I don't!'

'But you might lend a hand?'

'I assure you, my dear Miss Templar, I should only be in the way. The fewer outsiders there are at a fire, the better the professional

people like it. I am really doing more good by stopping away.'

She looked at him wonderingly, with just a suspicion of contempt in her blue eyes. Much as she liked this young man she thought him perhaps a trifle too well satisfied with a certain Mr Arthur Dicey who found this life an exceedingly pleasant business.

'Horace evidently did not think so,' she said quietly.

'No,' laughed Dicey, 'but they won't thank him. They are probably wishing him at the other side of London by now!'

Minnie sighed. The very fact that Horace had gone out to watch the fire had filled her with vague hopes as to some good motive being at work in his heart.

'Oh, dear,' she complained, turning from the window and seating herself on a low chair by the fire, 'what a helpless thing a girl is. I wish I could make myself useful.'

Mr Dicey had ceased to laugh and had crossed to the hearth-rug where he could obtain an excellent view of a flushed, girlish face and pensive eyes.

'Please don't wish for anything so unusual, Miss Templar,' he said flippantly, then, more gravely, 'I say, I want to talk to you. May I?'

She looked up questioningly, never suspecting what was coming and what, in fact, he had been trying to screw up courage to say to her all the evening.

'But you *are* talking to me, aren't you?' she asked.

He sat down on the arm of Mr Parker's favourite chair, staring into the fire, since he did not want to meet her glance at the critical moment.

'I—er—want to say something particular,' he observed.

Minnie glanced up at the clock and wished her aunt would return. She was very sleepy and felt it hardly to be her place to be thus entertaining a loquacious and slightly superfluous young man at this hour of night.

Still, of course none of them would be going to bed till Horace's return, so, after a moment's hesitation, she resigned herself to the inevitable.

'Oh well—I'm listening,' she said, with the slightest inflection of boredom in her tones.

'I don't quite know how to begin,' sighed Mr Dicey, shifting his position and beginning to wish he had not been tempted to start.

'Then hadn't you better postpone your remarks?' she asked sweetly.

‘You’re rather cruel,’ he reproached her. ‘You don’t make it a bit easy for me.’

Minnie suddenly remembered that Horace would probably be cold on his return and dropped on her knees, beginning to stir the fire into a blaze.

‘I’m very sorry,’ she said briskly. ‘What ought I to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied poor Dicey, looking at her mournfully and feeling how utterly beyond mortal power it was to propose to a girl whilst she is poking the fire.

Minnie laughed and re-seated herself. The blaze on the hearth was cheery—and—she would not turn her head to be reminded of the other blaze without.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I’ll sit down here and wait until you can remember what it was you wanted to say?’

Was there ever such a hopeless situation?—even worse than the poker had been a few seconds ago!

At last human endurance could stand it no longer.

‘Minnie!’ he burst out.

Instantly she drew herself up—all offended dignity.

‘Miss Templar,’ she reproved.

But Arthur Dicey had got his start, even if it were not a very promising one.

‘No, *Minnie*,’ he cried, ‘don’t you know I’m awfully in love with you?’

She grew scarlet from chin to brow.

‘Mr Dicey, please—’ she began.

But he would not be checked now.

‘I am,’ he declared, ‘and—and I want you to be my wife. There! I’ve said it.’

He was prepared to be triumphant now, but *Minnie* interrupted.

‘Oh, Mr Dicey, I’m so sorry!’

‘*Sorry?*’

‘It is impossible. Quite, quite impossible.’

He had been so convinced of receiving a different answer that he would not understand at first.

‘Don’t say that,’ he urged huskily.

‘But I must say it!’

A long pause ensued. Vainly *Minnie* watched the door, hoping for the return of her aunt, Horace, Bella, in fact anyone to break the ordeal of this unwelcome tête-à-tête.

‘Is there—is there somebody else?’ asked Dicey presently.

Minnie nodded. She could not trust herself to speak.

‘Horace? Mr Parker?’

‘Yes.’

‘But—but you said you were not engaged to him.’

The girl coloured, plucking at her embroidered sash. ‘Engaged to him! No, I suppose, I suppose I am not.’

‘You said—’

‘Oh, but I didn’t—’

‘Well, I understood you to say that—’

Minnie rose, and moved restlessly towards the window. It was better to look out at the fire than into the tragic face of this disconsolate young man.

‘Then you were quite mistaken,’ she said decidedly. ‘I never said anything of the kind.’

He followed her in a pathetic hang-dog fashion, which did not appeal to her in the least.

‘Won’t you think it over?’ he urged, ‘and let me speak to you again? A month hence? Six months hence? Yes, I’ll ask you again in six months.’

Why could he not take her first refusal like a man? That was what Minnie was asking herself in rising irritation. He lacked pluck and grit to keep whining on after she had given so decided an answer.

Yet, being a woman, and withal a womanly woman, she could not help feeling sorry

for him as she saw the misery on his boyish face.

After all he was very young, and had been accustomed to have all he desired from babyhood. It *was* a teeny bit hard, no doubt.

So she answered kindly.

'Please don't, Mr Dicey,' she asked. 'It would not be a bit of good, really. I can't change my mind or my answer. I never can.'

'I'll make it a year.'

Minnie turned to him with a smile.

'We can always be friends, can't we?' she questioned.

He coloured hotly, tears perhaps were not very far off. Tears of exasperation and disappointment.

'Friends,' he retorted bitterly. 'Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't talk about friendship. It seems like a mockery.'

'Well then,' she replied, still smiling and holding out her hand. 'I suppose we shall have to be enemies.'

The words acted like a tonic, and the young man recovered himself sufficiently to grip her hand. 'Thank you,' he said heartily, 'that sounds ever so much better. I'll be off. Good night.'

He turned to go, after that one handshake. But at the door he paused and came slowly back.

'I want you to know,' he said, 'that I'm *really* grateful to you for one thing.'

'Yes?' she questioned, puzzled by his manner.

'You didn't say that you'd be a sister to me. Thank you for that.'

CHAPTER XXII

UNLOOKED FOR VISITORS

‘How stupid men are,’ mused Minnie, as, after Arthur Dicey had finally left her, she paced to and fro up and down the library awaiting her aunt’s return. ‘You *can’t* make them understand. If they take it into their heads to propose nothing will stop them. I—I did my best, I’m sure. I made it as difficult as I could. But they are all like that! The clever men too, they’re just as stupid when you refuse them or—or break things off, though you don’t want them broken off. They *will* think you mean what you say. It’s so perfectly hopeless. You can’t manage people who have no more intelligence than that!’

The door opened at this moment and Miss Parker came in.

‘Has Horace returned, dear?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘How very tiresome. Most thoughtless of

him I must say. And it is not as if he were the least likely to be offering any assistance. That is not his way, I am afraid. So all he *is* doing is to keep the household up when it is high time we were all in bed.'

'There is some one coming in now. I heard the back door go. Hark, Aunt Martha. Don't you hear voices?'

'Probably Bella talking to cook.'

'No, no. That is not Bella's voice. Some men are talking—one is Horace, I am sure, but who *can* be with him? Who can be coming in?'

Certainly the strangest sounds were issuing from the direction of the kitchen; tramping of feet, the shrill wailing of an infant, the murmur of voices, above the latter, Mr Parker's rising dominant. He appeared to be leading a considerable number of visitors in the direction of the library.

Miss Parker and Minnie exchanged glances of the utmost bewilderment.

'What *can* he be doing?' questioned the elder lady.

'I can't imagine,' echoed Minnie, unless—' The flash of a dimple gleamed in her cheek, 'unless he has been to the fire.'

'Now, come in,' cried Mr Parker's voice outside. 'Come in all of you.'

He appeared to be in the most hospitable of

moods. Yet neither of the two ladies within was prepared for the sight which the opening door displayed.

A crowd of people, ragged, shivering, destitute of everything save the shabbiest and scantiest of clothing, came crowding in through the door.

A woman, cradling the wailing baby in her arms, hurried to the fire, kneeling down and holding the half-perished infant to the welcome warmth. A tattered urchin, red-headed and grimy of face, sneaked in past a shabby tramp who carried a poor lad whose scorched clothing and low moans of pain told their own tale.

Miss Parker had hardly recovered her breath from witnessing this astounding spectacle when Horace, minus overcoat and muffler, came hurrying to her side.

'Aunt Martha,' he exclaimed apologetically, 'I hope you won't mind my turning the house upside down like this. You see, these poor people are quite destitute. They had nowhere to go.'

Now Aunt Martha, with all her little faults of temper and vanities, was at heart the kindest and most sympathetic of women.

The sight of that poor, half-frozen baby had been quite enough to conquer any resentment, even if she had been inclined to feel any for a moment. Moreover she was practical in her

charities and liked to see the same practicality in others. So she answered her nephew briefly and to the point, even whilst she blinked away a tear which the sight of that pitiful crowd had brought to her kind eyes.

‘Of course not, Horace,’ she said briskly. ‘Supper of some sort shall be ready directly. At any rate they shall have some soup to warm them if the rest has to be cold.’

And away she hurried to attend to the culinary preparations with the help of the astonished cook and Bella.

‘Funny!’ muttered Horace to himself as he watched the erect figure in its Parisian-cut dress vanish down the passage, ‘I thought she’d kick!’

And he turned with a strange little lump in his throat to find Minnie herself superintending the bestowal of the injured boy on the sofa.

‘Is he badly hurt?’ the girl was asking of the tramp who had made the lad his special charge.

‘Yes, miss,’ replied the fellow with a nod, ‘I’m afraid so. Jumped out of window he did. He’d ’ave been all right if he’d waited a few minutes like the rest.’

‘Is he your son?’

‘No, miss, I ain’t got no son—only ’ad a daughter and I’ve lost her.’

He sighed heavily as he spoke, scratching his grey head and staring round the room.

It struck him as curious that the 'toff' who had so harshly refused him aid or work a few hours since should be so busy now in playing the part of Good Samaritan not only to himself but to all these poor homeless outcasts.

'You've lost your daughter?' questioned Minnie gently, 'do you mean she is dead?'

'No, miss; not as I knows on. But I can't find her; and I've been looking for her everywhere.'

Tears of ready sympathy filled Minnie's blue eyes.

'How very, very sad,' she whispered. 'Oh! I do hope you'll be successful in your search.'

'Not much chance of that, miss. Not now. I've been looking for her these three years. I'd been a different man if I could have found her. Poor little Minnie!'

'Minnie?' questioned Minnie, 'was that her name?'

'Yes, miss; that's her name.'

'Has anyone sent for the doctor for this boy, do you know?' struck in Mr Parker's voice with some of the old imperiousness in its tones as he looked anxiously from the tramp to Minnie.

'Oh yes, sir,' replied the former. 'They sent for him. But perhaps they can't find him.'

'It is a bitter night,' added Minnie, looking compassionately down at the sick lad.

Mr Parker moved away towards the door.

'I shall go and fetch one myself if he does not turn up soon,' he said.

Scarcely had the words left his lips than a bell rang loudly.

'That must be the front door,' said Minnie, hastily. 'Very likely it is the doctor just come, and as Bella must be busy in the kitchen I had better go and let him in myself.'

Probably Horace did not hear the latter part of the speech for he had gone over to the fire-place where the greater number of his guests had congregated.

'Supper will soon be ready,' he was saying kindly, noting with secret pleasure how the tired faces lit up at the mention of that magic word, when back came Minnie followed by a constable. Making her way to Horace's side she laid her hand on his arm.

'It's a policeman,' she announced in a whisper. 'I don't know what he wants.'

And she looked somewhat askance at the group before the fire.

Mr Parker beckoned the constable forward.

'Come right in,' he said cheerily, remembering in a vaguely amused fashion his former commendations of that splendid force the police.

Well! well! He had never heard of a dream with so strange a sequel, and the strangest thing about it was that what he had begun in a half-hearted, doubting fashion, he was ending in thoroughly enjoying! He had had no idea before how pleasant a thing helping other people could be.

As for Minnie! Well, he had met her glance just now, and he never remembered having seen her quite like that before; so pleased, so happy, so—was it pride or something altogether dearer and sweeter that he had fancied to see haunting those blue depths? If he were too busy at present to look more closely yet the memory thrilled him with a new and delightful joy.

The policeman, a burly, red-faced individual came lumbering forward, saluting Horace respectfully.

‘They told me you’d been kind enough to shelter some of the people that was burnt out, sir,’ he explained,

‘Quite right, policeman. Here they are.’

‘I was going to ask you, sir, if you could take in one more? Only one, sir, and she’s a little ‘un.’

‘Certainly, policeman,’ was the hearty rejoinder. ‘The more the merrier.’

‘The parties lived on a top floor, sir. The man and the woman’s dead; but we got the little girl out all right. She ain’t hurt.’

‘Bring her in at once then.’

The man saluted and went out grinning.

He had heard tales of this Mr Parker’s meanness and hardness before and would take good care to contradict them next time,—that he would.

So reflecting the worthy fellow went his way to bring in the little waif of misfortune, who had been left so utterly alone and forlorn in a world too big and too busy to heed her wants.

‘You are sure you don’t mind, Aunt Martha?’ Horace was saying anxiously, as his aunt came hurrying back to the crowded room.

Miss Parker looked at him and smiled, an enigmatical little smile which told of a great mingling of emotions. But her answer was emphatic,

‘Of course not, my dear boy.’

CHAPTER XXIII

'MY LITTLE MINNIE'

A CHILD stood on the threshold of the library door. A black-eyed little girl of about twelve to thirteen years, with black, elfin locks lying matted and tangled on her shoulders, her thin face sharpened by want and care.

The face of a child grown to premature womanhood, shabbily dressed too, with a ragged shawl pinned across the bosom of her cotton frock.

Behind her stood the policeman, red-faced and smiling, a kind of out-of-place Father Christmas ushering this poor little wanderer to her feast of warmth and plenty.

Ah! the world had been too big and cold without, and, but for Horace Parker's open door, there might have been another name added that night to the unnumbered rôle of the world's massacre of the innocents.

The child's hesitation only lasted a moment,

for, as her shrewd black eyes travelled quickly round the room, they rested on the figure of the tramp, who still stood near the sofa watching the restless tossings of the poor injured lad who awaited the coming of the doctor for the proper dressing of his burns.

Scarcely, however, had the child in the doorway observed the tramp, than she uttered a weird little cry of welcome, running forward with arms outstretched.

‘Daddy!’ she cried. ‘Daddy!’

He turned, and the face which before had appeared sullen and apathetic in its despair suddenly lighted with a great joy and gladness.

He opened his arms, and the child ran straight into their embrace.

‘Minnie!’ he cried huskily. ‘My own darlin’ little girl. My Minnie.’

He spoke the words with the most loving pride as he pushed back the tangled elf locks from the plain little face. To him those features were the most beautiful in the world. The face of his lost child, the image of the dead wife he had loved.

‘Oh, Daddy,’ she sobbed, clinging to him, ‘I thought you was never coming.’

‘I’ve found her,’ muttered the man, breaking down, and sobbing too. ‘I’ve found her.’ The wonder of it overwhelmed him.

Horace Parker, hearing the cries, had come up, and stood looking down very curiously at the pair.

'Is *this* your little Minnie?' he asked, searching in his mind for another tableau which a dream had focused there so vividly that he found it difficult to separate reality from fancy. 'Why, I thought you said—you told me, I mean—I thought she was grown up?'

The man raised his face all smeared with tears to meet the enquiring glance of this strange benefactor.

'Grown up, gov'nor?' he queried. 'No, this is my little kiddy, aren't you darling?'

The child twined loving arms round the bent neck, resting her own dark little head against his shoulder.

'Yes, Daddy,' she replied contentedly, 'Course I are.'

'She's the living image of her mother,' went on the tramp, kissing her again and again. 'Bless her lovin' little heart.'

The child looked up wonderingly.

'Why, Daddy, you're crying!' she exclaimed, 'You're not sorry, are you?'

'*Sorry!*'

He struggled to his feet, gently unclasping her arms but holding her hand tightly as though he feared she might vanish from his sight.

'Gov'nor,' he cried, turning to Horace, with passionate pleading on his toil-worn face. 'Can't you find me a job somehow? I'll never touch another drop. I'll swear off the drink. I've got something to live for now.'

He looked down at his little daughter and she smiled up at him, laying her other hand on his.

'All right,' cried Horace, cheerily. 'Don't you worry. *I'll* find something.'

'It ain't for myself, gov'nor,' said the man earnestly. 'I can rough it; I'm accustomed to that. But this little darling, she must be brought up decent and proper, like—like what her mother an' me hoped to bring her up.'

'Of course she must,' agreed Horace. 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll start you in a business of your own, and you shall work out some of those ideas of yours, eh? Halves, partner, halves!'

He took the fellow's rough hand in his, laughing at his own jest as he recalled that fantastic dream and the man who had lain fainting in the snow which they two had helped scrape away from a doorstep. Somehow the sense of comradeship was still with him, although that first partnership had been but a dream. Should he ever forget the thrill—a dreamer's emotion, yet genuine enough to out-

live the dream, when he had found the sovereign in the pocket of his ragged coat?

It had been 'halves' then. It should be 'halves' now,—though the demand for a spirit of fellowship and goodwill came from a Greater than any Messenger from Mars.

'No, d'you mean it, guv'nor?' the tramp was asking, too bewildered at first to realise this strange turn of fortune. 'D'you mean it?'

Horace laughed in pure exuberance of spirit, 'Yes of course I mean it,' quoth he, and would have added more had not a scuffle at the other end of the room attracted their attention. The child Minnie gave a gasp of terror and clung to her father's side as she saw the small, red-haired urchin struggling and writhing in the grasp of the policeman who had brought her to the house.

'What's e' bin an' done, daddie?' she asked in a shrill whisper.

The tramp—who was no longer a tramp, but Tom Bartlett, erstwhile engineer—drew the little girl close to his side.

'Don't you be frightened, lassie,' he told her, 'it ain't nothin' to do with us.'

To-night he felt he could look the whole world in the face without fear or shame.

Meantime the irate policeman was shaking his wriggling captive vigorously.

'Ah, would you,' he cried. 'Come along! I've got you.'

Horace stepped forward.

'What's the matter, policeman?' he asked, 'What is it?'

'*That's* what's the matter, sir,' cried the angry constable, drawing a small silver clock from the child's pocket, 'the young warmint.' Again he shook the boy who was sobbing loudly, with his thin knuckles pressed to his eyes.

Horace looked pityingly at the small culprit. Such a poor little misery,—a bag of rags and bones,—no more, with cruel lines of want and suffering around his pinched mouth.

'Oh, I think there must be some mistake,' he said quickly, 'See, my lad, you—er—did not mean to take the clock, did you?'

Amidst vigorous sniffs and the gulpings down of sobs the child replied that he did not, though the denial only elicited a scornful cough from his captor and the tightening of a resolute grasp about his coat collar.

'You see,' explained Horace, setting the clock back on the mantelpiece, 'it is getting rather late; I expect—er—he reached it down to see the time. If we put the clock here we can all see it. So, for this time, policeman, we will say no more about it. What is the boy's name? do you know, any of you?'

Very reluctantly the constable relaxed his grasp, whilst his captive scuttled off back to the fireside, where, from a corner by the coal-box, he turned staring in wide-eyed wonder at his champion. Horace repeated his question, looking round at the motley group gathered near the fire.

‘Don’t know as he’s rightly got a name, sir,’ said the woman who stood rocking her drowsy baby to sleep in her arms, ‘but we calls him the “Emperor.”’

Mr Parker smiled. A more inappropriate name he could not have conceived.

‘“The Emperor,”’ he asked, ‘and why do you call him that?’

‘‘Cos he ain’t got nowhere to live, and no responsibilities.’

‘And where does he live?’

‘Oh, reckon he gets a shake down where he can. Nobody knows where he came from.’

‘First time he came to the Court, sir,’ struck in a man who stood near, ‘he was with Joe the Coster.’

‘How does he live?’

‘Oh, we all does our best, bless yer, sir,’ responded the woman cheerfully, casting an encouraging glance at the poor little ‘Emperor’; ‘but that ain’t much I’m afraid.’

Horace stepped forward and laid his hand on the lad’s shoulder.

'I suppose you have a pretty rough time of it, boy,' he said, 'Are you happy?'

A pair of sharp grey eyes were raised to his in a curious stare.

'Happy?' asked the 'Emperor,' 'What's that?'
It was sufficient answer.

Just then Bella appeared at the open door. She had recovered from the first resentment of 'Master turning the house upside down in the middle of the night,' and stood now beaming and good tempered to deliver a welcome message.

'The supper's ready, sir,' she announced.

A murmur of approbation greeted the words, followed by unmistakable chuckles of delight, Horače could not help smiling too as he looked round.

If anyone could have told him at six o'clock last evening how he would be spending the early hours of the morning he would have called them fools. But he did not call himself one as he looked at those thin, hungry faces brightening at the very mention of food.

'Now, then, in to supper, all of you,' he cried, 'Minnie, will you and Aunt Martha look after them? I'll stay with this boy until the doctor comes.'

Minnie smiled her assent.

'Come this way, please,' she said, nodding to the expectant guests, who did not require

a second invitation. Out they trooped, following the pretty young lady, who appeared like some beautiful fairy leading them to a new world of comfort, warmth, and all good things.

Only Tom Bartlett and his little Minnie lingered in the library, standing back in the shadows by the book-case whilst Mr Parker spoke to the policeman.

‘Constable,’ the former was saying, ‘do you happen to know of a doctor anywhere in the neighbourhood?’

The man reflected for a moment.

‘Well, sir,’ he replied at last. ‘There’s Dr Chapman.’

‘Ah, Dr Chapman, my Aunt Miss Parker, knows him well. Let me see, where does he live?’

‘In the Bouverie Road, sir.’

‘Yes, of course he does. I wish you’d fetch him at once. There’s five shillings for you.’

He placed the money in the man’s hand with an enigmatical smile.

The burly policeman before him was certainly not the one he had seen in his dream, yet it struck him as a curious coincidence that the ‘tip’ should be the same.

‘Thank you, sir,’ the constable replied, saluting, ‘I’ll fetch Dr Chapman at once.’

And he left the room.

Horace stood, musing.

It was strange how the vivid happenings of his dream haunted him.

Even now it seemed that he could see the gleam of phosphorescent light, the towering form of the Messenger, his stern words of rebuke, which had ended at last in the brief speech of rapturous approbation.

And how about this Dr Chapman ?

He had been in the dream too.

Curious—very curious. Of course he recollected the doctor well enough now. Aunt Martha had always been singing his praises and saying what a hero of self-devotion he was in his work amongst the poor—he himself, Horace reflected, had always looked on the fellow as rather a fool. A man lacking in conversational power and who always seemed to be mentally concocting prescriptions.

He had admitted to having no taste whatever for astronomy.

‘Guv’nor,’ said a husky voice at his elbow. ‘I couldn’t speak up with all them folk standing round. And I can’t speak up much better now they’re gone. Speaking ain’t much in my line.’

Turning, Horace discovered for the first time that the tramp had not followed Minnie with the rest to supper, but stood there, sheepish and awkward, his own little Minnie beside him.

'That's very fortunate for both of us,' smiled Mr Parker, in answer to the faltering speech.

'But I want to start in and do something right away,' cried the man earnestly. 'Just to begin with. Can't I clean the boots, or sweep the snow from the door?'

Horace appeared to be lost in reflection. 'There is something you *could* do,' he replied.

'What's that guv'nor? Onny say the word.'

'Go and have some supper.'

'Why, where's my little namesake?' cried a gay voice, and Minnie Templar peeped into the room, smiling and beckoning to the child, who still clutched at her father's coat.

'Here she is,' replied Horace.

'Come and have something to eat,' invited Minnie, stepping forward and trying to take the little girl's hand, whilst she smiled down into the shrewdly wistful face.

But the smaller Minnie shook her elfin locks vigorously.

'Not without Daddy,' she replied.

'Then Daddy must come too,' was the retort. Tom Bartlett shuffled first on one foot then on the other, with a glance now towards the lovely young lady in the white frock who was speaking so kindly to his little one, and then at the gentleman who had opened the door of a new life to him at the very hour of his deepest

despair. If Horace Parker was to remember this as the strangest night of his experience, Tom Bartlett would never forget it as the most wonderful of his life.

And his arm-clasp tightened about his little daughter.

'Guv'nor,' he broke out huskily, 'my heart's too full for words, but—God bless you, for giving me this new start. God bless you.'

The words rang with a pleasant echo in Horace Parker's ears. Even after Minnie had led off the speaker and his little girl to the dining-room, where Aunt Martha herself was presiding over the wants of her hungry guests.

CHAPTER XXIV

A NEW HORACE PARKER

'I've found the doctor, sir. They had sent him to the wrong house.'

It was the policeman who spoke.

Horace Parker, who had been standing by the window, turned and advanced quickly to shake hands with the middle-aged gentleman in the heavy over-coat who had just been ushered into the room.

'Go and get something to eat, policeman,' he bade the latter, who went off nothing loath. It had been hungry work out there in the cold and the invitation was welcome. 'Here's your patient, Dr Chapman,' went on Horace, leading the doctor towards the sofa where the injured lad now lay unconscious. 'He has not spoken yet.'

The doctor knelt down and made a rapid examination.

'Leapt from the window, didn't he?' he

asked, 'At least I understood so from the policeman.'

'Yes. He was seized with panic I believe. If he had waited he would not have been hurt.'

'He ought to have been taken to the hospital.'

'There wasn't an ambulance ready, so I had him brought in here.'

'Very good of you,' replied the doctor drily, 'But he'll have to be moved there now.'

'Isn't it dangerous to shift him in his present condition?'

The doctor shook his head.

'Of course there is a bit of a risk. But we must chance that.'

'Why shouldn't he stay here.'

'Impossible. If he does pull through, he'll be laid up for weeks.'

'But if it is a case of life and death—if it is not safe to move him, he *must* stay here.'

The doctor rose to his feet, looking very curiously at the speaker. From previous experience as well as from having heard 'the constantly expressed opinion of others he had always regarded Mr Horace Parker as one of the worst types of an egotist.

And now—well ! he could not understand it, here he was taking as keen an interest, showing as much anxiety as though this beggar lad were his own brother.

‘There is danger,’ he admitted cautiously. ‘I can’t deny it. But I am sure you do not realise the trouble and inconvenience that you will be put to if he remains here.’

Glancing up, the doctor had noticed that Miss Parker had entered the room, and half turned to her as if in appeal for the confirmation of his words.

‘Horace, what is it?’ questioned Aunt Martha, crossing to her nephew’s side. She, herself, looked very tired, and her new gown was somewhat dishevelled and even slightly torn in places.

‘It is not safe to move the lad—’ Horace began. ‘Now, please don’t be vexed, Aunt Martha. But I know you won’t be. You—you’ve been such a brick to-night. And we can take him to the front spare room? You see it isn’t safe to move him. Doctor, help me to lift him—so—’

Aunt Martha turned away to hide the glint of tears in her eyes which sprang there at sight of the poor, crushed figure that the doctor and Horace between them were raising so tenderly in their arms.

How could she say another word? Even if this strange craze of her nephew's threatened to turn the house upside down, for a considerably longer period than one night?

And she had seen the look of honest admiration in Dr Chapman's eyes, as Horace made his decision. After all, too, the decision had been right since it was a question of that poor boy's life. A life placed against a few weeks inconvenience? But for all that, she could not understand Horace being the one to put the matter in that light.

'I can't make it out, at all,' she murmured to herself, when the sound of retreating footsteps had died away down the passage, and she was left alone in the deserted library.

'Something wonderful must have happened. Is this the Horace who would not take the trouble to fetch a cab for us to-night? Perhaps it was only in little things that he was selfish after all. And now his true character has come out!'

'Auntie!'

It was Minnie calling her. Minnie, who came running in, all eager excitement, and who slipped her hand through the elder woman's arm looking up into her face, her own blue eyes shining through a mist of tears.

'Yes, dear,' smiled Miss Parker, understanding

all that that happy look of pride meant to convey, 'I know!'

'Well—' cried Minnie, reproachfully, 'but what did you mean by saying he was selfish?'

Aunt Martha looked puzzled.

'I?' she asked.

'Yes, Auntie, dear. You know it was you who said so.'

'My dear Minnie, when you yourself—'

'Of course, dear, I have always adopted your opinions, because—because I thought it was respectful and dutiful to do so. But I think now you must admit, Auntie, that you were mistaken.'

Miss Parker was laughing.

'Oh, you little hypocrite! You were the first to say it.'

'Not the first, Auntie—the second.'

'You know you were always complaining.'

'Because I was convinced by what you said. But I'm beginning to think that you must have been altogether wrong. I hope you intend to make him a most humble apology.'

'I shall tell him we were both of us mistaken.'

'No, no. That won't do. You must speak for yourself, and leave me to make peace with him afterwards. What has become of the poor boy who was hurt?'

'The doctor wanted him to be sent to a hospital.'

‘Have they taken him?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it was not safe to move him so far. Horace insisted that he should remain.’

Voices were heard in the hall outside.

Evidently Horace was shewing the doctor out; those in the library heard the good-nights exchanged, and Dr Chapman’s promise to call early in the morning, then the closing of the front door and the sound of returning footsteps.

Minnie had left her Aunt’s side and crossed to the hearth, making a pretence of warming her hands though she was not in the least cold. But she was conscious that her heart started beating at a great rate when the library door opened, and Horace came in.

He did not notice the little figure on the hearth rug at first, but went straight towards his Aunt, evidently intending to continue his apologies for having disturbed the peace of the household in such summary fashion.

But Aunt Martha interrupted him.

‘Horace,’ she said gently. ‘I am so sorry I spoke as I did this evening—or rather last evening I suppose I ought to call it now. I must have lost my temper. Will you forget all about it?’

Horace took both the outstretched hands in his and bent to kiss his Aunt's tired face.

'Please don't say anything more about it,' he replied heartily. 'I deserved every word.'

'No, no, you did not. You've taught me a lesson which I shan't forget. Good night, my dear boy. God bless you.'

Again she kissed him and turned to leave the room. Horace would have followed her but suddenly paused. He had caught sight for the first time of the little figure standing before the fire.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RE-PLIGHTING OF A TROTH

‘MINNIE!’

The girl turned at the sound of her name and looked up.

‘Yes, Horace.’

She had been rehearsing all sorts of pretty speeches wherewith to express her contrition, but somehow they had all gone out of her head at the first sound of his voice, whilst the soft colour dyed her cheeks as she encountered his glance. And yet, why did he regard her so curiously, as though doubtful, half afraid?

It was so new an expression that she could not understand it.

‘May I ask you something?’ he questioned, coming to her side, but he did not attempt to take her hand.

‘Of course you may,’ she replied, with rather a nervous little laugh.

Could he be angry with her? Or what was it?
‘And you won’t be vexed.’

She shook her head vigorously, wishing he would come to the point.

‘Did—did Mr Dicey propose to you to-night?’

The colour flamed in her cheeks in good earnest now.

‘Yes,’ she whispered, allowing her head to droop forward a little, as though she was intent on the study of a white satin shoe which rested on the low fender.

‘At the dance?’ asked Horace in a constrained voice.

‘No, here, when—when we came back.’

‘Here!’

The monosyllable was one of surprise.

‘Yes. I did all I could to stop him. But it was no good.’

‘Then you did not accept him?’

She looked up now, pained reproach in her blue eyes.

‘Accept him?’ she cried, ‘Oh, Horace, how dare you? What are you talking about?’

There was a painful pause.

‘I don’t know,’ he replied slowly. ‘But you remember this evening before you went to the dance you said—’

‘Yes, yes,’ she interrupted eagerly. ‘I

thought you were inconsiderate and selfish, so I gave you back your ring,'

Her eyes pleaded for forgiveness.

'And you were right,' replied Horace earnestly, as, taking a step forward, he gently raised one of her hands, holding it, whilst he spoke, in his grasp. 'I *was* inconsiderate and selfish, and quite unworthy of your love.'

'Horace, dear Horace you shall not say such things of yourself.'

He looked at her with a whimsical smile playing round his lips.

'Better to say them of oneself—to *know* them of oneself, than that others should know them and say them instead.'

'No one can say you are selfish after all you have done to-night.'

'All I have done? How much after all? Sheltering a few homeless people. Feeding a few starving fellow creatures, and that at comparatively small cost or trouble to myself.'

'It was good of you, very, very good. You shall not be-little yourself. I—I am proud of you, Horace.'

Her whole face shone with the pride, and something deeper too, an emotion which Horace Parker, seeing, thanked Heaven for.

Supposing he had irrevocably lost the treasure of her love?

'I have had an awakening,' he said slowly, 'Since you and Aunt Martha went out to-night to Mrs Clarence's dance.'

Again she looked puzzled, as well she might. It all seemed so miraculous, so unbelievable that this Horace could be the same selfish lover of former times.

And *was* there an explanation after all? If so she was eager to hear it.

'An awakening?' she questioned half timidly, remembering his tirades against woman's curiosity.

'Somebody came from somewhere,' he replied dreamily. 'And taught me what a brute I was.'

The firelight shone on the lovely face up-raised to his, showing him the perplexity lurking in blue eyes.

'Whilst we were at the dance?' she demanded in an awed whisper.

'Yes.'

'Who—was it?'

She glanced timidly round as though some supernatural presence might even now be lurking in the shadowed corners of the room.

'I don't know,' replied Horace thoughtfully, 'but he made me understand a lot of things

that I never understood before. He told me that I was wrapped up in self, and cared nothing for the welfare of others; that I had been the possessor of a priceless treasure and that I had set no value on it.'

'A priceless treasure?'

'Yes—your love.'

He held her two hands, looking down into that glowing, tender face.

More than ever he realised that the Martian was right.

The Martian? Was that indeed the title of that strange Messenger whose towering form he could even now picture standing there by the window, his right arm flung across his breast, his wondrous face raised in lofty scorn and contempt.

Scorn and contempt? But that expression had gone, leaving a yet more wondrous look of love and tenderness behind.

And the lesson had been learnt. Dream or reality the Messenger from Mars had fulfilled his mission.

The echo of a Christmas Carol rang clearly in Horace Parker's ears.

'Therefore Christian men, be sure,
Wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor,
Shall yourselves find blessing.'

A blessing ?

And had he not already found it? A blessing ten thousand times greater and more glorious than was his due ?

The very magnitude of it made him marvel at his former blindness, as he looked down into his sweetheart's upraised face and read there the story of her love.

And she ? Why, she had always loved him, it seemed to her, yet never so dearly as at this moment—a moment which would live for ever in the memories of both.

'Oh, Horace,' she whispered, and could find no words to answer him.

'I do value it,' he went on, with that new-born humility vibrating in his tones ; 'indeed I do. I know I am not worthy of it—but may I have it back again ?'

She looked at him through a mist of happy tears.

'You have always had it,' she whispered. 'You always shall have it. See—there is the ring. Just where I put it down.'

She stretched out her hand pointing to where, on the edge of the table, sparkled the ring she had given back to him in such scorn a few hours ago.

How the rubies and diamonds blazed as he picked it up, holding it for a

moment as he looked smilingly down to put a question to which he already knew the answer,

‘May I put it on again?’

She held out her hand.

THE END

