Ribbons and Laces

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Ribbons and Laces

NOVELS AND STORIES BY

RUBY M. AYRES

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THE HIGHEST BIDDER
BROWN SUGAR
THE ONE WHO LIED

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BY

RUBY M. AYRES

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Contents

"Ribbons and laces for sweet pretty faces—
Oh, come to the market and buy."

When Linda was quite a tiny child, and, as her mother, who did not understand her, or attempt to do so, would say, "a very naughty child," the only way in which to keep her quiet and prevent her from being naughty, was to allow her to sort out her grandmother's "ribbon box."

Linda's grandmother was an old-fashioned grandmother. She wore a cap of snowy lace on her grey hair, and black silk frocks that touched the ground all round, and a gold watch chain a yard and a half long which went twice round her neck and hung down to her waist, and she still put sprigs of lavender amongst her clothes instead of the new fashionable scented sachet, and she was a firm believer in a button bag and a ribbon box.

If a garment wore out, or was about to be given away to a poor relation, or someone in the village, she first looked it carefully over to see if there were any special buttons attached to it which were worth keeping in case they should come in for another frock or coat or whatever might be in the making; and if they were, snip! Grannie's scissors cut them neatly off, and they were carefully put away in the button bag.

The same thing applied to oddments of lace and silk, and ribbons, or bits of fancy trimming, and such things; they all found their way into the ribbon box, where, be it admitted, they generally stayed indefinitely, as the occasion never seemed to arise when their usefulness could be put into practice again.

And Linda loved that button bag and that ribbon box!

To turn the buttons out on the floor and marshal them into long, varying lines, would keep her good for hours, and her idea of complete happiness for a long time after, as her mother plaintively said, "One would have expected her to have outgrown such childishness"—was to be allowed to "dress up" in the contents of the ribbon box.

Priceless odd lengths of lace, yellow with age, and as silky as a cobweb, lovely soft pieces of ribbons, each either too long or too short to be of any real use; queer-shaped oddments of silk and bright-coloured satin, and strange, old-fashioned little bunches of flowers cut from grannie's bonnets; all these were the joy of Linda's

heart, whereas expensive toys and dolls which opened and shut their eyes, and said "Mamma," left her cold and unresponsive.

"She inherits her father's commercial mind," her mother complained fretfully; she was a fretful person altogether, who never once in all the years of her married life had managed to forget that she came of an alleged blue-blooded stock, whereas plain, good-natured Thomas Dawson could only boast a line of not very respectable tradespeople as ancestors, and was proud of it.

"I'm a self-made man," he would say, thumping himself on the chest. "I never had any education, and I've managed to do without it. When I die I shall be worth nearly a hundred thousand pounds."

"Thomas is so . . . coarse!" his wife would complain to her mother. "Of course we all know that without money life would be impossible——"

(She did not think it necessary to add that it was because she had found it so impossible that she had married Thomas Dawson.) "But surely there is no need to be *always* talking about it?"

"Thomas talks about the only thing he understands," her mother would answer in her sweet voice. "And, after all, think how much worse it would be if he talked about things of which he was entirely ignorant?"

She herself lived quite happily and comfortably in the house of her daughter and son-in-law, and asked no questions.

She had a small and insufficient income of her own which Thomas generously supplemented, and at the back of her tolerant, old-fashioned mind, though she would not have admitted it for the world, she considered that Thomas had behaved very foolishly in marrying her daughter at all.

Mrs. Lovelace rather despised her daughter, chiefly because of the way she incessantly complained of Thomas.

Mrs. Lovelace herself had been married to a gentlemanly blackguard, to whose glaring faults and many peccadilloes she had kept her eyes shut through fifteen years of complete unhappiness, because it was her idea of loyally keeping her marriage vows, and she had no patience with the modern wife who walked through the highways of the world screaming her misery aloud, and advertising the mistakes which she had made of her own accord.

"You have no pride, Marion," she would say sedately to Thomas's wife. "When I was a girl we were always taught to keep our troubles to ourselves."

"You never had a trouble like Thomas," Marion would answer bitterly. "And Linda is just like her father! Heaven knows what will become of her."

"Linda is a very dear child," Grannie would answer warmly, and look across the

room to where auburn-haired Linda was sitting on the floor entirely surrounded by bright-coloured buttons, and dressed up like a May girl in odd pieces of silk and lace out of the ribbon box.

"She has her father's temper," Mrs. Dawson said snappily. "I suppose she inherited it with his red hair."

"Linda's hair is not red," Mrs. Lovelace would object with dignity. "It is chestnut—a real, beautiful chestnut."

Linda looked up at that moment, turning her pale, rapt face to the two women.

"Ten pink buttons, Grannie," she said solemnly, as if the affairs of nations depended upon her calculation being correct. "And only five blue ones. I wonder where the other one is?"

Mrs. Lovelace adjusted her spectacles and looked affectionately at her granddaughter.

"Those blue buttons were on a dress I had when your mother was a little girl like you are now," she said reminiscently. "And one of them got loose, and I meant to sew it on, but forgot, and so it was lost. That shows you, Linda, the necessity of never putting a duty off when it should be done at once. I hope you will remember that, my dear child."

"Linda never remembers anything I tell her," Mrs. Dawson complained. "And it's your fault, mother; you and Thomas spoil her shockingly."

Then she gave a final look at herself in the mirror over the mantelshelf, duly admired her feathered hat and expensive furs, and went out to where her latest extravagance, a grey-lined limousine, waited at the door.

Mrs. Lovelace rose from her chair and went to the window, watching till her daughter was out of sight; then she sighed, and came back to where Linda squatted happily on the floor, surrounded by her ribbons and laces.

The child looked up and smiled, her pretty face framed in a piece of old lace tied under the chin by a big blue bow.

"Grannie," she said, solemnly.

"Yes, my treasure?"

Linda scrambled to her feet, looking down at the strewn floor and the dozens of buttons with awe and respect in her eyes.

"Grannie," she said again. "When I grow up what do you think I shall do?"

"I don't know, my darling. Wear pretty clothes like mother, I suppose, and drive about in a motor-car."

Linda screwed up her rosebud mouth.

"Oh, no!" she said, fervently. "Nothing silly like that! I'm going to keep a shop."

Linda was fifteen when the crash came that flung her life into complete disorder and brought about her father's death.

The great firm of Dawson and Welby, silk merchants, collapsed like a house of cards, and left nothing out of the ruin.

One day to all appearances it was still a wonderful and flourishing concern, and twenty-four hours later newsboys were running all over the city bawling their news through the cold November night.

"Great City failure. Failure of a famous house! All the news!"

And Thomas Dawson walked into his home late that night, a broken and beaten man.

His wife was waiting for him, furious and incredulous. She had heard a great deal that was true and a great deal more that was not true, and she rushed upon the stricken man with no thought for his grief and despair, demanding explanations.

He stood quite still, leaning against the doorway of the handsome drawing-room in which he had never felt happy or at home, looking at his wife as if he had never really seen her before.

"What does it mean?" she demanded hysterically. "Why don't you speak? Why don't you tell me the truth?" She clutched the lapels of his coat with her diamond-laden fingers, and poor Thomas Dawson looked down at those fingers with dull eyes before he answered.

"It means that I'm a ruined man. I've lost everything."

He made no attempt to tell her the details, and she would not have understood or been interested if he had. He might have tried to defend himself; he might have blamed the war, or a dishonest partner, but in the face of her rage and bitterness it seemed futile.

She asked one last question.

"Does that mean that we give up everything? This house—the car? That I shall have to sell my diamonds?"

The ghost of a smile flitted across his face. So that was all she cared about; she had not one grain of pity for him who had seen his life's work go down in the wreck, not one thought as to how she might help and comfort him.

"It means that we've got nothing," he said.

Then the storm broke. In her fury she spoke many truths which she had been

afraid to speak before. She told him that she had only married him for his money—that she had never loved him; she told him that he had always disgusted her—his manner, his voice, his way of bragging; she said that if it had not been for her mother she would have left him long ago; she said a thousand hard, cruel things which went with poor Thomas Dawson to his grave; and then, when he made his one broken appeal to her "Marion . . . and I loved you!" she laughed in his face and went out of the room, banging the door behind her.

And in the morning she had gone, with a heartless melodramatic note left behind her pinned to the quilt on her bed to say that she had left England with "the only man she had ever loved," and that she hoped Thomas would do the decent thing and divorce her as soon as possible.

There was no mention of her mother, or of Linda; but she had been careful to take all her diamonds with her and anything else that was of value.

Thomas and Mrs. Lovelace read the letter together, and Thomas laughed, such a dreadful brokenhearted laugh that the old lady lifted her trembling arms and put them round the neck of this self-made man who had lost everything at one cruel blow, and said in her sweet voice, "Oh, my dear, my poor dear——" and for a moment they clung together, and both cried, regardless that one had the blue blood of centuries in her veins and that the other was the son of a small tallow merchant who had struggled to make both ends meet in half a shop off the Mile End road; and then Thomas went down to the grand library, where stood rows and rows of books which had never been opened or read, and an hour later one of the servants found him lying unconscious on the floor, his wife's letter still clasped in his locked hand.

And two days later he died without opening his eyes or speaking again, and that was the end of him.

The family lawyer came round and had a long consultation with Mrs. Lovelace, and after the perusal of many papers and documents it became apparent that, when the business was finally wound up and settled, there would be, perhaps, a hundred a year out of the ruin for Linda, and that was all.

Mrs. Lovelace lifted a lace handkerchief to her lips to hide their trembling.

"I have about a hundred a year of my own," she said faintly. "So perhaps we can manage together——"

The lawyer shook his head; things were very expensive, he murmured in distress; living even in the humblest way it would be difficult, most difficult. He looked up and saw the tears on the old lady's cheeks, and he put out his hand and took hers in a kindly clasp.

"Things may be better, who knows?" he said. "Later on it may be possible to

make some arrangement with the creditors."

Mrs. Lovelace shook her head; she had no hope left, but she thanked him for his kindness and asked him to come and see her again; then she wiped all traces of tears away, and went upstairs to Linda.

She found the girl curled up on a wide window-seat in her grandmother's bedroom, looking out into the garden, where rain dripped from the trees and shrubs, and lay in little puddles on the well-kept drive.

She looked pale and grave, but she roused herself when Mrs. Lovelace went to her. "Well, darling? What does he say?"

Mrs. Lovelace tried to smile.

"Things are not very good, Linda."

Linda kissed the old lady's soft cheek, and for a moment there was silence, then: "Do you think my mother will come back?" the girl asked in a strangely hard voice.

Mrs. Lovelace did not answer.

"I hope she doesn't," Linda went on, fiercely. "I hope I never see her again."

"My darling, you should not say that."

Linda's pale face flamed.

"I shall say it," she said vehemently. "I never want to see her again. She killed Daddy . . . if she'd only been kind to him——" She could not go on, her voice broke, for Linda had loved her father; in spite of his braggart ways and lack of education she had loved him whole-heartedly.

Mrs. Lovelace stroked her bent head with a gentle hand, and presently the girl looked up again, her eyes wet, but resolute.

"How poor shall we be?" she asked.

"Very poor, I am afraid. We shall only have about £200 a year between us, and that is very little nowadays." Mrs. Lovelace hesitated, then asked: "What are you thinking about, darling?"

Linda scrambled down from the window-seat; she stretched her arms above her head with a gesture of freedom, as if some intolerable burden had suddenly fallen from her shoulders.

"I am thinking," said Linda triumphantly, "that at last I can do what I've always longed to do. I can go into a shop."

"Go into a shop?" Mrs. Lovelace repeated her granddaughter's words as if they held no meaning for her. "Go into a shop? What shop? And why?" she asked perplexed.

Linda laughed; she looked flushed and excited.

"To work, of course, darling," she explained. "To learn the business. I shall have

to work! We can't live on two hundred a year—at least, we can't live on it and be happy, either of us! Besides, I must do something or I can't exist. Oh, Grannie, don't look so shocked."

Mrs. Lovelace sat down weakly in the nearest chair.

"You don't know what you are talking about, Linda," she said firmly. "You're over-excited. You had better go and lie down, and I will bring you some sal-volatile."

Linda laughed.

"Darling, don't be silly. I know quite well what I'm talking about, and my mind has been made up for . . . oh, ages! Long before all . . . this happened. Mother always said that I had Daddy's commercial instinct. Well, perhaps she was right! Anyway, I'm going into business. I'm not ashamed of being in a shop. I heard somebody say only the other day that all the money is in trade nowadays. Why, it was the vicar who said that if he had a dozen boys they should all go into trade—no more professions for him! Oh, Grannie, you know he did."

Mrs. Lovelace passed her handkerchief agitatedly across her eyes.

"The vicar has no sons, Linda," she said faintly. "If he had he would not have said anything so foolish. My dear child, let me beg of you to put this—this absurd idea out of your head. Why, let me see, how old are you—only fifteen?"

"Sixteen. I'm seventeen in March," said Linda firmly.

"It's a child—a mere baby," her grandmother wailed.

Linda knelt down beside her, and looked up into her face.

"Don't be a ridiculous darling," she said severely. "To do any good in the world one has to start young! Think what I've got to learn!" She clasped her hands earnestly. "Oh, I'm glad I'm not any older—it gives me such a lot of time."

She sat back on her heels and stared before her with earnest eyes.

"I've thought it all out," she announced. "I shall change my name for yours. I shall call myself Linda Lovelace! It's such a suitable name, don't you think, Grannie? Because, of course, I shall go into a draper's shop. I've always meant to—ever since the days when I played with your ribbon box, it's been in my mind that some day I would go into a real shop and serve real people with real yards of lovely lace and ribbons!" She sprang to her feet excitedly.

"Grannie! Do you remember that little old song you taught me when I was quite tiny:

"Ladies with blue eyes, and ladies with true eyes—
Listen, oh list to my cry—
Ribbons and laces for sweet pretty faces;
Oh! come to the market and buy."

Mrs. Lovelace burst into tears.

"And I am to blame for it all," she sobbed. "Linda, you will break my heart."

Linda stood very erect, her eyes shining.

"No, I shall make you proud of me," she said confidently.

She looked so young, and yet somehow so capable as she stood there, her slim young body drawn up to its full height, her hands clenched determinedly.

"So, like her father," Mrs. Dawson would have wailed if she had been there. "He was always a pig-headed, obstinate man. I never could do anything with him."

She could have twisted the poor man round her little finger at one time, if she had ever troubled sufficiently to try; it was only afterwards, when he realised the tragedy of his marriage, that he had grown hard and obstinate.

So there was another consultation between Mrs. Lovelace and the family lawyer, whose name was Stern, a name which to Mrs. Lovelace appeared strangely unsuitable, seeing that he immediately agreed with Linda that it would be a splendid thing for her to find some occupation, and promised to make inquiries for her.

"I should have liked to live in," Linda told him excitedly, "only, of course, there's Grannie—and I can't leave her."

"Of course not—exactly," Mr. Stern agreed, and looked with admiration at this determined young person who had so easily brought him round to her point of view. Only sixteen, he was thinking! She might have been nineteen, at least.

"I don't know where you have found out so much about the shops," Mrs. Lovelace complained when he had gone. "Did you read it in a book?"

"Mary had a sister in Lorne and Dodwell's," Linda explained coolly, "and she told me all about it. She was in hosiery."

Mary was a parlour-maid whom Mrs. Dawson had dismissed in a fit of temper and had regretted doing so ever after.

"Hosiery!" said Mrs. Lovelace, faintly.

"Yes," Linda nodded. She had long since made up her mind that the best and only way to manage her grandmother, and overrule her objections, would be to ignore them. "She sold lovely silk stockings, Grannie, with open-work clocks as fine as a spider's web—something like the old lace in your ribbon box; such beautiful work," she added almost reverently.

Mrs. Lovelace produced her smelling-salts; in her heart she was enormously proud of her granddaughter's pluck and determination, but in her young days it had always been the correct thing to show signs of faintness at any ultra-modern idea, and she could not as yet quite free herself of old customs and habits.

Finding she was unobserved, however, she put the stopper back into the smelling-bottle and sighed resignedly.

"I thought you were going for a walk," she said, after a moment. "It's nice and sunny, and we get so little sunshine."

Linda glanced towards the window.

"I'll go now," she said. She put on her hat and walked down the road, thinking of the future all the time, and stopping every few yards to look in at a shop window.

She and Mrs. Lovelace were still living in the big house in Kensington which Thomas Dawson had bought and redecorated with such pride, because for the present nothing had been decided, and the affairs of the business were still unsettled.

"It will be a cruel wrench having to leave," Mrs. Lovelace said often, but Linda did not think so. She had very few happy memories of the house, and a great many unhappy ones. She thought it would be delightful to start life all over again and try and forget the past.

"Except Daddy," so she told herself tremulously. "I could never forget him, whatever happened."

Her thoughts were full of him as she walked along; she had never realised until his death how tragic his life must have been.

As a child she had only known him as a kind man with a red face and a loud voice, who laughed a great deal, but lately, from little things she had heard and discovered for herself, she knew that his laughter must very often have rung hollow, and that he could never really have been happy at all. Tears swam into her eyes, blinding her as she turned to cross the road, so that she hardly saw where she was going, or realised that a high-powered car was bearing swiftly down upon her till she felt her shoulder grabbed by a strong hand, and she was unceremoniously dragged back on to the path.

"Why don't you look where you're going?" a man's voice demanded angrily. "You might have been killed," and she looked up, flushed and indignant, into a pair of grey eyes that were scowling fiercely at her from beneath rather bushy brows.

"You might have been run over," their owner said again more quietly. "Do you always walk about the streets dreaming?" Then suddenly he smiled, and when he smiled he looked quite young and jolly, so that involuntarily Linda smiled too, and forgot her annoyance.

“I wasn’t dreaming. I was thinking,” she corrected him gravely, and then as an after-thought she added, “Thank you, if you saved my life.”

He laughed. “Well, it wasn’t anything to write to the papers about,” he said cheerily. “But the car was coming rather quickly, and you might have been knocked down. . . . Hullo, it’s going to rain!”

The sunshine had all disappeared, and even as the man spoke, without any warning, a sudden shower came spattering down, making people run to right and left for shelter.

“There’s a doorway here,” the man said: he glanced at Linda, and then up at the sky. “It won’t last,” he added, and led the way under the shelter of a porch just behind them.

Linda followed and stood rather shyly beside him, watching the raindrops dancing down on the pavement.

“Like a spring shower,” said the man.

“Yes.” She glanced up at him interestedly. He was not at all good looking, in fact, she was not at all sure that she did not consider him rather ugly, except when he smiled, and then his face seemed to light up in the most unexpected fashion.

He was tall and rather thin, and the curiously bushy eyebrows made him look much older than he really was, and much more severe.

But he had nice grey eyes, and a well-cut mouth and chin, and what little Linda could see of his hair beneath his soft grey hat was dark.

The rain showed no sign of diminishing.

“It’s going to last,” the man said disgustedly; he looked at Linda again, “Do you live far away?”

“No. I can get a bus.”

He smiled amusedly.

“Can you? I doubt it. Look at the crowd fighting for them now.”

He glanced across the road to where a struggling mass of men and women were pushing and jostling one another to get on to an omnibus out of the pelting rain.

“Better stay here for a little while and wait,” he advised.

“Very well.”

Linda did not mind; she was not in a hurry to get home, and she was a girl who could always find plenty of amusement in watching the people around her.

Presently she asked politely, mindful of her companion’s previous consideration for her:

“Have *you* far to go to get home?”

He laughed. “Well, I don’t know about home—but I haven’t far to go to my

place of business," he explained. "You see, I'm down the road in Lorne and Dodwell's, the drapers."

Linda's face flushed with excitement.

It seemed to her that providence must have sent this man straight into her life to help her towards the goal of her great ambition; she caught at the sleeve of his coat eagerly as she repeated his words.

"In Lorne and Dodwell's! Oh, how perfectly lovely!"

"Lovely!" He looked intensely amused. "I don't know that I've ever considered it very lovely," he submitted drily.

"Grannie says that people never appreciate a thing when they have got it," Linda told him primly. "But it's my ambition to go into a draper's shop—not that I shall ever be lucky to get into such a splendid one as yours," she added regretfully, then her face brightened again. "What department are you in?" she asked.

He laughed outright at that.

"Well, I'm not exactly in any department," he said rather dubiously, "though I know practically the whole business. You see——" he hesitated, then he added, "you see I happen to be Robert Lorne."

"Oh!" Linda's hand fell from his sleeve, and she flushed crimson. "Oh, I beg your pardon! I never thought . . . never guessed."

"Of course not, how could you?" he answered easily. "I don't flatter myself that I'm as well known as all that. . . . And so it's your ambition to go into a shop, is it?"

"Yes. You see, I've got to work—my father died and left us without much money, so I must work; and the only thing I should care to do would be to go into a shop." She smiled suddenly, showing a little dimple at the corner of her mouth. "Mother used to say it was the commercial instinct coming out," she told him in friendly fashion.

"The commercial instinct is not at all a bad thing to have nowadays," young Lorne said; he looked at her consideringly for a moment, then, "You're rather young, aren't you?" he asked hesitatingly.

Linda told a white lie, feeling entirely justified.

"I'm seventeen."

"Really!" He looked surprised. "I should not have thought you were so much. However——" He hesitated again, then asked abruptly: "What do your people think of . . . of this idea of yours?"

"There is only Grannie to think anything at all," Linda said rather sadly. "Grannie and Mr. Stern—he's the lawyer, but he thinks it's quite right. He thinks if people are

very keen on anything they should be allowed to do it."

Robert Lorne laughed.

"Does he! Isn't that rather a tall order?"

"I don't think so. Grannie didn't approve at first, but she's quite resigned now." Again came the quick little smile and the dimple. "Grannie's a darling—but she's got old-fashioned ideas."

"And old-fashioned ideas are not bad things to have nowadays, either," young Lorne said.

"No, I suppose not." Linda looked anxiously up at the sky, which was clearing very quickly, showing a faint gleam of sunshine. She wished with all her heart that it would go on raining, so that she could stay here and ask this interesting man some more about his wonderful business, but apparently he was anxious to go, for he stepped out on to the path.

"The rain has stopped. I must be getting along."

Linda stifled a regretful sigh; such an opportunity would never occur again she was sure, and she was trying to summon enough courage to ask if he could not possibly help her towards the fulfilment of her ambition, when he said diffidently:—

"I wonder if you would care to come along and see my uncle? He's the head of the firm, you know, and if you told him what you have just told me. . . ."

She gave a little broken cry of delight.

"Oh, could I? May I?—wouldn't he mind?"

"I am sure he would be delighted," Robert Lorne said rather stiffly.

He thought this girl very amusing, and for her age a most determined young person, and he thought it would be interesting to see what impression she made on his uncle, for Samuel Lorne was admitted to be one of the hardest-headed men of business who ever made his way unaided through life, and also the keenest judge of character.

So together he and Linda crossed the muddy road and walked the few yards to the big entrance door of Lorne and Dodwell's, and with a fast-beating heart she followed him through the softly carpeted departments and down a long passage till they came to a door with a frosted glass pane with the word "Private" written across it and underneath the two magical names—

"Mr. Samuel Lorne,
Mr. Robert Lorne."

Her companion stopped then and looked down at her. "You've no need to be afraid," he said, mistaking the flush on her cheeks for nervousness, and Linda shook

her head as she answered: "I'm not a bit afraid, thank you."

Robert Lorne said: "Oh, I see," rather dryly, and opened the door, standing back for her to pass through.

An elderly man with white hair and a thin, parchment-like face sat at a table with a large cup of tea beside him.

At first glance he looked kindly and mild enough, but when he raised his eyes even Linda's youthful temerity received a check, for beneath the beetling brows which were so like his nephew's his eyes were as keen as steel gimlets, and Linda had the uncomfortable feeling that at one glance he had seen right through her, and knew just how anxious and eager she was to make a good impression upon him.

And then he said, "Well!" in a gruff, unfriendly voice, and looked at his nephew. "Well, what is it?" he said again.

Robert drew a chair forward for Linda, but she was too excited to sit down; she stood there twisting her hands together, her eyes bright with eagerness, while he explained the reason of her visit.

"I know you always believe in encouraging youthful enterprise," he finished up, and there was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes as he looked at the elder man. "So I ventured to bring Miss. . . ." He turned to Linda. "By the way, what is your name?" he asked.

Linda told him promptly.

"Linda Lovelace"—and the man at the table grunted and said "Humph! A good name for our business," and for a moment he stared hard at Linda silently. Then he said again, "What's your father?"

"He's dead."

The heavy brows almost met in a frown.

"I didn't ask where he was. I asked what he was!"

"He was a partner in Dawson and Welby, the silk merchants," Linda told him with a touch of pride.

"Dawson and Welby!" His scowl deepened. "Pooh! there was nobody of the name of Lovelace in that unfortunate firm."

Tears rose to Linda's eyes.

"His name was Dawson," she explained. "My mother's maiden name was Lovelace, and as I've got to work for my living now, I thought I would take it, as I like it better than Dawson."

"I see." Mr. Lorne finished his tea, and turned his chair round in order to get a better view of her. "So you're poor Dawson's daughter, eh?" he asked.

"Yes."

“I knew your father very well.” His voice was more kindly. “I knew him well, and sympathised with his failure, which was due to no fault of his. He was the one straight man in a gang of scoundrels.”

“Yes,” said Linda gratefully: she liked him for speaking so kindly of her father.

“But because I knew him, that will be no reason for treating you any differently to the rest of my staff—always supposing I give you a trial,” the old man went on. “You’ll have to start at the bottom of the ladder and work your way up, as I had to—as my nephew here had to—as anyone who is worth their salt can do!”

“Yes,” said Linda.

There was another silence, then Samuel Lorne looked at his nephew.

“Well, supposing we give the little girl a chance?” he suggested.

Looking back on that afternoon it always seemed like a dream to Linda—a dream from the moment when Robert Lorne’s hand dragged her back to safety from the speeding motor-car, till the moment when she walked out of his uncle’s office with a promise of a start in the great firm of Lorne and Dodwell at the astounding salary of fifteen shillings a week and her lunch and tea.

Robert Lorne escorted her back to the street door, and shook hands with her solemnly; but there was a twinkle in his eyes beneath their heavy brows, and he had hard work to check a smile when she turned impulsively to him at the last moment to ask—

“Mr. Lorne really means it, doesn’t he? I really have been given the post, haven’t I?”

“My uncle is a man of his word, Miss Lovelace,” Robert Lorne answered. She gave a great sigh of relief.

“Yes, I knew he was,” she said, and a moment later she had disappeared through the heavy swing doors and was speeding away down the street.

Her face felt hot, and her heart was beating fast with excitement as she burst into her grandmother’s drawing-room.

“It’s happened! I’ve done it! They’ve engaged me, and I start on Monday morning. Fifteen shillings a week, Grannie, and lunch and tea. In Lorne and Dodwell’s—Mr. Lorne himself engaged me. I met him in the rain—the nephew I mean, not the uncle—and I told him I wanted to go into a shop, and he said if I liked I could go to see his uncle, and the uncle’s a director—and I went to the office, and he knew father! and I told him why I’ve changed my name—and he said because of that I shouldn’t have any favouritism shown, and he was awfully nice, and they both shook hands with me, and. . . .” She flung her arms round the old lady’s neck and kissed her rapturously. “Oh, isn’t it perfectly wonderful.”

Mrs. Lovelace extricated herself from her granddaughter's arms and gasped.

"My dear child, what are you talking about?" she objected in alarm. "I haven't understood one word, and I've only heard about two. Sit down and take off your hat and coat, and get your breath. Have you got wet? You took no umbrella, I know ——" She passed an anxious hand over the girl's shoulders. "Did you stand up for the shower? Oh, my dear, do sit down quietly, and get your breath."

Linda obeyed with an effort; she could not understand why the whole world was not as excited about her afternoon's adventure as she was, but she managed to control herself, and tell Mrs. Lovelace with more or less clearness exactly what had happened.

"And I start on Monday morning," she added again breathlessly.

Mrs. Lovelace felt with a white, helpless hand for her smelling salts. "And . . . have these two gentlemen given you any guarantee of their integrity?" she asked faintly.

Linda laughed.

"Oh, darling, don't behave as if we came out of the Ark," she objected.

"Mr. Lorne is a most wonderful man, and I love him already. He's got eyes like the sparks that come off an anvil, and brows like this——" and she screwed her sweet face up into a very bad imitation of old Samuel Lorne's.

"And—the nephew?" Mrs. Lovelace asked with the deadly calm of a great despair. "Do you love him also, may I ask?"

Linda waved an airy hand.

"Oh, he's only quite young, and so he doesn't count," she explained. "He must be quite a junior partner—at least, his name came second on the office door."

Mrs. Lovelace applied a handkerchief to her eyes.

"I don't know what your poor father would say," she wept.

Linda stood up. She looked very independent and confident, and her eyes were almost fierce.

"He'd say—he'd say that he was proud of me," she said in a voice that was not quite steady. "I know that's what poor Daddy would say."

"And if anything happens and you do not like the life——" her grandmother said faintly. "If anything happens that you cannot stand the hard work——"

"Darling, it won't be hard! and there are heaps of other girls there, and they can't all be so much stronger than I am."

"But the continual standing!" Mrs. Lovelace wailed. "I have so often felt sorry for the poor girls. Linda, if anything happens to you, what will become of me?"

"Nothing will happen, except that some day I hope I shall have a business of my

own," Linda said confidently. "Oh, Grannie, how can you sit there and cry, when I thought you'd be so proud and pleased?"

But for some minutes Mrs. Lovelace was inconsolable.

"I had such plans for you. I hoped you would be presented at Court, and make a great marriage," she sobbed, for the first time speaking of the cherished ambitions she had dreamed of for her darling.

Linda turned away, and for a moment there was silence; then she said in a firm little voice that held a strong note like her father's: "Grannie, I haven't any ambitions like that. I hate money that is only used to have what people call a good time—money that is used as—as mother used it—for frocks and diamonds and—and trying to go to places where she wasn't wanted, and to know people who didn't want to know her except for what she'd got. Father was a self-made man, and that's something to be proud of. It wasn't his fault that he failed, poor darling—why, even Mr. Lorne said that he was the one straight man in a gang of scoundrels. . . ." Her voice faltered but she went on again bravely.

"I'm going to make my own way as he did! and as for a great marriage!" she laughed with youthful scorn, "well, I never want to get married at all, if it's going to be like Daddy's was——"

"All women are not bad," Mrs. Lovelace averred. "And there must be many happy marriages in the world. Some husbands are goodness itself to their wives."

Linda turned and looked at her steadily.

"Was yours?" she asked.

Mrs. Lovelace tried to temporise.

"Your grandfather was a very difficult man, my dear. He took a great deal of understanding. I cannot truthfully say that we were always happy—nobody can expect to be always happy; but he had his good points."

Linda began to laugh.

"Oh, Grannie; and I heard you say once that the day you most liked him was the day he died."

A faint flush rose to the old lady's cheek, and she held her head high with dignity.

"I think you are speaking of something you are far too young to understand," she complained, and sailed out of the room with a great rustling of silk skirts.

Linda grew grave when she was alone again. She crossed to the mantelshelf and looked at herself in a mirror which hung above it.

It had so often reflected her mother's beauty in its settings of expensive frocks and hats, and for a moment a pang of remorse touched the girl's heart as she thought of her.

Where was she now? And what was she doing? So little was known of the man with whom she had made her heartless flight. Mr. Stern had told Mrs. Lovelace that beyond the fact that he had had a bad reputation and no money, nothing had been discovered about him, and the old lady had always rather shrunk from the subject.

"I wonder if I shall ever see her again," was the thought in Linda's mind as she looked at her own grave reflection; and then, "And I wonder if she is happy."

Happiness was such a great thing, and even to her youth there seemed little enough of it in the world, and she remembered that she had once heard Mr. Stern say that people would find life easier if they only had more to occupy their time.

"Work! That's the thing to make life worth while," he had told her. "You remember that, my dear. Work well, then you'll be able to play well, and then you'll be happy."

"And I will be happy, I will," Linda told herself determinedly. "I will make a success of my life, and do something that is worth while."

And in her room overheard Mrs. Lovelace, wiping away her tears and trying to believe that everything was for the best no matter how much of a mistake it might seem at first, heard Linda's happy voice singing a snatch of the old song which she had taught her as a small child:

> "Ladies with blue eyes, and ladies with true eyes,
> Listen, oh list to my cry!
> Ribbons and laces for sweet pretty faces,
> Oh, come to the market and buy!"

"If only she is going to be happy, that's all I care about," the old lady told herself passionately. "If only she is going to be happy."

Linda started work in Lorne and Dodwell's on the Monday morning as had been arranged, and for the first few days she found life the most bewildering and strange thing.

The business into which she had been so eager to enter, proved at first to be anything but a bed of roses.

"I never would have believed I could be so stupid," she told Mrs. Lovelace almost in tears. "It's taken all the conceit out of me!" She laughed with the tears in her eyes. "Not that it isn't perfectly lovely all the same," she added breathlessly as she saw the anxiety in her grandmother's face.

"If you don't like it——" the old lady faltered and Linda squared her shoulders.

"Don't like it! Of course I do! It's only that it's a little strange just at first."

The strangest part of it all, although she hardly liked to admit it even to herself, was the feeling that she was only one of a great organisation. There were so many girls and women employed in Lorne and Dodwell's, all of whom seemed more important than she did, that the feeling that she was, after all, of very small moment, gave her a new sense of humility.

During her interview with Mr. Samuel Lorne she had felt important and of real necessity to the firm, but half an hour of routine work disillusioned her.

Mr. Robert Lorne passed her in the lace department on the first morning with only the vaguest acknowledgment, and she had had the uncomfortable feeling that he did not even remember her.

For a moment she felt hurt, then she laughed at herself; after all, why should he remember her, just because they had had a few moments' chat together in the rain, and because he had known her father?

"Do you like being here?" she asked the assistant in whose charge she had been placed, during a slack moment, when they found themselves alone. Miss Gillet, who had at first been rather inclined to patronise Linda, unbent a little at the question.

She was rather haughty in manner, and Linda had watched with awe while she waited on an old lady with gold pince-nez and a waving plume in her bonnet, and it had almost seemed to her that Miss Gillet was the more aristocratic of the two, until she had been told that the old lady was the Countess of Star. It was during the moment following this that she had ventured upon her question.

"Do you like being here?"

Miss Gillet glanced at herself in a mirror, and adjusted a lock of perfectly waved hair before she answered.

"Does anyone like working for one's living?"

"I think I do," Linda answered quite seriously, and then, drawing a step nearer, she asked interestedly: "And was that lady really the Countess of Star?"

Miss Gillet pursed up her lips in disapproval.

"It is not good form to discuss the customers, Miss Lovelace," she said frigidly.

"Oh!" Linda flushed in embarrassment.

"I was only so interested," she apologised. "You see, I've never been so close to a Countess before."

She remembered her mother's unavailing struggles to get back into what she had always called "My own set"; remembered, too, that her father had been the chief drawback, for, in spite of the money he had at one time possessed, he would never try to make himself popular with his wife's friends.

"They only want you for what you've got," he often said in his downright, almost brutal fashion. "If you lost your money, or, at least, if I lost mine, do you think they'd look at you? Not much they wouldn't."

The memory brought a sadness to her face, and Miss Gillet, seeing it, relented a little.

"You're young, and new to the business," she said more kindly. "Live and learn is a good motto. Yes—that was the Countess of Star." She lowered her voice as she added, "And the young lady with her was Miss Fernie, the Countess's companion."

"Oh!" Linda cast eager eyes across the lace and ribbon counter to catch another glimpse of the interesting client, but she had already moved out of sight.

"If you will pay attention," Miss Gillet said in her most businesslike tone of voice once more, "I will show you the new filet lace that came this morning. The second box on your left—no, the second!"

Linda obeyed instructions eagerly; she thought the lace was the most delicate and beautiful she had ever seen; she touched it with fingers that were almost reverent.

"Isn't it perfectly lovely!" she whispered.

Miss Gillet raised indifferent brows.

"It is a very fine texture," she said carelessly.

Then she smiled, with one of her swift changes from stiff unapproachability to friendliness. "When you have been in this business as long as I have, you will be less enthusiastic," she said.

"I thought perhaps I might be more enthusiastic," Linda ventured, whereupon

Miss Gillet froze again and bade her sharply not to chatter so much.

"But she's nice really; she's quite nice!" so a girl who sat next to Linda at lunch informed her in reply to a tentative question. "You may think she's rather a tartar, we all do to start with; but, really, she's ever so kind. Why"—she lowered her voice—"last winter, when I was ill, she came round nearly every day to see me, and brought flowers or fruit; and it isn't everyone who'll do that."

"I think she's very smart," Linda said admiringly.

The other girl, who's name, so she informed Linda, was Nelly Sweet, shrugged her slim shoulders.

"Oh, she's smart enough, but she's not very good-looking, is she?"

"I think her hair is lovely," Linda said rather defensively.

Nelly Sweet was at the handkerchief counter, and therefore Linda felt it was her duty to stick up for ribbons and laces.

Nelly chuckled.

"Lovely! Why it's dyed," she whispered.

Linda looked angry. "Well, anyway," she ventured after a moment, "I don't know that it matters much, if she's as kind as you say she is."

Nelly blushed.

"No! it was horrid of me to say that," she said generously. "As you say, what does it matter?" She looked at Linda quizzically. "I should like to be friends with you," she blurted out then. "What's your name?"

Linda told her.

Lunch was ended at that moment, but as she rose to leave the table, Nelly Sweet said quickly:

"Wait for me at six. I'll walk home with you."

Linda was late home that evening, and when at last she walked into the house, Mrs. Lovelace met her agitatedly at the door.

"Oh, my dear! I was so anxious! What has happened? I have been imagining all sorts of things."

Linda laughed as she kissed her.

"Sorry, dear! Am I late? I didn't know what the time was." She took off her hat, and ruffled her hair. "Grannie! I've made a friend."

"A friend, dear?"

"Yes." Linda sat down at the table and began to pour out tea. Late dinner was a meal dispensed with now for economy's sake, and "high tea" had taken its place.

"All my life I've been used to my dinner at night," Mrs. Lovelace protested at first. "But, of course, if we really can't afford it any longer——"

"I'm afraid we can't dear," Linda said briskly. "And after all, what does it matter?"

So she poured out tea, and cut bread and butter happily enough as she talked away.

"She's in the handkerchief department, and her name is Nelly Sweet, and she's ever so pretty, and she's got short curly hair."

"Nelly Sweet!" Mrs. Lovelace faltered. "Doesn't it—doesn't it sound rather like—the stage, Linda?"

Linda laughed.

"Yes, I think it does," she admitted. "And she was on the stage once, but she was no good at it, so she went into Lorne and Dodwell's instead. She lives in rooms with another girl—a girl named Joan Astley—down the Fulham Road"—she hesitated—"I don't think I like the other girl," she added slowly.

Mrs. Lovelace shivered distastefully.

"The Fulham Road! Isn't that rather a—poor neighbourhood?" she asked.

"Some of it's awful," Linda admitted. "But it's all they can afford; and it's all we shall be able to afford, I'm afraid, darling, when we leave here."

The old lady's face quivered a little, but she made no reply.

"I'm going to bring Nelly to see you one day," Linda went on. "I've told her all about you, and she's longing to see you. She's got a grandmother herself, and she loves her——" she looked across the table with affectionate eyes. "Almost as much as I love you," she added.

Mrs. Lovelace put down her teacup with a hand that was not quite steady. "Linda! Mr. Stern has been here this afternoon, and—the house is sold."

"At last! Oh, what a relief." Linda drew a long breath of thankfulness. "Won't it be lovely to get out of it? Why—Grannie——"

Mrs. Lovelace had covered her face with her slender hands.

"You are so young," she said brokenly. "You've got all your life before you; but I'm an old woman, and—to me it's like the end of everything I have ever known."

"Grannie!" Linda left the table, and knelt down beside her, her face flushed with pity and distress.

"Oh, don't say that! don't!" she pleaded. "We're going to be so happy. I'm going to work so hard. We can have a little home of our own—or rooms! If we could get rooms like Nelly's, we could be quite happy. There is such a nice landlady——"

Mrs. Lovelace wiped her tears away.

"I'm not brave like you, my dear," she said, trying to smile. "And to me the

world seems all upside down—all upside down!"

Linda would not take her seriously; she laughed and joked, and determinedly changed the subject, rattling on about the incidents of the day, till Mrs. Lovelace smiled again and forgot her troubles.

But at night when Linda was brushing her hair in her own room her grandmother's words suddenly came back to her.

"I'm an old woman—and to me it's like the end of everything."

It was true! She was old! And sudden fear filled the girl's heart.

If Mrs. Lovelace died! What would become of her? She would be all alone.

She tried in vain to shake away the foreboding.

Why should Mrs. Lovelace die? She would live for many more years yet. Of course, it would seem strange to her at first, to live in small rooms, and perhaps in a neighbourhood like the Fulham Road. . . .

She tried to picture her grandmother in the rooms to which Nelly Sweet had taken her that afternoon. They were like the rooms in a doll's house! and very cheaply furnished. All right for anyone young and strong enough to fight a way through the world and conquer; but for anyone old and frail who had been used to a sheltered life of luxury, how impossible.

And again the old thought flashed into Linda's mind.

"If only I could be quick and make some money for her! If only I were well off!"

As it was, she would probably have to wait years and years before she was in any position worth speaking about—years and years, and by that time—— She would not allow herself to think what tragic thing might have happened by then. She crept into bed, and drew the clothes over her head.

But the following day she spoke of her thought to Nelly Sweet.

"Wouldn't it be fine to be rich?"

"Rich!" Nelly wrinkled up her pretty nose. "I never think about it because I know it's no good," she said philosophically.

"Why not?" Linda asked. "Lots of women make money! Lots of women run their own businesses."

Nelly laughed.

"Oh, is that your ambition?" she said teasingly.

Linda shook her head.

"No, it isn't! I've never even thought about it, but all the same, I should like to," she added slowly.

"Where there's a will, there's a way, very often," Nelly said lightly. She was not a very serious person.

She took life very much as it came, enjoying everything, envying nobody.

"Gillet's cute, you know!" she said suddenly. Linda looked a little shocked; she had not yet got used to the casual way in which the girls referred to the heads of departments when they were not present. "Gillet's cute," Nelly said again. "She said that you had ambitious eyes!" Linda was not sure if it was a compliment or not.

Nelly laughed. "That's what she said, and she's generally right."

The two girls were coming down from lunch then, and Nelly suddenly caught Linda's arm in an eager little grip. "Look! there's the Black Prince, as we call him. No—you're looking the wrong way—over there by the door."

Linda looked quickly round. A tall young man with rather a bored face was standing by the main entrance, impatiently tapping his cane against an immaculately shod foot.

He was exceedingly good looking in a rather swarthy way, and Nelly's name of "the Black Prince" seemed to suit him admirably.

"Who is he?" Linda asked; she was not particularly interested.

"His real name is Andrew Lincoln," Nelly explained in an undertone. "He's an Honourable or something. I'm not quite sure about his title—I always get muddled. Anyway, he's the Countess of Star's nephew, and he's rich—oh! ever so rich."

Linda stifled a sigh.

Things were not very fairly divided in this world, she thought, with a shade of envy. Why was it that some people had so much and others so little, so very little! not even enough to keep a dear, beloved grandmother in comfort for the rest of her short life.

She looked at the Black Prince rather wistfully and at that moment, as if conscious of her gaze, he turned, and their eyes met.

There was a moment's hesitation, then the faintest smile crossed his dark face and, to her intense annoyance, a wave of embarrassed colour ran up from Linda's chin to her brow.

Nelly Sweet, noticing it, squeezed Linda's arm.

"There you are! He smiles at any girl," she said with a sort of amused scorn, and at the same moment one of the shop-walkers, a precise-looking person in an immaculately-fitting frock-coat, came across to them.

"Are you waiting for anything, Miss Sweet?" he asked, rather cynically, and Nelly Sweet hurriedly dropped Linda's arm.

"We've just come down from lunch," she answered in rather a subdued tone of voice, and, turning, she fled precipitately, leaving Linda to follow as best she could.

"Who was that?" Linda asked breathlessly, overtaking her.

Nelly tossed her head.

"Oh, that's old Flynn! He's been here since the flood," she explained, rather inelegantly. "He doesn't like me—and I don't like him, if it comes to that."

"I thought he looked rather nice," Linda submitted doubtfully.

Nelly laughed. "You're welcome," she said laconically, and disappeared behind her own handkerchief counter.

Linda thought quite a lot about the Black Prince during the afternoon; there had been something about him that had strangely attracted her; something in his smile, a slow, unknown quantity which she had never met before, and which had stirred her pulses in a new, frightened way.

"He only smiled at me because I was a shopgirl," she thought, and wondered how he behaved with the girls of his own circle.

"I've spoken to you twice, Miss Lovelace," Miss Gillet said in her sharp way, "and apparently you have not heard me. Are you dreaming, or have you already lost interest in your work?"

Linda apologised hurriedly, and for the rest of the afternoon she worked with great energy, but at tea-time that evening she said to her grandmother:

"There was a countess in Lorne and Dodwell's this afternoon."

Mrs. Lovelace smiled.

"I expect that is a very ordinary occurrence, Linda," she said gently. "Lorne and Dodwell's must have most of the best people as customers."

"She was the Countess of Star," Linda told her thoughtfully.

Mrs. Lovelace looked rather startled.

"I knew her—slightly—years ago," she said in her dignified way. "A very charming woman she was in those days. Let me see, she must be about my own age."

"She is very handsome," Linda said.

"She came of a handsome family," Mrs. Lovelace answered. "I remember her marriage quite well. Star was much older than she, and it was a great regret to them both that they never had any children. When her husband died the title passed to his brother."

"She has a nephew," Linda said unthinkingly. "I think he is an Honourable——"

A shade of anxiety crossed the old lady's face.

"You seem to have gained a great deal of information to-day, my dear," she protested.

Linda laughed, though her colour rose.

"It's only what the other girls tell me—what Nelly Sweet tells me."

“I should like to meet this Miss Sweet,” Mrs. Lovelace said after a moment. “I should like to judge for myself whether she is a fit companion and friend for you.”

Linda laughed, half in amusement, half vexation.

“Oh, Grannie, darling! As if I’m not old enough to choose for myself!” she protested. “If I’m old enough to go to business, I must be old enough to make my own friends.”

Mrs. Lovelace sighed.

“And that remark brings it all back to my original point. Am I right in allowing you to do this work at all?”

Linda frowned.

“Dearest, haven’t we settled all that long enough ago?”

She rose from the table rather impatiently; she was tired and her head ached.

She might have said more than would have been wise, but she was prevented by a ring at the bell.

The woman who cleaned the house and looked after Mrs. Lovelace during the day had gone, so Linda went down to open the door, and to her surprise she found Nelly Sweet there.

“You! How did you find me?” she asked in amazement.

Nelly laughed.

“I got your address from Gillet,” she said frankly. “I wanted to see you, and it seemed the only way. I looked for you at six but you’d gone, so, as it’s important, I came round.” She hesitated, then asked, “Well, aren’t you going to ask me in?”

“Of course; please come in. My grandmother’s upstairs; we were talking about you a moment ago.”

She led the way to the sitting-room, which was the only one they used now, and opened the door.

“Grannie, we were talking about my friend Nelly Sweet—here she is!”

Mrs. Lovelace rose from her chair; her faded eyes searched Nelly’s bright face with almost painful intensity, then she held out her hand. “How do you do? I am pleased to meet you,” she said simply. Nelly beamed and gushed.

“I’m pleased to meet you too. I’ve heard an awful lot about you from Linda.” She paused, then seemed to realise she was not saying quite the right thing, and rushed on in embarrassment: “I say, what a big house you’ve got! I’d no idea you were such a swell, Linda.”

She did not mean to be offensive, but Mrs. Lovelace flushed sensitively. “This is our house no longer, Miss Sweet,” she said in her simple, dignified way. “Linda and I have only stayed on here till it was sold. We are leaving as soon as we can find

suitable rooms."

Nelly broke out again eagerly.

"I know some in the Fulham Road—awfully nice ones. They're over a grocer's shop, but . . ." her face fell. "I suppose you wouldn't like to live over a grocer's shop?" she submitted doubtfully.

Linda glanced at her grandmother deprecatingly.

"Beggars cannot afford to be choosers," Mrs. Lovelace said.

"No, of course not!" Nelly's eyes were roaming round the room, full of curiosity. She had vaguely recognised from the first that Linda was somehow different from the average girl who came to Lorne and Dodwell's, but she had not expected to find her in a house like this, or with a grandmother who looked as if she had stepped straight out of an oil-painting. Nelly's own grandmother had been a working woman who wore her fringe in curlers from Monday morning till the following Saturday night, and whose language had not always been quite choice.

"What did you want to see me about?" Linda broke in. She could see that Nelly was not making a good impression on Mrs. Lovelace, and she felt annoyed, realising that if only Nelly would be her natural self instead of putting on an affected voice, things would be very different.

Nelly glanced at Mrs. Lovelace and raised her brows in a very obvious question. She had spent many years of her life trying to hide her own little escapades and flirtations from her mother, and was not sure whether Linda practised the same methods.

But it was Mrs. Lovelace herself who interpreted the look and who replied to it.

"Linda has no secrets from me, Miss Sweet."

Nelly laughed apologetically.

"Oh, well, then, in that case!" she said; she turned to Linda. "I want you to come to a dance on Saturday night. A whole crowd of us from Lorne's are going, and it will be great fun. What do you say?"

Linda's eyes grew eager, and her cheeks flushed.

"Oh, I should love it—" she began, then stopped. "I can't," she said in sudden change of voice, "I haven't got a frock."

"Oh!" For a moment Nelly Sweet looked nonplussed, then she broke out again. "Oh we can soon rig one up for you. I'm quite clever at making something out of nothing. I'll show you mine. It's all pieces and remnants, but it's just the sweetest thing on! and you'll love it. Do say you'll come."

Linda looked at her grandmother.

"Can I?—what do you think? Shall I go?" she asked dubiously.

Mrs. Lovelace went back to her chair, one slim hand which rested on its arm was a little unsteady as she spoke.

"May I ask whose dance this is, and where it is to be held, Miss Sweet?"

Nelly laughed nervously.

"Well, it's not anybody's dance exactly," she said with a sort of reluctance. "It's a subscription dance. But it's quite cheap—" she hastened to add, misreading the shadow which crossed Mrs. Lovelace's face. "It's only four shillings with refreshments."

There was a little silence.

"And—where is it to be held?" Mrs. Lovelace asked faintly.

"In a hall quite close by," Nelly explained, eagerly. "It's ever such a nice dance, and we have a real jazz band." She looked at Linda. "You can dance, of course?"

Mrs. Lovelace interrupted with dignity.

"As a child, my granddaughter attended the very best dancing classes."

Nelly looked subdued.

"Oh, of course!" she murmured.

"I can't do any of these new dances very well," Linda admitted. "But I daresay I can soon learn."

"Of course you can! I'll find you some good partners. Joan's taking her boy, and I've got one to come along with me." Again she hesitated, glancing at Mrs. Lovelace. "You haven't got a boy you can bring, I suppose?"

Linda laughed; she was beginning to find the situation amusing.

Her grandmother's face was a study, and she guessed what the old lady must be thinking in her old-fashioned, most circumspect mind.

"I'll talk it over with grannie and tell you to-morrow," she promised, hurriedly. She was relieved when Nelly had said her good-byes and they were downstairs again.

"I think your Grannie's a darling," Nelly said, full of enthusiasm. "She looks as if she's stepped right out of a Christmas number! You know what I mean! One of those coloured plates they give away."

Linda was not sure if Mrs. Lovelace would consider that a compliment or not. "And you will come to the dance?" Nelly urged as a parting word. "You've no idea how jolly they are! Half-past eight till one, and we'll see you home."

"I'll let you know to-morrow," Linda promised, and went back up the stairs with slow feet.

She found Mrs. Lovelace sitting where they had left her, something rather piteous in the expression of her eyes.

"Well, darling?" Linda forced herself to speak cheerfully, "what do you think of her?"

The old lady's lips quivered.

"My dear—I have hardly had time to judge. She has a pretty face, but—oh, Linda, when I was a girl we never thought of going to subscription dances. I don't believe there ever were such things."

"I'm sure there were not, dear," Linda agreed cheerily. "But it's considered quite all right now; but all the same, if you'd rather I didn't go—of course, I haven't a frock."

Mrs. Lovelace rose from her chair; she had fought a stern battle with her scruples while Linda was out of the room.

"If it is the thing to do, and you wish to go, you shall," she said firmly. "It is not the form of enjoyment I should have chosen for you, but . . ." she stopped, and stifled a sigh; then she crossed the room. "Linda! do you remember my old piece-box, the one you used to be so fond of playing with when you were a little child? Well, there is a most lovely length of silk in it now—I bought it somewhere . . . before your mother . . ." her voice shook, and she did not finish her sentence.

She went out of the room, and presently came back with the quaint old tapestry box in which Linda's baby fingers had so often rummaged.

She put it down on the table, and lifted the lid.

Linda stood beside her, her face flushed and eager.

"Ribbons and laces, for sweet pretty faces"—she sang softly.

"I'm coming to the dance," she told Nelly Sweet during lunch the following day. "And I've got some lovely stuff for a frock."

Nelly nodded; her mouth being occupied with a piece of very hot potato at the moment, she found speech impossible.

"A friend of the woman who cleans our house is making it for me," Linda went on, "and it's amber-coloured——"

"Ripping!" Nelly beamed. "You'll look lovely in amber," she prophesied. "Where shall we meet? Would you like us to pick you up, or will you come along to the hall and meet us there?"

"Who else is going?" Linda asked with a shade of anxiety.

"Me and Joan—the girl who digs with me, you know—and I'm taking a boy named Bill Sargent. You'll like him; he's in a bank, and he dances well enough to beat the band. I don't know who Joan is bringing, but it'll be someone posh, you bet! She knows tons of men."

“And nobody else from here?” Linda asked. “Nobody—I mean—I suppose Mr. Lorne never goes, does he?”

“Mr. Lorne!” Nelly’s eyes almost fell out of their sockets in sheer amazement. “Mr. Lorne!” she said again blankly. “Good lord, are you serious? Do you mean Mr. Robert?”

“Yes. I only thought perhaps——” Linda felt very uncomfortable. She wished she had not asked such a foolish question.

Nelly went into fits of laughter.

“Heavens, you have got some quaint ideas! He go to a dance. My dear, he’s the perfect thing in manhood! Mother’s darling and uncle’s joy, and all the rest of it. Why I don’t believe he’d dare go to heaven unless he’d seen a list of those who’d already gone before him.”

Linda frowned. She resented this downright criticism of the man who had been so kind to her.

“I’m sure he isn’t a bit like that,” she protested indignantly.

Nelly made a grimace. “Oh, all right, if you know him so well,” she said, in an injured voice, “I don’t want to spoil your sweet illusions.”

“I only asked a question,” Linda protested. “How do I know what he does or where he goes?”

“Well, he doesn’t go anywhere where he’s likely to meet any of us, you bet your young life,” Nelly said flatly. “That reminds me. If you’re going to wear amber, it’ll clash horribly with me! I’m wearing orange.”

There was a dismayed silence, then she laughed.

“What’s it matter? Joan’s wearing bright green, and she can stand between us and tone us down if ever we get together.”

Linda did not see her again until just before closing time, when she caught her arm for a moment as they passed one another.

“I say, who do you think Joan’s taking to the dance to-morrow night?” she asked.

Linda shook her head.

“I don’t know.”

“She is the absolute limit,” Nelly said, half admiringly, half in disgust. “I don’t know how she does it! I suppose it’s her yellow hair and her figure, but anyway, she gets hold of the men all right.”

“Well, who is she taking, then?” Linda asked. But before Nelly answered some instinct had told her.

“She’s taking the Black Prince, my dear.”

Linda always looked back upon that dance as a distinct division between her old, sheltered life, and the new one upon which she had chosen to embark.

It was all novelty and excitement from the moment when Nelly Sweet called at the house for her, breathless and very smart in her new frock, and with a too much powdered face, till the moment, long past midnight, when she was escorted home again by the Black Prince himself.

"Take care of yourself, promise me you will take care of yourself," were Mrs. Lovelace's last imploring words, and Linda laughed as she kissed her. "What do you think is likely to happen to me?" she asked with affectionate scorn.

She wrapped her cloak warmly around her and ran downstairs to the open door where Nelly waited.

There was a taxicab chugging at the kerbstone outside, and a man standing beside it in evening dress.

Nelly explained and introduced him rather incoherently.

"This is Bill Sargent!—my friend, Miss Lovelace. He's in a bank—oh, I told you—and he would have a taxi. I was late you see. I generally am, aren't I, Bill? So as there wasn't any time to lose we had a taxi." She gave Linda a little push forward. "Get in!" she ordered; "we shall be late, and I want to get there before Joan does."

Linda obeyed. She felt rather bewildered, but a moment later they were driving away, with Nelly chattering all the time, and the big young man on the opposite seat rather silent.

"Linda hasn't been to one of these shows before," Nelly informed him. "I may call you Linda, mayn't I? And you can call me Nelly—it's more easy. You'll like Bill when you know him better," she went on, addressing first Linda and then Bill Sargent with quaint familiarity. "He's rather quiet, but he can dance all right—can't you, Bill?"

Bill shifted his feet uneasily; he looked a little cramped on one of the small seats back to the driver.

"Not so bad," he said modestly. "Do you go to many dances, Miss Lovelace?"

"I haven't been to a grown-up dance at all," Linda admitted reluctantly. "I used to go to parties and things like that when I was small, but lately—well, things have been different."

"Her father died, and they lost their money, you see," Nelly explained. She was

rather proud of Linda and her grandmother; she wished regretfully that it was not compulsory for their big house to be given up; she had been childishly pleased to introduce Bill to it that evening.

Bill made no comment on this gratuitous piece of information, and they arrived at the hall almost at once.

There was a strip of red carpet down, and an awning overhead.

"It's not for us, though," Nelly explained, modestly. "There was a private dance here last night, and I suppose they've left it up."

Linda said "Oh!" She could not always follow Nelly Sweet's rapid transition of thought; she took Bill Sargent's hand when he offered to help her from the taxi, and followed Nelly through the open doorway.

In the cloakroom dozens of girls were already assembled, and the noise of their chatter and laughter was like the humming in a beehive. Nelly introduced her to half-a-dozen of her friends in a single breath.

"They've all brought partners," she informed Linda, in a whisper, "and Bill says he's got someone for you."

Linda felt a little uncomfortable, and for a moment she wished she had not come as she listened to the light-hearted, irresponsible chatter around.

"Look at Elsie's dress! Isn't it a sight? Dyed, I'll bet! It's the same one she had last year, only it was blue then! I don't mind her dyeing it, only she does swank so! Thinks she's too good for anyone else."

"Who's she brought with her?—No! has he really? Well, it serves her right; she always thought he'd ask her to marry him."

Linda caught vague snatches of conversation as she took off her cloak and brushed her hair, meeting the reflection of her pale face in the mirror with rather scared eyes.

What sort of an evening was this going to be? And would she be sorry she had come?

Nelly gripped her arm.

"Come along, the band's started."

They went out and upstairs together; to Linda's confused eyes the room seemed very much overcrowded, and everyone seemed to be staring at her.

Bill Sargent came up to her with a boyish-looking youth following him.

"May I introduce my friend Archie Lang—Miss Lovelace."

Archie Lang bowed, and smiled, showing a dimple and a faultless set of teeth; his very blue eyes seemed to take Linda in from head to foot, with friendly approval before he crooked an arm towards her.

“Shall we dance?”

Bill Sargent had moved away with Nelly, and Linda stammered out:

“What sort of a dance is it? I don’t know the new ones! Oh, I am sorry, but it’s the first dance like this I’ve ever been to.”

Archie Lang did not look at all perturbed, probably he had been warned what to expect beforehand.

“I’ll soon show you how,” he promised. “Just do as I tell you, and don’t be nervous.”

Linda obeyed as best she could.

“Not so difficult—eh?” he asked when they had gone the round of the room three times. “You’re picking it up splendidly. Not tired, are you?”

“No, I like it awfully.”

“Good—we’ll go on then.”

They did not stop till the band stopped, then Archie mopped his warm face and looked at Linda smilingly.

“You’re going to make a dancer, I can see that,” he told her.

“Where shall we sit? It’s warm, isn’t it?” he broke off, staring across the room with round eyes. “My hat! look at our one and only Joan.”

Linda followed the direction of his gaze, and saw that Joan Astley had just entered the room with the tall figure of the Black Prince beside her.

Joan was dressed in a closely-fitting frock made in a very expensive-looking brocade of brilliant colouring, and her queer honey-coloured hair was coiled tightly round her head in a smooth plait.

Archie grinned.

“Looks like an Egyptian,” he said.

“I think she looks lovely; it’s the best frock in the room,” Linda declared.

She was right; beside the expensive originality and severity of Joan Astley’s cut, every other frock seemed to pale into insignificance.

“Well, she’s supposed to know how to dress,” Archie said reluctantly; he had once had rather a serious, if callow, affection for Joan himself, and had not yet quite got over it in spite of the severe snubbing he had received.

Linda was looking at her interestedly; she had not liked Joan when she met her at Nelly Sweet’s rooms, but she honestly admired her appearance.

“That’s the Black Prince with her,” Archie volunteered. “I suppose she has hopes! She always says she’ll marry a title or die an old maid. Should think she’d die an old maid myself, but one never knows!” he added in a mincing tone of mimicry.

Linda looked puzzled.

“But if the Black Prince, as you call him, is really a titled man, why does he come here?” she asked. “There must be heaps of far better places he can go to.”

Archie chuckled.

“These are the sort of places he prefers, I suppose,” he answered. “He can do more as he likes. He’s quite a sport, too, in spite of all the stories people tell about him. I know him well; he banks at our show—when he’s got anything to bank,” he added, facetiously. “And there’s no side about him; he’ll shake hands with any of us, no matter where we meet him.” He hesitated, looking down at Linda. “Like to be introduced?” he asked, with unintentional patronage.

Linda flushed sensitively; at that moment she had met the gaze of the Black Prince across the room, and the same little thrill, half of fear, half of excitement, which his eyes had given her before, went through her heart.

She was conscious of a feeling of fatality, almost of dread.

“If you’d like to know him——” Archie said again.

Linda shook her head.

“No thank you, I should not like to at all,” she said decidedly.

Archie Lang looked surprised.

“Most girls go potty over him,” he said blankly. “You are funny!”

“Am I?” Linda laughed. “Perhaps I like my friends to myself instead of sharing them with everyone.”

“You’re like me, then,” he said. He moved his chair a little closer to hers. “I think we shall get on well.”

“I think we’d better dance again,” Linda told him in her most matter-of-fact voice. “Unless you’re tired of teaching me how not to tread on your feet.”

He declared that nothing could give him greater happiness, and the time seemed to fly until Nelly Sweet came across the room to inform them that they were going to get something to eat.

“Bill’s got a table, so you can share it with us,” she told Linda. “Well, how do you like Archie?” she asked, lowering her voice. “Isn’t he a dear?”

“He’s rather nice,” Linda admitted. “But he’s only a boy.”

Nelly raised her brows.

“Only a boy! My word, he wouldn’t like it if he heard you say that,” she protested. “He thinks he’s absolutely it! he’s in the same bank as Bill, you know.”

“So he told me.”

“They’re great friends, and they dig together,” Nelly went on. Apparently she had a passion for explaining everything and everybody. “Bill’s people live up in the North, and he doesn’t like them, so he doesn’t often go home, and Archie hasn’t got

anybody except an old aunt, who he thinks will leave him all her money. He really comes of well-to-do people," she added impressively.

Linda said, "Oh, does he!" She was getting rather tired of listening to everyone's family history; she would much have preferred to find things out for herself.

They pushed their way down the crowded staircase to the refreshment room.

Bill Sargent, standing on a chair, waved frantically to them.

"Here I am! Come along."

He had tipped up four chairs round a marble-topped table, and had secured a plate of sandwiches and some pale-looking claret-cup.

"Bill always manages to get things," Nelly told Linda with a touch of pride. "He's such a man of the world, you know."

"Is he?" Linda asked, and looked at the placid Bill rather sceptically.

But she was hungry and enjoyed the sandwiches, which were followed by macaroons and an ice-cream which was beginning to feel the heat.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Nelly asked Linda.

She had a great air of showing Linda how one did things in London; presently she produced a cigarette-case and offered it.

"You don't smoke!" she ejaculated in horror when Linda refused. "Goodness, that's another thing we must teach her, Archie."

"I don't think I should like it," Linda protested, flushing.

She did not like to appear different from everyone else, but she was sure smoking would make her head-ache; to change the subject she admired Nelly's cigarette-case.

"What a very pretty one!"

"Yes," Nelly smiled. "Bill gave it to me." She shot an arch look at Bill, who fidgeted uncomfortably.

"Are you engaged to Mr. Sargent?" Linda asked in an undertone when they rose from the table.

Nelly chuckled.

"Not yet! But . . . well . . . I think he'll ask me," she said in a confident little whisper. "He's got quite a good position in the bank—he's on the counter."

Linda was not sure what that meant.

"Is Mr. Lang on the counter, too?" she asked.

Nelly shook her head.

"No, he's a ledger clerk." Then she laughed. "Why don't you call them by their Christian names?" she demanded. "We all do; it's so much more friendly."

Linda flushed in embarrassment. "But I never met them before this evening!" she

protested.

Nelly laughed in derision.

"Goodness! One evening is long enough for some people to get engaged and married in," she said. She turned to the two men who were following them together. "I tell Linda she ought to call you boys by your Christian names," she said airily. "And you call her by her's."

Linda interrupted. "Thank you! but I should not like that. I only allow people I know very well to use my Christian name." Then, conscious of Nelly's blank stare of amazement, and the two men's uncomfortable look, she apologised quickly.

"I don't mean to be unfriendly, but . . . I'm not quite used to the way you all do things."

Nelly's pretty face sharpened angrily.

"If you think you're too good for us——" she began.

Big Bill Sargent struck in bluntly.

"Don't be silly, Nelly, Miss Lovelace is quite right. I should not think of calling her by her Christian name."

Nelly made a grimace at him.

"Hoighty-toighty!" she scoffed. "You're getting up on a pedestal, too, are you?"

He answered rather sharply that he was not doing anything of the sort, and if she liked to be disagreeable she could. And that, anyway, he was going to have a dance with Miss Lovelace.

The hot blood surged into Nelly's pale cheeks, and for an instant her eyes narrowed, until she looked almost plain, but almost at once she was laughing again.

"Pooh! Do you think I care!" she scoffed. "Dance with her and welcome. Archie and I can easily amuse one another. Come on, Archie." She caught his arm, dragging him away, and Linda looked at Bill with vexation.

"Now she's angry with us," she said. "Oh, I am sorry. I would not hurt her feelings for the world."

"You haven't," Bill said bluntly. "She's too fond of trying to have everything her own way. Well—may I have this dance?"

She agreed reluctantly.

"I can't dance at all well," she told him. "But if you like to risk it. . . ."

"I shall be delighted," he answered, and slipped his arm round her slim waist.

He was a far better dancer than Archie Lang, and after the first little embarrassment, Linda gave herself up whole-heartedly to the enjoyment of the moment.

"That was topping!" Bill said when they stopped. "You only want a little practise,

and you'll dance like a fairy."

Linda smiled, well pleased, though she shook her head.

"I'm afraid I shan't have much opportunity to practise," she told him regretfully. "You see——" He interrupted quickly.

"I shall be delighted to bring you here again, or take you to any other dances, if I may."

The colour rose in Linda's face.

"It's very kind of you, but. . . ."

"It's not kind at all—except to myself," he interrupted coolly. "You have only to let me know any night you are free, and . . ."

Linda broke in——

"But Nelly! what would Nelly say?"

He looked surprised.

"It's nothing to do with her," he answered blankly.

"Nothing to . . . oh!" Linda realised that she had said the wrong thing, and tried hurriedly to cover the mistake.

"Shall we go downstairs again and see what the others are doing?" she suggested; she led the way without waiting for him to answer.

The stairs were still fairly crowded, and there was a little knot of people gathered below in the doorway of the refreshment room.

Bill tried to shoulder a way for her.

"Thank you . . . please let this lady pass."

A tall man, who was the centre of the group, turned hurriedly at the request; he was holding a jug of claret-cup in his hand, and as Linda passed him, someone must have jogged his arm, for without the slightest warning the jug tipped, spilling its contents down the front of Linda's frock.

"Oh, I say, I'm most frightfully sorry! Oh, by Jove, what can we do!"

Linda, for a moment, hardly realised what had occurred, raised her eyes at the sound of the distressed voice, and for the third time met the gaze of the Black Prince bent upon her.

Then she looked down at her frock, and saw what had happened.

She gave a little cry of dismay.

"Oh!" She had been so proud of her first evening frock, and now it was quite spoilt.

The Black Prince produced a soft silk handkerchief from his pocket and tried clumsily to wipe out the stains.

"I wouldn't have had it happen for the world. I can't think how I was so clumsy.

I say, do forgive me! Can't we get some water or something and wash it out? I say, you fellows, what's a good thing to get claret stains out with?"

Bill had pushed his way forward now; he frowned as he saw the havoc on Linda's pretty frock.

Joan Astley, lounging picturesquely in a wicker chair close by, laughed in soft amusement.

"I'm afraid nothing will get them out. You'll have to have a fresh width put in, Miss Lovelace."

She was smoking a cigarette in a wicked-looking yellow holder, and she puffed a little cloud of smoke into the air as she spoke.

Linda answered in distress:

"But I shall never be able to match it! It's a very old length of brocade my grandmother gave me——" Tears welled into her eyes, and the Black Prince broke out energetically.

"It's only right that I should pay for my clumsiness; frocks are deuced expensive things, I know, and so . . ."

Linda froze him with an indignant stare, and he relapsed into embarrassed silence.

"The woman in the cloak-room might know of something," Bill said. "I should run along and ask her."

Linda escaped gladly; she was angry with herself for being so upset, and more angry with the Black Prince for his carelessness.

And how dared he offer to buy her a new frock! Her cheeks burned at the thought; and yet, she was sure he had not meant to insult her, and his handsome eyes had been genuinely distressed.

The woman in the cloak-room had small consolation to offer.

She had known frocks where claret stains had dried and never shown, but she had known others, so she declared, where the stain showed so badly they could never be worn again. She shook her head over Linda's beautiful brocade, as she sponged daintily at the stains. "I'm afraid it's done for," she prophesied dolefully. "However did you come to do it?"

"I didn't do it; it was a clumsy man," Linda told her angrily.

The woman's eyes opened wide.

"Make him pay for it!" she advised energetically. "This frock cost a mint of money, I know, or else I'm not a judge."

They dried the frock in front of the fire, and together anxiously examined the result.

The elder woman shook her head.

"Well, it will always show!" she admitted.

Linda went back to the ballroom with slow steps and at the door encountered Nelly Sweet, who pounced upon her sympathetically.

"Oh, you poor thing! What a shame! I've just heard! Here, let me look!" She scrutinised the stains critically. "Bill's furious about it," she said. Her eyes swept Linda's flushed face. "Here, don't you go taking Bill away from me," she threatened, half in fun, half in earnest. "He's never danced with anyone else before when I've been around, so you're mighty favoured."

Linda felt angry.

"I didn't want to dance with him," she protested indignantly. "And I certainly don't want him!" she added with energy.

"Thank you very much," said Bill's voice drily from behind her, and she turned with a guilty start.

"I didn't know you were there," she admitted. "But it would not have made any difference if I had," she added, angered by the expression of his eyes.

He smiled good-naturedly.

Nelly broke in rather agitatedly.

"Did you hear what I said about you Bill?"

He did not reply; he spoke to Linda again.

"Mr. Lincoln wishes to be introduced, Miss Lovelace——"

"Mr. Lincoln!" Linda echoed.

Nelly grasped her elbow.

"The Black Prince," she prompted in a whisper. "Go on and be introduced, dear! You'll like him!"

And the next moment the Black Prince was bowing before Linda.

"I don't know how to apologise for my extreme clumsiness," he said earnestly. "I'm afraid I've quite spoilt your charming frock."

"I'm afraid you have," Linda admitted with a sigh. "But, of course, it was an accident, and accidents will happen."

Before she could realise it, he had drawn her a little apart from the others.

"We'll sit out for this dance, shall we?" he asked. "The room is rather warm, and I feel that it will take me some time to apologise for my sins and receive absolution."

"I would much rather not say any more about it," Linda told him. "It's done, and that's all there is to say. Let's forget it."

He turned his handsome eyes upon her.

"And we are friends?" he asked.

“If you wish.”

He held out his hand.

“Then that’s a bargain?”

Linda laid her hand in his.

“I begin to think that my ideas of friendship are all wrong,” she told him in a puzzled way. “I thought friendship was a thing that took years to make, but apparently nowadays it can be done in a few minutes.”

“It can be done in less time than that,” he answered promptly. “For instance, the first time I ever saw you I knew that you and I were going to be friends.”

She laughed. “Oh, what nonsense!”

“That’s unkind! Besides, it isn’t nonsense. I saw you yesterday in Lorne and Dodwell’s—do you remember? Yes, I see you do,” he added, as she flushed. “I’m a great believer in first impressions, Miss Lovelace, and my first impression of you was. . . .” He stopped. “No, on second considerations, I will keep it to tell to you another time.”

Linda looked up.

“Oh, tell me now!” she urged.

He shook his head.

“You might not like it.”

“Is it so terrible, then?”

“On the contrary——”

She made a little grimace. “How unkind to rouse my curiosity and not satisfy it!”

Archie Lang crossed the room. “This is my dance, I think, Miss Lovelace.”

The Black Prince looked up coolly.

“Your thoughts are wrong, then, Lang. Miss Lovelace is engaged to me for this.”

He looked at Linda. “That is right, isn’t it, Miss Lovelace?”

Linda tried hard to say no. She knew that Archie had the prior claim, and yet . . . she looked up at him, smiling tremulously.

“I am so sorry, Mr. Lang, but I have already promised Mr. Lincoln.”

“There you are, my boy!” the Black Prince said casually: but there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

The rest of the evening passed in a dream for Linda. She had never before met a man of the world like Andrew Lincoln, and when he calmly proceeded to monopolise her, with a fine disregard for either her partners or his own, she gave in meekly.

He asked innumerable questions about herself; how long she had been at Lorne and Dodwell's, who were her friends there; what plans she had for the future, and where she lived.

Linda answered them all frankly enough; she thought he was kindness itself; she thought he was the handsomest man she had ever seen—she found him a divine dancer; it was only when the evening was nearly at an end and Nelly Sweet caught her for a moment alone, that she realised she had not perhaps been quite discreet.

"You've done it!" was Nelly's first remark. "My hat, you've done it with Joan. She'll never forgive you for this; you're in her black books for ever and ever amen. Lord, what on earth made you do it?"

Linda looked bewildered.

"Do it? Do what?" she asked. "I haven't done anything."

Nelly explained.

"You've put Joan's nose out of joint, that's what you've done. She brought him here after all, and she's fifteen years older than you are, I should think. How you've got the nerve, I don't know!"

Linda flushed up to her eyes.

"The nerve!" she faltered. "But . . . but he asked me to dance with him. He said he would rather dance with me than with anyone else."

Nelly screwed up her nose.

"Pooh! Do you suppose you're the only one he says that kind of thing to? Don't you flatter yourself, my dear. He's an old hand at the game, and you're a young one. Well, I've told you, and now it's your look-out."

She turned away, but Linda caught her arm.

"Oh, don't go! I'd no idea I was doing anything wrong; but he is so kind——"

"Kind!" Nelly laughed ironically. "Oh, well, I've heard him called a lot of things, but never that before," she said. "Ask Bill, if you want a true character of the Black Prince. Bill hates him as the devil hates holy water. Here he comes."

Bill joined them at that moment; he glanced at Linda, and quickly away again.

“It’s time we went, isn’t it?” he asked Nelly. “It’s raining cats and dogs. I’ll see if I can get a taxi.”

“A taxi! lord, how extravagant we are to-night,” Nelly mocked him, but her eyes sparkled; she loved riding in taxi-cabs.

“Bill’s not mean, that’s one thing,” she said when he had left them.

“Bill would give you the shirt off his back if you wanted it.”

Linda made no reply, she looked pale and downcast, and in sudden remorse Nelly demanded:

“Here, what’s the matter now? you look about as cheerful as a wet week.”

“You’ve spoilt my evening, that’s what’s the matter,” Linda said energetically. “How did I know I wasn’t supposed to dance with the Black Prince? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Lord, am I to look after you all the time for fear you do the wrong thing?” Nelly demanded truculently. “There! don’t look so sick about it.” She lowered her voice, “As a matter of fact I’m rather glad you’ve knocked some of the stuffing out of Joan. Though she digs with me, I know she’s a cat, and it won’t do her any harm. Look out! here comes Prince Charming.”

Lincoln came swiftly across the room.

“Have you been hiding from me, Miss Lovelace?” he asked, in mock reproach. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere. It’s raining like the dickens, but my car’s here—if you’ll let me give you a lift, I shall be only too delighted.”

Linda promptly refused.

“I came with Miss Sweet; we shall go back together.”

“But there’s room for us all,” he answered quickly. “Room for Sargent, too, if he will come. You’ll never get a taxi at this time of night, and raining so hard, too.”

Nelly smiled and dimpled.

“I’m sure it’s very kind of you,” she said, to Linda’s intense surprise. “But Bill has gone to find a taxi—oh, here he is.”

Bill returned at that moment; he looked rather cross.

“Not a cab to be had, and coming down in sheets,” he grumbled. “You girls had better wait while I go further down the road and see if I can pick one up somewhere else.”

“I’ve just offered you all a lift in my car,” Lincoln struck in, pleasantly. “There’s tons of room—and I shall be delighted.”

“Oh, it’s awfully good of you!” Nelly gushed. “I’ve got white shoes on, and they’ll be ruined if we have to walk. Come on, Linda; we’ll get our coats.”

She dragged Linda off without waiting for further protest.

"My dear, he's got the duck of a Daimler," she confided to her when they were out of hearing. "A grey one, and all upholstered in grey!" She giggled. "My, won't Joan be wild! Bet you she thought she was to be the only honoured one."

The car proved to be all that Nelly had promised, and Linda gave a little sigh of content as she sank back into its luxury.

Bill had obstinately refused to join them.

"I'd rather walk. I like air after the stuffiness of that room," he declared, bluntly. "Bye-bye, Nelly; see you to-morrow."

Nelly blew him a kiss as she scrambled in beside Joan Astley.

"Bye-bye, old thing, and thanks ever so much for coming."

Linda sat beside Lincoln on the opposite seat; for the first time since her father's tragic death she felt a faint tinge of regret as she remembered the time when she was driving with her mother in just such a car as this, instead of having to work for her living. Then she pulled herself sharply together; it was wrong to be dissatisfied; she had much to be thankful for; she looked shyly at the Black Prince, and found his eyes upon her.

"Tired?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Oh, no! thank you."

Joan Astley laughed with a cynical note.

"Tired! Have you been dancing so energetically then, Miss Lovelace?"

Her eyes beneath their darkened lashes were spiteful, and a little shiver went through Linda.

Nelly was right, she knew, and she had made an enemy of Joan.

"I'm not used to it, that's all," she answered gently. "I've never been to a dance like that before."

"But you'll go to tons now," Nelly declared. She laughed. "Archie was furious with you for throwing him over," she broke out impulsively. "He's not used to such treatment, you know."

Linda flushed crimson; she had forgotten all about Archie. She was annoyed because there was an amused look in the eves of the man beside her.

She raised her head a dignified inch.

"Next time I shall take my own partner," she said.

They all laughed.

"I suppose he will be a duke at least," Joan sneered.

Linda took her literally.

"I'm afraid I don't know any dukes," she said.

"Oh, there's plenty of time," Joan declared, and Nelly laughed.

"Well, this is where I get out," she said in her cheery way. "Are you getting out with me, Joan, or are you going on?"

Joan looked quickly at the Black Prince.

"It's such a wet night," he said, in his quiet voice. "Too wet to go on anywhere else, I am afraid. Some other time we must all foregather and have a little dinner together."

The car stopped at the kerbstone, outside the unpretentious house in the Fulham Road, and the chauffeur came to the door.

Lincoln got out and stood in the pouring rain, bareheaded, giving his hand first to Nelly, then to Joan.

Linda heard their good-nights.

"Nice weather for young ducks," Nelly said as she scuttled across the path and out of the wet.

But what Joan said was inaudible, though she stood for some seconds talking to the Black Prince regardless of the rain on her frock and flimsy evening coat.

Then Linda heard him say, "Well, it's au revoir then——"

And the next moment he and she were driving away alone through the night.

There was a silence which Linda broke.

"It's been such a lovely evening. I have enjoyed it. Thank you so much."

"There is nothing to thank me for, Miss Lovelace," Lincoln said. "I am glad you have had a good time." He hesitated, and then asked diffidently: "Perhaps some evening you will be very kind and do me the honour of having dinner with me?"

Linda flushed; this was an acquaintance of whom she was sure her grandmother would approve; she remembered that Mrs. Lovelace had recalled meeting the Countess of Star some years ago, and that the Countess was this man's aunt.

"I shall be delighted," she said readily. "At least, that is if you are sure you wouldn't rather take somebody else."

He laughed.

"Who do you suppose I would rather take?" he asked amusedly.

Linda hesitated; she thought of Joan, but hardly liked to mention her name, remembering how annoyed Bill Sargent had seemed with her earlier in the evening for alluding to Nelly as if she had a claim on him. Things must be different to what she had always supposed, she thought resignedly: apparently because a man took a girl to a dance and spent most of the evening in her company, it did not mean that they were anything more than ordinary friends.

She answered Lincoln with a little dignified air that she did not know any of his

friends, so could not possibly answer his question.

"I am quite a free agent, if that is what you mean," he told her; "I mean that I am not married, or engaged to be married, or any of the hundred and one things I am supposed to be, I promise you that."

"Oh, I didn't mean to be inquisitive," she cried in distress.

"I am sure you did not." He took a cigarette-case from his pocket and offered it to her.

"Will you smoke?"

"Thank you; I never have."

"Try one now," he urged softly.

But Linda shook her head.

"Oh, no, thank you; oh, no."

He put the case away and changed the subject.

"So you are in the ribbons and laces, are you? How do you like it?"

"Very much indeed, thank you."

"And you mean to stay?"

"Oh, yes!" Linda answered fervently.

"Until you get married, I suppose?" he asked lightly.

Linda laughed.

"That won't be for years and years—if ever," she said seriously.

"Why not?"

Linda thought of her own mother and father.

"I don't think married people are often very happy," she said slowly.

He agreed. "I'm afraid they are not; but isn't it rather their own faults, don't you think? They ought to make sure they are choosing the right man or woman."

She puckered her brows.

"I don't see how anyone can be sure," she said. "People change so, don't they?"

His eyes flashed into sudden amusement.

"How old are you?"

Linda told him without hesitation.

"I shall be seventeen very soon."

"Only seventeen?"

"Yes."

"You look much more," he said.

She was pleased.

"Do I? I'm so glad."

“In a few years’ time it will make you glad to be told that you look younger than you really are,” he prophesied.

“I don’t see why.”

He stifled a sigh.

“It must be nice to be so young and unworldly as you are,” he said.

His hand touched hers by accident, and Linda moved uneasily.

“We seem to be a long time getting home,” she said. She leaned forward and peered through the rain-smudged window.

Lincoln did not tell her that he had told his man to drive them the longest way round; he merely answered that it was a bad night, and one could not drive too fast.

“It’s a lovely car,” Linda said. Her hand touched the grey upholstery with soft pleasure, and then she added, unthinkingly: “We had a car like this once—very much like it.”

“You did!” He looked surprised, and she flushed sensitively. “Yes. It’s some time ago,” she hastened to add. “My father lost all his money, then he died, and so now we’re quite poor, Grannie and I.”

“I see, and you live with your grandmother?”

“Yes.”

They were nearing home; Linda recognised various little landmarks through the wet night, and she hardly knew if she were glad or sorry.

It had been a wonderful evening, and yet—a little sigh of relief escaped her as the big car slowed down and stopped.

But for a moment the Black Prince did not stir.

“When shall I see you again?” he asked abruptly.

“See me again?” Her voice expressed her astonishment; that he should want to see her again was too wonderful.

“That is what I said,” he told her. He thought her face was the sweetest and most childlike he had ever seen in the dim light of the car, with wide eyes and lips parted a little in her amazement.

“Don’t you want to see me again?” he demanded, a note of impatience in his voice.

Linda suddenly remembered Nelly Sweet’s friendly warning.

“I’m only in a shop,” she said, “and you——”

He laughed—not a very happy laugh.

“Don’t call me the son of a belted earl, or anything melodramatic like that,” he said cynically. “I’m an ordinary man like Bill Sargent and the other fellows who were there to-night; an ordinary man with a few more handicaps than they have; that is the

only difference." His eyes were earnest as they dwelt upon her face. "I can be just as good and true a friend all the same, Miss Lovelace."

He did not wait for her to answer, but he opened the door of the car and stepped out on to the path.

The rain had almost stopped, but the pavements and house-tops glistened wetly in the lamplight.

"So this is where you live?" he said musingly, looking up at the face of the big house, where a light burnt only in one window, the room where her grandmother waited, Linda knew.

"Yes"—her eyes followed the direction of his—"but we are leaving here almost at once," she told him. "We can't afford to stay; we're going into rooms."

She held out her hand.

"Good-night, and thank you for being so kind, Mr.—Mr.—or do I call you by any title?" she asked helplessly.

He took her hand in his.

"My name is Andrew Lincoln," he said.

"Well—good-night, Mr. Lincoln."

"Good-night, and thank you—very much," he said, gravely.

It was a strange thing to have said, she thought, and she stood on the doorstep in the darkness till the big car had rolled noiselessly away from the kerb, then she opened the door with her key and crept up the stairs.

Mrs. Lovelace's door was open, and she called out as she heard the girl's light step.

"Is that you, Linda?"

"Yes, darling?"

Mrs. Lovelace was sitting up in bed, her white hair parted neatly beneath an old-fashioned lace cap, her arms and shoulders wrapped about with a soft brown Paisley shawl.

"I was so afraid something had happened to you," she faltered. "Who brought you home? I thought I heard a car."

"It was a car; it was raining so hard we could not walk."

For the first time in her life Linda felt it impossible to tell Mrs. Lovelace exactly what had happened; she kept her eyelids lowered as she kissed the old lady's soft cheek.

Mrs. Lovelace held her at arm's length.

"Why, how pretty you look!" she said, with fond pride. "Linda, I have never seen you look so pretty before."

Linda flushed with pleasure, and the quick thought came to her, "Did Mr. Lincoln think I was pretty? I wonder if he did?"

The day following the dance seemed to Linda long and dreary.

Miss Gillet had a bad cold, and her temper suffered in consequence.

"You must really take more interest in your work if you wish to stay here," she said once, sharply, to Linda. "When I was your age I had longer hours and far less pay. Where are your thoughts all the time? You are certainly not thinking of your work. No. That is not the real Torchon: it is the imitation! How many more times am I to tell you the difference? Customers will not tolerate such carelessness."

Linda said she was very sorry; to tell the truth she felt tired and her head ached. She was not used to late hours, but she did not like to make it an excuse for her inattention.

"You do look washed out," Nelly Sweet said at lunch with all the candour of a friend. "Anyone can see you're not used to staying out till morning. What time did the Black Prince go?"

Linda looked up, flushing a little.

"He took me home, that was all."

"Oh!" Nelly's voice was dry. "You ought to have heard Joan go off the deep end when we went to bed," she added with a chuckle.

Linda made no answer, but a guilty pang touched her heart, as she thought of Andrew Lincoln's invitation to dine with him.

"I shan't go, of course I shan't go!" was the thought with which she tried to comfort herself. "And probably he won't ask me again."

But unconsciously she found herself looking for him all day; every time a man came into the store her heart-beats quickened, thinking perhaps it might be he, till she grew so preoccupied that Miss Gillet reprimanded her again.

"Really, Miss Lovelace! I've spoken to you twice and you have not answered me. If this continues, I shall speak to Mr. Lorne."

"Oh, no, no!" Linda was panic-stricken; she could imagine no worse calamity; but the threat had the desired effect, and she worked well and carefully for the rest of the day.

"You haven't told me anything about the dance, Linda," Mrs. Lovelace said that evening at tea. "I thought you would be so full of it. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"It was lovely, lovely!" Linda said fervently. "I danced every dance, or tried to!" she added, laughing. "People were ever so kind, and showed me the steps."

"And your frock?" Mrs. Lovelace urged anxiously.

Linda looked distressed.

"We had an accident! Someone spilt claret-cup all down it, Grannie."

"Oh, my dear!"

"Yes, I nearly cried," Linda admitted. "But, of course, it was a pure accident: he couldn't help it?"

"He? Then it was one of your partners who did it."

"Yes." Linda began to spread some butter on her bread as if her life depended on it. "Yes—I wasn't dancing with him, but someone bumped into him, and he spilt it. He was awfully sorry."

"How very distressing. You must show me the frock presently, and let us see what can be done."

Linda did not like to say that she was afraid nothing could be done. She felt a little nervous of her grandmother's searching eyes.

"And who did you dance with?" Mrs. Lovelace asked after a moment.

Linda told her readily.

"There was a friend of Nelly's—a Mr. Sargent; he's in a bank, and I like him; then there was a Mr. Lang, but he's only a boy"—Linda added, with a fine disregard of the fact that Archie Lang must have been at least six years her senior.

"And who was kind enough to bring you home?" Mrs. Lovelace added.

Linda flushed sensitively, though she could not have told why.

"That was Mr. Lincoln," she said nervously. "He had his own car there, and it was raining hard, and so . . . we all came home together," she added.

"Mr. Lincoln!" the name seemed familiar to the old lady. "Why, surely, that must be some relation to the Countess of Star?"

"Yes, her nephew," Linda said.

She rose from the table on the pretext of getting more hot water for the teapot, but in reality it was because her grandmother's eyes were so searching; and yet, "I've nothing to mind! I've not done anything to be ashamed of," she told herself in vexation.

But Mrs. Lovelace let the subject drop, to Linda's relief, and spoke of other things.

"Mr. Stern has very kindly made all arrangements for us to leave this house on Saturday," she said; her voice was very pathetic. "He thinks an ordinary cab will take all we shall require. He has managed to secure the rooms he spoke to me about at Hammersmith. I have not seen them, Linda, but he tells me they are quite nice, and it will not be too far for you. I believe an omnibus runs right from the corner to Lorne and Dodwell's."

"Oh, I shall be all right anywhere," Linda said quickly. "It's only you, darling."

Mrs. Lovelace passed a handkerchief across her lips to hide their sudden trembling.

"I try only to remember that we both have much to be thankful for," she said. "Saturday is not a nice day to move anywhere, but I knew it was the only time you could be with me."

"Of course! As if you could manage alone!" Linda teased her.

But to her dismay there was a letter for her the following morning from Andrew Lincoln:—

> Dear Miss Lovelace,—I wonder if you remember how kind you were to me the other night, and how you half promised that some evening you would have a little dinner with me. I know Saturday is your free day, and so I am writing to ask if you will let me drive you out in the country somewhere for the afternoon, and dine quietly with me afterwards? Please say yes—and let me have a line to the above address. I hope you were not too tired after the dance.—Yours sincerely.
>
> ANDREW LINCOLN.

A drive into the country, and dinner afterwards! Linda's heart leapt at the thought. It would be wonderful, perfectly wonderful! Then her enthusiasm faded as she remembered that on Saturday they were to move to the Hammersmith rooms.

She would not be able to go! She had never been so disappointed about anything in her life.

Perhaps he would never ask her again! Perhaps he would be too offended at her refusal to give her another thought.

Why could they not postpone the removal another week, or why could she not ask for the morning off? But that would never do, she knew, and with much heartburning she wrote a little note in reply:—

> Dear Mr. Lincoln,—I am so dreadfully sorry—(she underlined the adjective)—but Grannie and I are moving from this house on Saturday as it is my only free time, so I cannot possibly come. Thank you very much, all the same, for asking me.
>
> LINDA LOVELACE.

She said nothing to Mrs. Lovelace about it, but she gave a deep sigh as she dropped the letter into the box on her way to business that morning.

“Have you seen anything of the Black Prince?” Nelly Sweet asked her interestedly when they met for a few moments.

Linda shook her head.

“No, why do you ask?”

“Because he was going to take Joan out on Saturday, and he wrote last night putting her off.”

Nelly’s shrewd eyes searched the younger girl’s face inquisitively. “I wondered if perhaps it was anything to do with you.”

Linda shook her head.

“With me? Of course not! We’re moving on Saturday. How could it be anything to do with me?”

“I thought perhaps it might be,” Nelly said: she looked disappointed. “You know, I’m sure he was awfully struck on you.”

Mrs. Lovelace and Linda moved from the big silent house to Hammersmith in a cold wind and a driving rain.

The last look Linda had of the home where she had known so much sorrow, was through the rain-spattered window of a hired cab, as they trundled slowly away from it through the cheerless afternoon.

There were two big trunks on top of the cab, and various small parcels inside.

"I wonder if we've got everything," Mrs. Lovelace said for the twentieth time. Her eyes were red with weeping: not because she had ever known any great happiness in her daughter's house, but because she was old, and change of any sort seemed terrible to her gentle soul.

"If we have we can always go back and get it, dear," Linda said patiently; she had few regrets herself: with the eagerness of youth she looked forward to good things and happiness which were to come.

Mrs. Lovelace stroked the protesting back of a small kitten which she was cuddling in her arms. It was a tiny black thing, with large scared eyes, and it had appeared on the doorstep of the house just as she herself was leaving it.

"I shall take it with me," she told Linda firmly. "A black kitten is lucky, and we shall need all the luck we can get." So she held the kitten in her arms all the way, in spite of its faint mews of protest.

"It's probably got a home and will be missed, dear," Linda said; but Mrs. Lovelace would not listen.

She believed that Fate had sent her this piece of luck, and she was not going to refuse it.

The house at Hammersmith was a tall, typical London house that had once seen better days.

A flight of steps led up to its front door and another flight down to its basement. There were yellowish lace curtains drawn tightly across all the windows as if there was something to be concealed, and small, withered-looking shrubs grew in boxes on each of the lower sills.

The cabman dragged the two heavy trunks up the steps, leaving large, muddy footprints behind him, and an overworked looking maid, in a not very clean cotton frock and cap, opened the door to them.

"You can come in," she said ungraciously, when she heard who the new arrivals

were, and Linda and Mrs. Lovelace walked into the dark, narrow hall, which was clean, although it smelt faintly of a meal but recently cooked.

"Rooms on the first floor, I'll show you," the girl said, and Linda followed, a little depressed in spite of herself.

"It's no use, we shall have to get used to it," she kept saying over and over in her mind. "If I let Grannie see I hate it, she'll break down, and then what shall I do?"

So she looked round her smilingly and said cheerfully that it was all very nice, and that she was sure they would be most comfortable.

"Are we the only . . . people in the house?" Mrs. Lovelace asked faintly.

She had sunk into the nearest chair, still clasping the black kitten and was groping for her smelling salts.

The little maid, whose name Linda had discovered to be Jenny, shook her head.

"Oh, no, mum! There's a gentleman got a bed-sitting-room on the top floor, and a lady and gentleman downstairs; but they're all nice people like yourselves," she hastened to assure them.

The cabman dragged the boxes upstairs and departed, and Jenny reluctantly followed.

"If there's anything you want——" she said tentatively.

"We should like some tea," Linda said. "And—who—can you tell me who the landlady is?"

Jenny smiled. "She's a Miss Dallow," she told her. "Fancy you not knowing."

She only meant to be kind, but Linda flushed with vexation.

"I have to work for my living, and so I had no time to come here myself," she said with a touch of dignity. "We took these rooms through our solicitor."

"Oh!" Jenny opened her eyes wide. The word solicitor conveyed nothing much to her, but it sounded important, and she closed the door softly behind her as she went away.

"And now let me take off your bonnet, and we'll have tea," Linda said as cheerfully as she could; but there was a lump in her throat as she noticed the shabby furniture of the sitting-room and the faded walls, which badly needed repapering, and the tiny grate with its handful of coals instead of the generous fires to which they had been accustomed.

Mrs. Lovelace submitted silently; she looked worn and weary, and her eyes were eloquent as they wandered round the room.

Linda moved about, putting things straight and chattering all the time.

"When we make our fortunes we can refurnish this room," she said gaily. "We'll have dark paint and a light paper, don't you think, dear, and two big, comfy chairs?"

She opened another door which led into Mrs. Lovelace's bedroom. "Oh, this is nice!" she said, with a pleased note in her voice. "It's quite a big room, darling! Come and look."

But Mrs. Lovelace had broken down, and was crying piteously. "It's not where you ought to be!" she sobbed. "I don't mind for myself, but for you—you're so young and pretty! You ought to be going about now, and having a good time. It's not fair, it's not fair!"

Linda's face quivered, and she bit her lip to steady it, then she said brightly:

"But it's much more fun like this; can't you see that it is? It's far better to get on through our own efforts than to have everything just left to us by someone else who has done the hard work. Oh, Grannie, don't cry, or I shall start, too, and then what will you do? You just wait till I've unpacked our things and bought a few flowers! You won't know the place, I promise you!"

Jenny arrived at that moment with tea to Linda's intense relief, and Mrs. Lovelace went hurriedly into the next room to hide her tears.

The tea was not exactly appetising; the bread was thick, and there was not much butter; the tea was weak and rather dusty, and the cups were thick and the little plate of home-made cakes were burnt.

"I'll get tea myself another time," Linda thought as she hurriedly rearranged the table to make it look better.

But, try as she would to look on the bright side of things, her spirits seemed to be sinking with each passing moment, and the tears were not very far away.

She wondered what her father would think if he could see them now! Poor man, he had worked so hard to ensure their comfort, and after all he had failed.

"But he succeeded first, and so will I," Linda told herself, determinedly. "What's the good of giving in and admitting that you're beaten?"

She did her best the whole evening, but it was hard work, and she was glad when at last Mrs. Lovelace took her tears to bed, and even then she found fresh cause for distress.

"There is no feather-bed, Linda, and a mattress makes my poor bones ache so!"

Linda fetched all the shawls and pillows she could find to improve matters, and at last the old lady fell asleep, while the little black kitten curled up on the quilt beside her.

Linda stood looking down at them both, with tears in her eyes, then she put out a finger and touched the kitten's soft fur.

"Bring us luck! We want it," she said with a sigh, as she went back into the sitting-room and poked the dying fire into a little flame.

She dreaded Monday, when she would have to go to work and leave Mrs. Lovelace alone. Jenny seemed a kind enough girl, but Linda knew how sensitive her grandmother was, and wondered how she would get through the long days with nobody else for company.

It was nearly ten o'clock then and she was thinking of going to her own room which was just across the landing, when someone tapped softly at the door.

"Please come in." She expected Jenny to enter, but to her astonishment, when the handle was reluctantly turned, it was Nelly's friend, Bill Sargent, who stood there, his big person filling up the doorway, his face a little red and embarrassed.

"You!" Linda was too amazed to give him any other greeting.

"Yes." He came a step into the room. "I knew you were moving in to-day," he explained. "And I wondered if there was anything—if I could do anything for you ——" He smiled suddenly.

"I live in the bed-sitting-room upstairs," he added.

Linda was too astonished to speak; she just stared at Bill Sargent with blank eyes; then, realising that he looked decidedly embarrassed, she laughed and held out a hand.

"Well, how surprising! who ever expected to see you here? How did you know we had taken these rooms?"

He took her hand in a bearlike grasp.

"Everyone talks in a place like this," he said in his cheery way. "And Jenny—the maid, you know—she's a great friend of mine, and she told me. Of course, I was awfully surprised."

"Of course! I hope we shall be comfortable. Grannie doesn't like it a bit, poor darling—the rooms are small, and . . . well, it's not what she's been used to, of course, but I do hope she will settle down."

"Changes are never very pleasant," Bill said. He fidgeted on one foot rather nervously. "Sure there's nothing I can do for you? I'd have come down before, only I thought perhaps you wouldn't thank me for interfering."

Linda glanced behind her into the littered sitting-room.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I should be very glad if you would move some of our boxes for me," she said reluctantly. "I don't like to make use of you like this, but they're heavy—the man brought them into the wrong room when we came, and in the excitement of it all I forgot to ask him to move them."

"I'm a great hand at being a porter," Bill said. He was so friendly and cheery that Linda felt her heart warm towards him. After all, it would be rather nice to have somebody she knew, even slightly, in the house; she looked on with amusement

while he shouldered the heavy trunks and stowed them way in corners under her direction.

"And that one goes across the passage into my bedroom," she told him. "Oh, thank you so much."

"Not at all." He deposited the last box carefully, then squared his shoulders, brushing a hand boyishly over his hair, which had got rather ruffled in the removal.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Thank you, yes; thank you, ever so much."

"Not at all," Bill said again. He looked like a big schoolboy, she thought, and suddenly she realised why Nelly Sweet thought so much of him.

He was such a breezy, unaffected personality, with such disarming frankness.

"How is Nelly?" she asked impulsively.

"Nelly," he frowned a little at the question. "Well, you should have later news of her than I have," he said bluntly. "You see her every day, don't you? I haven't seen her since the dance."

"Not since the dance?" Linda looked the astonishment she felt; she was under the impression that Nelly saw him very often. "Oh—well," she added rather helplessly.

There was a little silence, and to break it she asked how long he had lived in the house.

"About two years. I have a home, but I don't hit it with my people very well, so I prefer to be on my own."

"Yes, I see."

"I've only got a bed-sitting-room," he explained, casually, "but it suits me. I'm in so little."

"Yes. And—Miss Dallow—she—is she nice?"

He laughed boyishly. "Oh, she's all right; she looks rather like a bad copy of the women Du Maurier used to draw," he said. "You'll have a fit when you see her for the first time, but she's not so bad. I get on with her all right."

"Well—I won't keep you any longer," Linda said; she held out her hand. "Good-night, and thank you so much."

"You've nothing to thank me for; only too delighted."

He disappeared up the stairs, and Linda heard his footsteps overhead and the opening and shutting of a door.

She went back to Mrs. Lovelace, and found the old lady nodding drowsily in spite of her declaration that she would never sleep. She bent over her and kissed her wrinkled cheek softly, then she turned out the light and went into the sitting-room.

She tidied it up to the best of her ability, but it still looked hopelessly overcrowded and uncomfortable, but she was too tired to sit up any longer, so she decided to leave the rest until to-morrow, and went off to bed. She slept soundly in spite of the strangeness of the room, and only woke to find the maid Jenny standing beside her bed, and the room full of daylight.

Jenny carried a cup of tea on a painted tray.

"For you, Miss," she said in a theatrical whisper; "it's against the rules for me to bring tea to our lodgers as a rule, but I made myself a cup and I thought you'd like one too."

"Oh, Jenny, how kind of you."

Linda was touched and delighted; she drank the tea thirstily, then put on her dressing-gown and ran across to Mrs. Lovelace.

The old lady said that her head ached, and she was inclined to be tearful; she declared that she had not slept a wink; she said that the noise of the omnibuses had kept her awake all night.

"But, darling, they don't pass the house!" Linda protested.

"But I can hear them in the distance, I know I can," Mrs. Lovelace persisted.

Linda laughed, and told her it was imagination.

"I must get dressed and then you shall have breakfast," she said, and hurried away.

To her unaccustomed hands there seemed a tremendous amount to do before one got a kettle and eggs to boil, and bread to turn into nice crisp toast.

"I shall do it better when I'm more used to it," was the thought with which she comforted herself.

The time seemed to fly, and the work did not seem half completed when the clock showed her that she ought to be leaving the house.

She made up the fire and kissed Mrs. Lovelace.

"I must go, but I'll be home as soon as I can, and promise me not to fret, and try to be cheerful."

"I'll try," Mrs. Lovelace promised with an April smile, but Linda's heart ached as she descended the stairs. She could not bear to think of the long day Mrs. Lovelace must spend alone; she wondered if what Bill Sargent had said would ever come true, and that they would get used to their new surroundings.

She met Nelly Sweet as she left the omnibus; Nelly, very smart in a new hat of almond green, with a primrose wing at one side.

"Like it?" she demanded, turning and twisting her head like a canary bird. "I bought it off Joan."

"It's very smart," Linda said wistfully, and wondered how long it would be before she could afford a new hat for herself.

"Well, have you moved in all right?" Nelly inquired as they hurried along together.

"Yes. We're not straight, of course, but—oh, by the way, who do you think lives upstairs over our heads?"

"Couldn't say! Anybody exciting?"

"Mr. Sargent!"

"What! My Bill?" Nelly's eyes were round with amazement. After a moment she demanded: "Here, did you know that before you moved?"

"Of course not; what a silly question."

Nelly looked ruffled.

"Well, I never knew where he lived," she said offendedly. "I always have to write to him at the bank if I want anything."

"Well, you know now," Linda said; she felt rather annoyed at Nelly's manner.

Miss Gillet had a cold in the head that morning, and her temper was a little more uncertain than usual.

"Only just in time, Miss Lovelace," she said icily, as Linda hurried in. "When I was your age I was expected to be at least ten minutes earlier than scheduled time."

Linda began to explain that she had had a lot to do, but Miss Gillet cut her short.

"That will do; excuses are not necessary." She did not speak to her again till much later in the morning, when she called to her from the far end of the counter.

"Miss Lovelace, will you kindly attend to this lady for me?"

Linda turned hurriedly; it was not often that Miss Gillet permitted her such an honour. She looked at the lady standing by the counter. She was tall and rather overdressed, and she was impatiently tapping her fingers on the glass lid of a showcase.

"What can I do for you, madam?" Linda asked timidly. Then she gave a stifled cry of amazement as she looked into her mother's face.

"Mother!" Linda spoke the word in a breathless whisper, the hot colour surging into her face.

She had hardly thought of her mother since the tragic moment of her flight; she had shut her out of her memory with great bitterness, and now here they were face to face again when she had hoped that they might never meet any more.

Mrs. Dawson had altered considerably, and not for the better; she had grown stout, and the natural beauty of her hair had been artificially touched; although Linda hated herself for the thought, it flashed into her mind that her mother had grown

common.

"Mother!" she said again.

Mrs. Dawson laughed.

"So this is what they've done with you," she said. "I've often wondered. This is your grandmother's doing, of course! A nice occupation for a lady!"

Linda drew herself up proudly.

"It was my own wish. I had to do something for a living, and this seemed the best thing."

Mrs. Dawson's lips curled in a sneer.

"I always said you were like your father. This is the sort of life he would have chosen for you if he had been asked."

Linda cast an agonised glance in the direction of Miss Gillet; there was very little that escaped her, she knew, and she was not anxious for her to realise the situation.

"I'm not supposed to speak to customers except about their purchases," she said breathlessly. "Please——"

"A fine way to speak to your own mother," Mrs. Dawson said, indignantly. "I suppose you're the typical modern girl now; all independence and impudence——"

"Mother!"

"And where are you living, may I ask? Where is your grandmother?"

Linda bit her lip to hide its trembling.

"I can't tell you—she—we, oh, we're not in at all a nice place; you would hate it."

"You have not yet told me where it is."

Linda flushed and the tears rose in her eyes; she knew that Mrs. Lovelace would not wish to see her daughter; but it was going to be difficult to keep them apart, she could see.

"We thought you had gone abroad," she faltered desperately.

Mrs. Dawson laughed.

"I went abroad certainly, and now I am married again. You may be interested to hear that I married Goring-Wells, the financier, and we have a house in Cavendish Square."

Linda was not interested; she had never heard of Goring-Wells.

"It will be to your advantage to be friends with me," her mother went on. "My husband is a wealthy man, and I have often spoken to him about you. You must leave this business at once, of course——"

Linda broke in agitatedly.

"It's not possible! I can't! I don't want to."

Mrs. Goring-Wells went on:

"You must take your proper place in society now. I shall be delighted to take you about with me." She realised how much Linda had changed for the better, and a faint pride rose in her selfish heart. In her ambitious way she looked ahead, and saw a great future for her daughter, and perhaps a great marriage. She imagined what a pleasure it would be to chaperone a beautiful daughter, to choose her clothes; she knew that Goring-Wells would not object. He was a mild little man, with no opinion of his own except where business matters were concerned. He would not dare to thwart her wishes she knew.

Linda interrupted determinedly.

"I shall not leave here, and I shall always live with Grannie."

"Nonsense! Your grandmother cannot live for ever, and then what will become of you? Don't be ridiculous. Now give me your address."

"I can't! I—oh, please!—I shall get into such trouble if you talk to me much longer without buying anything!"

"Very well; then I will meet you later on. What time do you leave here?"

"Six o'clock, but——"

"I will be outside at six, then."

"But mother——" Mrs. Goring-Wells turned away without answering, and Miss Gillet came at once to Linda.

"You allowed that lady to go without making a purchase; what is the reason?" Then she saw the tears in Linda's eyes, and softened a little. "Pooh, don't be so soft-hearted!" she chided her. "We all have to put up with rebuffs; the sooner you cultivate stoicism in business the better."

Linda did not like Miss Gillet well enough to explain matters, but she was thoroughly upset and distressed by the meeting.

What would Mrs. Lovelace say? Should she tell her?

"A penny for your thoughts," Nelly Sweet said at lunch. "I've been watching you for the last ten minutes, and you haven't eaten a thing; you've just been staring before you. What's up? In love?"

Linda roused herself with an effort.

"Of course not! I was only thinking."

"Well, I should try and think about something more pleasant then," Nelly advised, adding another lump of sugar to her tea. "Take my advice, and never worry about anything. What's the good? Nobody cares, and it makes you old and ugly."

But Linda could not help worrying, and her heart was beating fast with nervous apprehension when, at six o'clock, she waited up and down outside Lorne and

Dodwell's. She had had to make an excuse to Nelly that she had someone to meet, and had met with the usual question.

"A boy?"

"No, of course not."

"I wouldn't like to bet on it," had been Nelly's laconic answer as she put on her hat and hurried off home.

Linda hoped with all her heart that her mother would not come, but before long she saw her.

"Punctual, you see," Mrs. Goring-Wells said lightly; she carried a large bunch of lilies in her hand. "For your grandmother," she said. "We will take them to her."

Linda stood still. "Mother, I'm sorry, awfully sorry—but I couldn't take you home without telling Grannie first. It might make her ill. Oh, please, don't be angry, but I know I am right."

"I know you are very impertinent," was the angry reply. "It is coming to something if I am to be defied by my own daughter. Does all my love and care for you count for nothing?"

Linda's eyes filled with tears.

"You left us—you left me and father when we most wanted you."

Mrs. Goring-Wells opened her lips to retort, then closed them again with a sort of snap; after a moment she said darkly:

"I say nothing! Thank heaven I can control myself; but some day you will be sorry for behaving in such a manner. Now, no more nonsense, if you please. Call a taxi and take me to your grandmother."

"I can't—I'm sorry—but I can't——" Linda hardly knew what she was saying, but she spoke determinedly enough, and then, as her mother began a fresh torrent of anger, she turned precipitately and ran from her across the road.

She climbed on to the first omnibus she could find, and took a seat on top at the very back.

The tears were wet on her cheeks now, and she had to bite her lip hard to keep herself from bursting out crying.

She was overwrought by the responsibility and excitement of the past months, and was very near breaking point.

A man sitting beside her moved up a little to give her more room, then suddenly he spoke:

"I thought I was not mistaken. It is Miss Lovelace, isn't it?"

And, turning, she found herself looking into the face of Robert Lorne.

"Oh, Mr. Lorne!" She hardly knew whether to laugh or cry. She wiped her tears

away with a shaking hand, but more came.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked kindly. "Aren't you well—or—I hope nothing has gone wrong in business? If it has, tell me. I like everyone to be happy. Come, can't you tell me?"

She broke into trembling, embarrassed denials.

"It's nothing—at least, nothing to do with you or the business. It's only something—something of my own that's gone wrong."

He smiled at the rather childish explanation.

"Well, two heads are better than one in any trouble," he said. "Why not tell me what it is, and see if I can help you?"

Linda hesitated, then she looked at him with misty eyes, and saw the kindly sympathy beneath his beetling brows.

This was a man to trust, she knew. After a moment she told him what had occurred.

Robert Lorne listened kindly to the story of Linda's meeting with her mother while the omnibus jolted them on its way down the street.

"It would kill Grannie if I took her home," Linda added with a little excited note in her voice. "She has never spoken of mother since the day she went away. I just couldn't do it, could I?"

Robert Lorne hesitated; he felt rather surprised at himself because of the interest he was taking in this girl. His was such a busy and rather self-centred life that he had very little time for concerns outside his own, but Linda seemed so genuine in her concern, and looked so young and confiding with the tears still wet on her lashes, that she invested her story with more romance than it really deserved.

"I think I should tell Mrs. Lovelace that you met your mother," he said after a moment, "and leave her to decide for herself what is to be done, but I don't think there is any real need for you to be quite so upset about it," he added, smiling whimsically. "It's not your fault in any way, is it?"

"I know, but—you see, I loved my father," she told him, her lip quivering.

Robert Lorne made no comment; he felt vaguely sorry for this girl; he had taken the trouble to find out something of her history, and agreed with his uncle that her father had been the victim of a rascally partner. After a moment he asked:

"And where are you living now did you say?"

Linda told him apologetically. "They're not very nice rooms, but I daresay we shall get used to them."

"It's surprising how quickly one can get used to anything with a little determination," he answered kindly. He rose. "This is where I get down, so I will say

good-bye for the present."

He held out his hand and pressed hers kindly.

"Cheer up," he said, and, with a smile, was gone.

Linda looked after him as he walked away down the street. It was all very well for him, she thought in vague resentment; no doubt he was a very rich man, and lived in a beautiful house. She could not understand why he was riding on an omnibus; she thought that she would condescend to nothing less than her own car if she were in his position.

But she felt more cheerful for having confided her troubles to somebody, and there was no sign of distress in her face when she reached Miss Dallow's.

Mrs. Lovelace was sitting by the window, a shawl round her shoulders, and a book lying disregarded in her lap; she turned her head when Linda entered and a little glad smile crossed her face.

"At last! I thought you were never coming."

"I came as soon as I could, dear, but I was detained"—Linda avoided her grandmother's eyes. "I'll make the tea in a moment; what have you been doing all day—oh, how lovely!" she broke off with a little cry of delight as her eyes fell upon a large bunch of roses lying on the table. "Oh, Grannie, where did they come from?"

Mrs. Lovelace shook her head.

"I don't know, they were just left at the door. I daresay you know more about it than I do," she added, with faint jealousy, as Linda bent her face to the scented blossoms.

"I don't! I don't know anyone who would be likely to spend so much money on me," Linda declared, but in her heart she thought she knew. It was Andrew Lincoln, and her pulses tingled with excitement as she laid the flowers regretfully down again.

He had not forgotten her then; he had found out where she lived. She sang as she laid the cloth and made the tea, rattling away now and then of the events of the day.

"I came home on an omnibus, with—whom do you think?" she demanded gaily.

"My darling child, how should I know?"

"Well, it was Mr. Lorne, Mr. Robert Lorne, the man who got me into the firm, you know. He was so nice—he——" she broke off, remembering her confidence to him. Well, she would wait a little while before she spoke of her mother; it would do later on in the evening.

She untied the roses and arranged them in a blue glass vase.

"They scent the whole room, don't they?" she said, holding them at arm's length. She set them down on a corner of the small sideboard where they showed to best

advantage, and dragged a stool over to Mrs. Lovelace, sitting down upon it, and leaning her arms on the old lady's lap.

"Well, and what have you been doing all day?" she asked.

Mrs. Lovelace sighed.

"I haven't done anything," she admitted. "I looked out of the window, and then I tried to read—and then Jenny came in and talked to me for a little while, and then Miss Dallow came. Linda, you haven't seen Miss Dallow yet?"

"No."

Mrs. Lovelace lowered her voice.

"She's a most strange person," she said mysteriously. "I don't think I have ever met anyone quite like her before."

Linda laughed; she had begun to discover that the world was full of strange people, but instead of feeling shocked about it, as she could see Mrs. Lovelace did, she thought how wonderfully interesting it made life appear.

"I'll go down and see her presently," she promised. "Mr. Sargent says that she's really not at all bad."

"And who is Mr. Sargent, Linda?"

Linda flushed a little.

"Well, dear, it's very strange," she said, rather reluctantly. "I met him at the dance the other night; he's a friend of Nelly Sweet's—and it appears that he lives upstairs."

"Upstairs! In this house?"

"Yes. After you had gone to bed last night he came down to see if there was anything he could do to help us."

Mrs. Lovelace looked disturbed.

"Linda, did you know before we came that this young man was in this house?" she asked severely.

Linda laughed. "Grannie! Of course not! I've only seen him once."

"You seem to have made friends with a great many young men since you went into business," Mrs. Lovelace complained.

"Not friends," Linda protested. "I only just know them. Why, they all belong to someone else," she added with a half sigh as she thought of Andrew Lincoln. What would Joan say if she knew he had sent her those flowers? She stole a shy little glance at them across the room.

"Things were very different when I was a girl," Mrs. Lovelace said uneasily. "Why, I remember when I was engaged to your grandfather, I was never allowed to speak to him alone until we were married. My mother or father was always in the room."

"Grannie! Why, however could you be expected to know one another?"

Mrs. Lovelace smiled reminiscently.

"Well, I'm afraid we never did," she admitted.

Linda rose to her feet.

"I'll just clear the tea things away, and then I'll go and see Miss Dallow. If she's so queer, I'd like to get it over."

She was half-way down the stairs when she encountered Bill Sargent coming up.

"Hullo!" said Linda, breezily; she looked upon Bill very much as she would have done upon an overgrown schoolboy.

"Have you only just come from business?"

"No." He leaned against the banisters, squeezing his big figure into as small a compass as possible to allow her to pass, for the stairs were not very wide.

"Did you get the roses?" he asked, abruptly.

"Roses!" Linda repeated the word vaguely, then the warm colour rushed to her face with a sense of acute disappointment.

"Oh, were they from you?" she asked, blankly.

"Yes." He hesitated, looking rather puzzled. "I thought you would like them," he added, lamely.

Linda recovered herself with an effort when she saw his disappointment.

"Oh, it was kind of you, ever so kind," she said quickly. "But you shouldn't have sent them! I never dreamed it was you."

He answered bluntly: "No, I don't suppose you did." Then he gave a rough little laugh. "I'm sorry. I won't offend again," he said almost rudely, and, turning, brushed past her and went on up the stairs to his own room far above.

Linda went on her way feeling rather puzzled. It was strange of him to have sent her flowers which must have been so expensive, she thought, especially as she had understood that he was Nelly's friend.

Of course, he had meant it kindly, but all the same there seemed no reason for the attention; her face was rather grave as she descended the stairs which led down to the basement, and tapped on a closed door.

It was opened almost immediately by a tall, spare woman, with the blackest hair and the highest forehead Linda had ever seen. She looked more like a caricature than a real woman, and she wore the strangest, stiffest, most old-fashioned frock it was possible to imagine. It was high at the neck, and buttoned in a row of at least twelve buttons down to the waist, and a heavy silver chatelaine hung with keys and scissors and all sorts of other useless looking articles dangled by her side.

Linda looked at her with unaccountable nervousness.

“I am Miss Lovelace,” she stammered out at last.

“Yes, I have seen you before—in the distance,” was the uncompromising reply, and the door was opened a shade wider. “Perhaps you will come in if you wish to speak to me. I object to the entire household knowing my business.”

Linda wished she had not come, but she followed Miss Dallow into the room, and the door was shut.

It was a warm, cosy little room, with a big fire, and large easy-chair drawn up before it, in which sat a big cat with round yellow eyes like an owl’s, which stared at Linda all the time with a most disconcerting steadiness.

“I don’t want to speak about anything particular,” Linda said, feeling very young and foolish. “But I thought you would like to see me, that’s all.”

“You are very kind.”

Miss Dallow’s beady eyes, like sharp gimlets, seemed to be searching her soul, and Linda fidgeted nervously.

“I have already interviewed Mrs. Lovelace,” Miss Dallow went on in a deep voice that seemed to come from a great distance away. “So I think it is hardly necessary for us to waste one another’s time. I think you will be comfortable in my house. I have never had complaints from any of my lodgers—yet!”

There was a little pause, then she opened the door, and Linda found herself outside again, too dazed to speak.

“What a horrible woman!” she thought resentfully as she climbed the stairs. “If I had known she was like that, I wouldn’t have come here, not for Mr. Stern or anyone else.”

“I am sure she means to be kind, dear,” Mrs. Lovelace said, when Linda burst in upon her, flushed and angry. “Perhaps you should not have gone down to see her. But, really, I know nothing about the etiquette of such things, and I thought it would be only polite.”

“She’s an old cat!” Linda said vigorously.

Mrs. Lovelace drew her delicate brows together in protest.

“Linda, that is not a very ladylike thing to say! It sounds more like Nelly Sweet than my granddaughter.”

Linda laughed.

“And what is the matter with Nelly, pray?” she asked, teasingly.

Mrs. Lovelace spread her white hands.

“Nothing, dear—oh, nothing!” she said, rather helplessly.

There followed rather a dull fortnight for Linda. Nothing particular happened to break the monotony of her business life. She neither saw nor heard anything of Andrew Lincoln, and she felt a little sore about it.

Nelly Sweet was unsympathetic.

"I told you what he was!" she said triumphantly. "Just a flirt, that's all. You won't see him again, mark my words. I daresay Joan gave him such a dressing-down that he won't dare to look at you any more."

"I never wanted him to look at me," Linda protested with dignity.

But it was not quite the truth, and a dozen times a day she found herself thinking of him, and wondering, wondering. . . .

Were all men like that? Just paying attention to a girl for their own amusement? She was sure there was a look of triumph in Joan Astley's queer eyes whenever they met hers.

As a matter of fact, Linda was finding life a little disappointing in more ways than one; the ribbons and laces which she had so adored as a child began to pall a little when one lived amongst them every day, and Miss Gillet reduced everything to such a commonplace business atmosphere that there seemed very little romance about earning one's own living at all.

Linda had imagined that she would never wish to leave the shop and go home, but now she found herself looking forward to six o'clock just as eagerly as the other girls did, and as the days grew longer and brighter she thought of the country and the green fields with longing.

Nelly Sweet was voluble one Monday morning of the Sunday she had spent down at Chorley Wood.

"Bluebells, my dear, till you couldn't think," so she told Linda. "And grass, and the darlingest little lark in the sky; oh, it was heaven!"

"Did you go alone?" Linda asked enviously; she had spent her Sunday trying to amuse Mrs. Lovelace, who had got a bad chill, and had been forced to stay in bed.

"Did I go alone!" Nelly echoed with scorn. "Not much! Bill took me."

"Oh!" Linda had hardly seen Bill since that day on the stairs when he had asked her about the roses. Once he had passed her at the gate with a hurried good evening; once he had taken a letter to the post for her when it was raining; but his first attempts at friendliness had vanished; he treated Linda now as he would have

done the most casual acquaintance.

She was vexed, without knowing why.

"It doesn't really matter, of course!" she told herself. "And yet, it would have been nice to have him for a friend."

"Are you engaged to Bill?" she asked Nelly, as she had asked her once before on the night of the dance.

Nelly shook her bobbed head so vigorously that for a moment she really looked like a yellow mop.

"No! no luck!" she said sententiously. "But I don't mind admitting that I'd have him if he asked me."

"Why don't you make him ask you then?" Linda inquired, with the ignorance of a girl who has never cared for anyone seriously.

"Make him!" Nelly opened her eyes wide. "Goodness, I can't see anyone making Bill do anything he didn't choose to do," she said in amazement.

Linda looked scornful.

"Pooh! He's only a big boy," she said, with a little spiteful feeling in her heart as she thought of Bill's casual good-day to her on the stairs that morning.

Nelly looked amused.

"Is he? That's all you know," she said calmly. "Why, if he chose, Bill could make me, or you, or any other girl knuckle under to him in a brace of shakes."

"I should like to see him try with me," Linda said loftily.

Nelly Sweet laughed.

"I'll tell him," she promised calmly.

The chill which Mrs. Lovelace had managed to contract did not yield to treatment as easily as Linda had hoped, and one night, going into her grandmother's room to see how she was, she found the old lady fighting for breath and obviously very ill.

Linda was terrified; she rushed out on to the landing, calling loudly for Jenny, but the house seemed unusually quiet and deserted, and she was running wildly downstairs for help when a door opened overhead and Bill Sargent appeared on the staircase.

"Miss Lovelace, is anything wrong?"

Linda turned a white, scared face up to him.

"It's Grannie—she's ill, she's dreadfully ill; she cannot breathe; oh, where can I get a doctor?"

"I'll get one." Bill was down the stairs in a twinkling and out in the street: he called back over his shoulder to Linda: "Get some water boiling. I daresay it's only

bronchitis. I'll be back in a minute."

But it seemed a lifetime till he returned, breathless with the speed at which he had run.

Jenny was awake then, and had tumbled out of bed, sleepy-eyed but sympathetic, willing to do anything, though she rather spoilt her kindliness by narrating how she had seen her own sister die of bronchitis, "fighting something awful for breath till the end!"

She was in the middle of a second hair-raising story when Bill Sargent came in, and promptly silenced her.

"Now then, Job's comforter," he said, "you be quiet, and go and let the doctor in. That's him ringing now—hurry up, there's a good soul."

He took her by her shoulders and turned her forcibly out of the room, and Linda looked at him with terrified eyes.

"Oh, do you think she will die? Do you think she will die?"

"I'm sure she won't"—his calm, matter-of-fact voice restored her confidence. "People don't die of a mild attack of bronchitis. Here is the doctor, so I'll go, but if there's anything you want, just sing out to me, and I'll come."

But in spite of his assurance, Mrs. Lovelace was very ill for several days. Linda spent agonised hours at Lorne and Dodwell's, not liking to ask for leave, and dreading what she would find when she got home in the evening.

Nelly was sympathetic, but inclined to be jealous of Bill's kindness, for in the gratitude of her heart Linda told her what a good friend he had proved.

"I don't know what we should have done without him," she said over and over again. "He's been like a brother."

Nelly sniffed inelegantly.

"Well, as long as he's *only* like a brother——" she said darkly.

The subtlety of her words passed Linda by; she was too racked with her own fears to heed anything outside them.

At six o'clock she raced home, trembling with dread, to find the doctor's car outside the house, and to meet Miss Dallow on the stairs.

"Grannie!" She could hardly voice the word, but Miss Dallow did not relax her usual sternness at the girl's distress.

"She is not so well," she said, as if the life of one little old lady could be of no possible interest to anybody. "This afternoon she had a heart attack—brought on by coughing, I do not doubt—and we were forced to send for the doctor again." She put up a thin hand and smoothed her inky black hair.

"I have never had a death in my house, and it will be most unpleasant if the worst

should happen," she said, heartlessly.

Linda pushed her on one side.

"Oh, I hate you! I hate you!" she sobbed, and ran wildly up the rest of the stairs.

There was no doubt that Mrs. Lovelace was very ill; she lay all that night with closed eyes, hardly seeming to breathe, and Linda dared not leave her or take off her clothes.

Jenny was kindness itself, and a dozen times Bill Sargent came to the door to know if there was anything he could do.

Linda shook her head. She could not speak: in her heart she was sure that Mrs. Lovelace would die, and her terror of the future knew no bounds.

To be alone, without anyone of her own. The thought was a nightmare.

Bill looked at her with sympathetic eyes.

"Won't they let you stay home from business?" he asked.

"I haven't asked them. I don't like to."

"Do you think they would?"

"I don't know. Mr. Robert might—he's always been kind."

Bill turned to the door.

"I'll ask him for you," he said, and was gone before she could protest.

There was no hope in Linda's heart; she dared not allow herself to think of hope as she sat beside her grandmother's bed, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes fixed on the frail little figure lying there.

She thought of her own mother and wondered what she would say if Mrs. Lovelace died. Would she mind? Had she any spark of love for her? Linda did not think so. She only hoped that she would never have to see Mrs. Goring-Wells again. Goring-Wells! What a name! She shuddered as she thought of the change she had seen in her mother's face. She thanked God she had not told Mrs. Lovelace of that meeting.

Presently, out of sheer exhaustion, she fell asleep, her head resting against the hard bedpost, and when Bill Sargent came back she did not hear his gentle knock at the sitting-room door, and he softly turned the handle and entered.

He called to her in a low voice: "Miss Lovelace!" and then, after a moment: "Linda!"

There was no answer, and he tiptoed across the room to the closed door of the bedroom.

"Linda!"

Then he pushed the door gently open and looked in.

Linda was sleeping heavily, her head thrown back in discomfort against the iron

bedpost, her slight figure drooping helplessly with utter weariness.

Bill stood watching her for a moment compassionately; she looked so young, almost a child, and for the first time he realised how difficult life must seem to her, and how hard was the fight which she was called upon to make in the world.

Then he went forward and touched her arm.

She woke at once, starting up with a cry.

"It's all right—it's all right." He took her hand, and drew her into the sitting-room. "I saw Mr. Robert Lorne and explained. He was very kind, and told me to tell you that you might stay away from business until Mrs. Lovelace was out of danger."

Linda burst into tears; tears of weariness and gratitude and overwhelming relief, and Bill let her cry, standing beside her, holding her hand as if he were indeed the big brother to whom she had likened him. And then, when her sobbing was checked, he said gently:

"Now look here, you've got to go to bed and have a good night. The doctor is going to send in a nurse. Nonsense! of course you can," he insisted as she began to protest. "What shall we do with two of you ill?" he asked banteringly. "Poor old Dallow downstairs will have a fit with two invalids on her hands."

"I hate her; she's got no heart," Linda said brokenly.

"Well, she doesn't count anyway," he answered. "All you've got to do is to go to bed and sleep. Leave the rest to me."

"You're so kind, I don't know what I should do without you. I shall never be able to thank you."

"You have thanked me already by what you have said."

"Nobody has ever been so kind to me as you."

His face softened. "Well, we all have to stand by one another sometimes," he said. "Perhaps some day you'll have to stand by me."

She raised her wet eyes.

"Oh, I will! I will!" she promised fervently.

"That's a bargain then," he said lightly, and stooping, touched her hand with his lips.

Linda stayed away from business for a week, during which time she nursed her grandmother devotedly, hardly leaving her even for a few moments in the fresh air.

When Bill Sargent came in from the bank he used to knock at the sitting-room door before he went up to his own room.

"Have you been out to-day?" was invariably his first question, and if Linda said no, he would say:

"Well, put on your hat and go now. I'll stay here."

The nurse whom the doctor had sent in when Mrs. Lovelace was at her worst had departed, partly because of the expense, and partly because the old lady strongly objected to her businesslike methods.

"I will not be ordered about, and made to eat when I don't want to," she protested almost in tears, and at last because she was afraid the excitement would make her grandmother worse, Linda told the nurse she would not need her any longer.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders when he heard, and looked at Linda doubtfully.

"Your grandmother is very ill, and you are young to take so much responsibility," he said, but Linda did not care. She worked day and night uncomplainingly, till Bill Sargent's kind heart ached for her.

"There must be heaps of other things I could do to help you if you'd only let me," he said, many times, in disgruntled fashion. "What's the use of a great hulking fellow like me if I can't do something for my living."

Linda only laughed at him.

"You do too much already," she answered. "I shall sit still like a lady soon, and allow you to wait on me hand and foot."

"I wish you would," he said, gruffly, and for a moment there was a little silence, which Linda broke rather nervously by asking if he had seen Nelly Sweet or any of the other girls from Lorne and Dodwell's.

Bill frowned.

"I'm not Nelly's keeper," he protested. "Why do you always ask me about her? But I saw another friend of yours the other night," he added, maliciously. "That chap Lincoln! He asked if I knew where you were living: said he had lost your address." He looked at her with suspicion. "Do you write to him, then?" he demanded.

Linda flushed. She had been rather hurt by the silence with which the Black Prince had treated her note.

"He asked me to go out with him, and I was not able to, so of course I had to write," she answered.

"I see! Well, he didn't get your address from me. I don't like the way he goes hanging round after every decent-looking girl he happens to meet."

Linda tried to feel angry, but it was not very successful. She had grown rather fond of Bill and his bullying manner during the past week, and the first impetuous emotion she had felt towards Andrew Lincoln had somewhat faded into the background.

"I'm sure I don't want to see him," she protested with dignity.

Bill caught her hand.

"Do you mean that?" he demanded.

Her eyes met his a little shamefacedly.

"Yes; why not?"

"Because——" he broke off, turning away. "Look here," he said, after a moment. "To-morrow's Sunday and you say you're going back to business on Monday, so I've got a suggestion to make. Mrs. Lovelace is much better, isn't she?' "

"Yes—much better, I think."

"Well, will you have a day in the country with me to-morrow?"

Her eyes sparkled with pleasure, then she shook her head.

"I couldn't possibly leave Grannie for a whole day."

"Half a day, then! Jenny will look after her! Just half a day. I'll take you down to Chorley Wood—we can have tea, and a walk, and——"

"Isn't that where you took Nelly?"

His ready frown came again.

"Did she tell you so?"

"Yes, how else should I have known?"

"She chatters about everything," he complained. "After all, she wanted to go ——"

Linda repented. "So do I want to go," she said. "If you are sure it will be all right."

"Quite sure. We'll have an early lunch here, and go directly afterwards. We can be back by seven if you like."

"I must ask Grannie."

Bill smiled shyly.

"I've asked her already, and she thinks it's a fine idea."

"Bill!"

He laughed outright.

"Well, why not?"

"I never knew anyone who could get their own way as easily as you can."

He made a grimace.

"Easily! I like that; when I've been trying to screw up my courage to ask you to come with me all the week."

"Your courage! Are you afraid of me then?"

"Horribly afraid, sometimes."

"Why?"

He began to tell her, then stopped.

"It will keep. I'll tell you when I think you are really interested."

She did not press the question further; in her heart she knew that if there were times when Bill was afraid of her, there were also times when she was afraid of him.

He had such a way of looking at her—almost as if she belonged to him.

"How absurd!" she told herself, and dismissed the thought.

When Bill had gone she went in to Mrs. Lovelace. The old lady was up and sitting by the fire for the first time. She looked very frail, and her hands were as white as the gossamer lace shawl which was folded round her shoulders. That shawl had been associated with Linda all her life.

"I gave it to your mother when you were born," Mrs. Lovelace told her once. It was the first time she had mentioned her daughter's name. "You used to be wrapped in it when you were quite a tiny baby. But it wasn't grand enough when your father began to make so much money, so it was discarded for something finer; but I always kept it—" the old lady added sentimentally, stroking the soft lace with her slender fingers.

"And if you're not quite, quite sure that you won't mind being left for a whole afternoon, just say so, and I'll be quite happy to stay at home," Linda urged. "I don't really want to go, but Mr. Sargent has been so kind, and he seems anxious to take me——"

"Go by all means, my dear," Mrs. Lovelace answered. "You've lost all your colour nursing me; besides, I like that young man," she added reflectively. "Where did you tell me he was—in a bank?"

"Yes."

Linda felt a little self-conscious.

"Well, he's nice, he's very nice," Mrs. Lovelace said again. "I know you will be

quite safe with him." Her faded eyes sought her granddaughter's face earnestly. "Do you like him, Linda?"

"Of course I do."

Mrs. Lovelace gave a little sigh, half of relief, half of sorrow. After a moment she said:

"I'm glad of that, because I think he likes you, too."

"Likes me!" Linda opened her eyes wide. "Why—why, he's as good as engaged to Nelly Sweet," she protested.

"Did he tell you so?" Mrs. Lovelace asked.

Linda shook her head. "No, but Nelly did."

"Ah!" The old lady looked wise. "That makes a difference," she murmured.

Linda went down to Chorley Wood on the Sunday afternoon with Bill Sargent; it looked cloudy and inclined to rain when they left London, but the clouds stayed behind with the crowded noisy streets, and when they got into the country the sun was shining and the sky was blue.

"Do you often come down here?" Linda asked as they left the little station and walked across the common.

"Whenever I can. I love the country. I was born in it, you see. I've often thought of applying for a transfer, from the bank, only sometimes you lose in the long run by asking favours." He hesitated. "Do you like the country?" he inquired.

"I love it."

Bill switched at a dandelion with his stick.

"If I got married I should apply for a move and chance it," he said rather abruptly.

Linda looked up.

"Oh, are you thinking of getting married?" she asked, and a little pang touched her heart.

Bill smiled.

"Well, I suppose we all think of it sometimes, don't we?"

"I suppose so."

No doubt it was true that he and Nelly were almost engaged, if not quite, Linda decided. She began to wish she had not come out with him after all; it was silly to go about with a man who belonged to somebody else; besides, Nelly would not like it, she was sure.

"If I ever marry, it will be for money," she said, suddenly. "I'm tired of being poor."

Bill frowned.

"Money and love hardly ever go together."

"Oh, yes, they do," she answered, airily. "They must do sometimes, and that's what I'm looking for."

His face took a grim expression.

"It would be no use offering you a little house in the country with a back garden and perhaps lots of flowers—eh?" he asked.

She parried the question with sudden shyness.

"Have you got it to offer, then?"

"I could get it. I've got a bit of capital, and I shall get some more when my aunt dies—at least, I've always been led to suppose that I shall, but I haven't seen her for years—we had a row."

"Oh, what about?"

"I wouldn't marry the girl she wanted me to."

"Oh, didn't you like her?"

"I hated her."

Linda laughed. "You're a person of very strong dislikes, aren't you?"

"Yes, and strong likes, too. Once I love anyone it's for ever."

She looked at him consideringly: yes, she could believe that. He had a strong, determined face and a mouth which looked as if its lines had been carved in granite.

Bill struck off the beaten pathway a little to the left.

"We ought to find some primroses here," he said. "They were nearly out a fortnight ago when Nelly and I came."

Linda said, "Oh, were they?" rather off-handedly; she was slightly jealous of Nelly.

The primroses were there all right, and she went down on her knees to pick them.

"Oh, aren't they sweet?"

"Very." But his eyes were on her face all the time.

She bunched a little nosegay together and offered them to him to smell.

"Did you ever know anything so perfect?"

Bill took the little bunch and fastened them in his coat.

"Thank you. I look like the tripper I am, I know—but who cares?"

"I wanted them for Grannie," she objected.

"You'll find heaps more."

They turned into a little copse, where the trees met overhead, and it was cool and shady. Bluebells grew here, too, and delicate, graceful bracken.

"It's a picture—a picture!" Linda whispered excitedly, and then forgetting all her previous statements, she said, "When I marry, I shall come and live in a place like this, where it's quiet, and you can hear the birds sing, and where you can walk out of your front door without a hat if you want to, and pick flowers."

"'Mine be a cot beside the hill,'" Bill quoted softly.

She looked up, her eyes rapt and sentimental.

"Is that poetry?" she asked.

"Yes, don't you know it? I'll say it to you." Bill took off his hat and ran his fingers through his thick hair.

"Mine be a cot beside the hill,
  A bee-hive's hum shall soothe my ear.
A willowy brook that turns a mill
  With many a fall shall linger near.

The swallow, oft, beneath my thatch
  Shall twitter from her clay-built nest:
Oft shall the pilgrim lift the latch,
  And share my meal, a welcome guest.

Around my ivy'd porch shall spring
  Each fragrant flower that drinks the dew,
And Lucy at her wheel shall sing,
  In russet gown and apron blue——"

He broke off, his deep voice ending with a little rough note, as if of some emotion of which he was ashamed.

"Oh, is that all?" Linda asked disappointedly.

"No, there's another verse, but you'll think I'm sentimental if I go on much longer. . . . It's pretty, though, isn't it?"

"Lovely. I didn't know you liked poetry."

"You don't know much about me at all, do you?"

She flushed. "Well, no, I suppose not."

There was a little silence, unbroken save for the twitter of a young bird in its nest overhead, and a little rustling in the bracken as a field-mouse stole by.

It seemed so far away from Hammersmith and Lorne and Dodwell's, Linda thought! almost as if they were in another world, and she wished with a pang that Mrs. Lovelace could be with them; it seemed dreadful to think of her cooped up in

the dingy rooms at Miss Dallow's, whilst down here in the country there was sunshine and fresh air and that wonderful inexplicable feeling of being free!

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Bill asked abruptly, and she woke from her reverie with a start.

"Yes, so much! I was just thinking what a long way off Lorne and Dodwell's seems, and the Hammersmith Road."

His face darkened.

"It's no life for you in a draper's shop."

Her pride rose at once.

"I like it very much," she said, on the defensive, "or I should not be there. Everyone is so kind to me."

"It's no life for you, all the same," he insisted doggedly. "You ought to be down in the country. . . ."

She smiled teasingly.

"In your 'cot beside the hill'—eh?" she asked.

To her surprise the hot blood rushed to his face, and his eyes took a fierce expression.

"You are making fun of me," he said; he walked on, and left her standing there.

What had she said to annoy him? She hurried after him all penitence. "Mr. Sargent! Oh, don't spoil the lovely day by being cross! What have I said?"

He stopped, and waited for her.

"Nothing. I was foolish to mind: but I don't like being made fun of."

"I wasn't making fun of you. I think it would be lovely to have 'a little cot beside the hill.'"

He turned his face away.

"You don't mean that! You'd rather be riding round London in a Daimler over tarred roads than walking here with me."

Linda opened her lips to answer him, then closed them again with a feeling of panic.

What had happened to her that she had changed so soon? A week ago she could have answered "Of course I would" and it would have been true, but now—surely there was no greater happiness to be found in life than a day in the country with Bill Sargent.

They had tea outside a little inn overlooking the common, on a rustic table, with many tame pigeons strutting round them.

Linda had taken off her hat, and the fresh breeze had stirred her hair into little curls. She looked like a schoolgirl, Bill thought, as he watched her eating thick slices

of bread and jam with more appetite than she had shown for days, and he wished with all his heart that she need not go back to London.

For some time he had been racking his brain for some means whereby he could secure a holiday for her, but beyond offering right out to pay for it, no way had occurred to him.

"The country's the place for her, not London," he told himself for the fiftieth time. "She's not fit for the sort of life Nelly leads."

The thought of Nelly touched his conscience. They had been good friends he and she, and only yesterday there had been a curt little letter for him at the bank asking what she had done to offend him that he never came to see her now.

Poor little Nelly! He liked her well enough, with her high spirits and ready smile; but compared with Linda——

"What are you thinking about?" Linda asked abruptly; and he roused himself with a sigh.

"I was thinking what a pity it is we have to go back home again."

"Home!" Linda made a little grimace. "It's not much of a home, is it, no matter how hard we pretend?" She sat silent for a moment thinking of the home she had once had, and of her mother. If only her mother had been different! Kinder! More loving! How different life would have been for them all.

She wondered why she had not heard from her again. What had become of her? Perhaps she had thought things over and repented her offer to take Linda into her new life.

"Not that I would ever go," Linda told herself quickly. But she could not help wondering what her mother's second husband was like, and if he was the man with whom she had gone away that tragic night.

"The only man I have ever loved——"

Mrs. Lovelace had told her of the contents of the melodramatic letter which her mother had left behind, and, young as she was, Linda had been struck by its incongruity; Mrs. Dawson had never had it in her to love anyone but herself.

If only things had been different! She pulled herself up sharply and stole a shy look at Bill.

Well, if they had been different she would never have met him, for one thing; she found his eyes upon her.

"How old are you, Miss Lovelace?" he asked abruptly. "Or is that a question I must not ask?"

Linda laughed.

"I'm eighteen and I wish I was more."

“Don’t do that. Eighteen is a fine age. All the world and life before you”—a little pause—“how old do you think I am?”

She made a vague guess.

“Twenty-three?”

He laughed rather grimly.

“Twenty-eight! A Methuselah to you, I suppose.”

“I wish I were twenty-eight.”

“And when you are you’ll look back to eighteen and sigh to be eighteen again.”

She shook her head.

“I don’t think so. I feel somehow . . . as if I’m shut in in a corner of life just now. I want to get out”—she flung her arms wide. “I want to do great things, to be successful!” She stopped, looking at him with apologetic self-consciousness. “That was a bit of my father talking,” she added.

“Was he a successful man?”

“Very, at one time, but he lost all his money. That’s why I’m here.”

“With me, you mean?”

“I didn’t mean that at all. But things would have been different if—well——” She did not finish, and he did not press her. He had guessed for himself that there must be some story behind the lives of these two waifs who had strayed across his path. Miss Dallow’s apartment house was not the place either for Linda or her grandmother.

“What’s the time?” Linda asked suddenly.

He told her regretfully.

“Half past five.”

“Oughtn’t we to be going back?”

“It will take us over an hour to get home.”

Linda brushed some crumbs from her lap in the direction of the strutting pigeons.

“Then we must go. The afternoon must have seemed ages to Grannie.”

“And will you come with me again?” he asked, when they had paid the bill and were walking back to the station.

“I will if you ask me to.”

“Oh, I shall ask you all right,” Bill said laconically.

He was very silent going up in the train.

“I suppose he’s had enough of me,” Linda thought with a pang. “I know I’m not bright and amusing like Nelly is.”

And again came that swift jealousy of her friend.

Either Nelly cared for Bill, or she did not! And if she did——

“Well, I don’t want him,” Linda told herself proudly. “She need not be afraid that I’m trying to take him away from her.”

“And to-morrow you’ll be back at business,” Bill said suddenly.

“Yes, Miss Gillet will be glad to have me.”

His eyes twinkled.

“How do you know that?”

“She told me so. She called yesterday and brought Grannie some grapes. She’s really very kind, though sometimes she just freezes me up.”

“I don’t know the lady,” Bill said.

“Nelly hates her!” Linda told him with a little laugh, then stopped. Why did the name of Nelly so often obtrude itself? There was a vague sense of uneasiness in her heart.

Although Miss Gillet had called, Nelly had not been near. Linda wondered what she would say when they met to-morrow.

She broke into a little run when the house came in sight; there was a light in her grandmother’s bedroom, and something of the old fear touched her heart.

Supposing Mrs. Lovelace was ill again?

Bill overtook her, and caught her hand.

“Don’t be in such a hurry: say good-night to me first.”

She looked at him in surprise.

“But you are coming in, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but there’ll be crowds of people.”

“Crowds! only Grannie. What difference does she make?”

He dropped her hand at once.

“Oh, well, if that’s how you feel——”

It wasn’t how she felt; in that moment while he held her hand, the most absurd impulse had rushed through her heart; the impulse to lift her face and kiss him and say “Thank you for being so good to me. It’s been the happiest day of my life——”

But, well, there was Nelly!

She opened the door and ran on ahead upstairs.

“Come and tell Grannie all about it,” she called back to him.

Bill followed soberly.

Linda went back to business the following morning, and was greeted very kindly by Miss Gillet.

"I've missed you, Miss Lovelace," she condescended to say, "and I hope that your grandmother is better."

"Much better," Linda said gratefully. Her eyes fell on a box of new Buckinghamshire lace. "Oh, how lovely!" she cried in rapture.

Miss Gillet smiled leniently.

"I thought you would admire it," she said; she took up a strand of the beautiful lace and passed it tenderly through her fingers. "See what fine texture it is, and all hand-made! We do not have much demand for it as a rule; this is a special order for a trousseau."

She kept Linda busy and interested all the morning, so that the time passed quickly until lunch-time came, and Linda went off to look for Nelly.

To her surprise, she had moved her seat to another table, and seemed to avoid looking in Linda's direction at all.

Something was the matter, then! Did Nelly know about yesterday and the trip to Chorley Wood?

Linda hardly ate anything; she liked Nelly, and it hurt her to feel that there might be trouble between them.

She waited for her when lunch was over.

"Nelly!"

Nelly looked round ungraciously.

"What do you want? I'm in a hurry."

"I don't want anything, only—look here, are you angry with me?"

"Angry!" Nelly gave a short, unhappy little laugh. "I've no cause to be, of course, have I?" she sneered.

Linda drew back, her face flushing.

"What do you mean?"

"You know quite well what I mean. I thought you were my friend, but you can't be! You're not contented with one man, you upset poor old Joan over the Black Prince, and now that he's done with you, you go running after my boy! Oh, I know."

"Nelly, how dare you say such things?"

"Oh, I dare quite well; I'm not afraid of you. I know where you were yesterday

—you went out with Bill. You're not going to deny it, I suppose?"

"Why should I? He asked me."

"Is that a good enough reason? I suppose you'd go out with the devil himself then if he asked you."

"Nelly!"

"Oh, don't Nelly me! I blame myself for ever trusting you. You're sly, that's what you are, and so's Bill! I haven't done with him yet, so he needn't think I have. He's going to hear from me——"

"Nelly!"

Flynn, the shop-walker, passed at that moment.

"A little quieter, if you please, Miss Sweet," he said in his starchy voice.

Nelly turned on her heel.

"I'll shout the house down if I like," she muttered under her breath.

Linda went back to her laces with a heavy heart. So what she had feared had come true, and Nelly was jealous.

Well, there was only one cure for it! Her friendship with Bill must end.

After all, there were plenty of other men in the world, and she did not wish to steal anyone's property—plenty of other men who would be glad to go about with her—why, even the Black Prince had asked for her address.

But her heart ached as she thought of Bill. He was so kind. So dear.

"Mine be a cot beside the hill——"

It seemed a hundred years ago since she had stood with him amongst the bracken and bluebells and listened to his clumsy recitation of the charming verses.

Why did the good things of life go by so quickly? Why could not the hours stand still when one was quite, happy.

She waited about after six o'clock, hoping to see Nelly, but she had either left or was determinedly avoiding her, and at last she went home, very sad and dispirited.

The little sitting-room was full of the scent of the primroses which she and Bill Sargent had picked the day before, but Linda no longer cared for them. She blamed herself for having gone to Chorley Wood with him; after all, Nelly was her friend, and she knew that Nelly cared for him.

Mrs. Lovelace's sharp eyes saw the weariness of her darling's face.

"Tired, dearest?" she asked anxiously. She was sure that Linda was finding life too hard, and she longed to be able to take her away from it all and put her back amongst the luxury from which she had been uprooted.

But only that morning she had heard from Mr. Stern to the effect that there

would be less money for them than he had at first hoped; affairs, it seemed, were terribly involved, and out of the ruin all he could promise her was a paltry £85 a year.

The old lady worried and grieved as she sat alone during the long days. It was not fair that some girls should have so much, and others so little. Here was Linda, fit to hold her own anywhere, and forced to live in second-rate lodgings and make friends of anyone who chanced across her path.

"What have you been doing today?" she asked with an effort to be cheerful. "And have you seen Miss Sweet?"

Linda said "Yes—," but did not pursue the subject, and silence fell between them.

Overhead she could hear Bill Sargent's heavy tread and his cheery whistle, and she dreaded the moment when he would come downstairs and knock at the door with his usual kind inquiry,

"Anything I can do for anyone?"

She must not let him come in, no matter how badly she wanted him to. She must shut him determinedly out of her life because he belonged to Nelly.

And then, almost as if he guessed her thoughts, she heard his step coming down the stairs, and then his knock on the door.

Mrs. Lovelace looked up.

"That must be Mr. Sargent," she said. Now Linda would be more cheerful, she thought; Bill always made her smile.

But Linda's face was very cold and grave as she went to answer that knock.

"Anyone at home?" Bill's cheery voice came at once. "Good! Is there anything I can do? I'm spoiling for a job!"

"Nothing, thank you. Thank you very much."

Linda's voice, a little unfriendly, but quite determined, answered him, and his face changed.

Mrs. Lovelace spoke from across the room.

"Come in, Mr. Sargent—do come in."

Bill hesitated.

"I think I won't to-night," he said stiffly. "I only just came along to see if everybody was all right; but if I'm not wanted——"

He waited a moment, but Linda did not speak, and he turned away.

"You were not very kind, were you, dear?" Mrs. Lovelace said timidly when the door was shut again. "Has he annoyed you, Linda?"

"Oh no, dear."

“I was sure he had not; he is always such a gentleman, but—you were not very kind to him, dear.”

Linda made no reply, but later when Mrs. Lovelace was in bed and she had put on her hat to steal out for a little fresh air, she met Bill on the stairs.

It was impossible to pass on, for he would not have allowed it.

“How have I offended you, Linda?”

It was not often he addressed her by her Christian name, and she felt herself paling, though she tried to smile.

“How absurd! you haven’t offended me.”

“Then will you accept this?” He brought a box of chocolates from his pocket. “Please take them,” he added, earnestly.

Linda drew back.

“Thank you, you’re very kind, but . . . I don’t want to!”

“You mean . . . because they are from me.”

“If you like to put it that way.”

It was the hardest thing she had ever done in her life, but the thought of Nelly drove her to be cruel.

Nelly was welcome to him.

For an instant Bill looked at her steadily, his mouth twitching a little, and she broke out tremblingly against her will:

“Oh, I don’t want to be unkind—if you understood——”

He drew back.

“I think I understand—perfectly,” he said in a voice of flint, and the next moment she was alone.

She went back to the sitting-room feeling rather dazed; her throat felt constrained as if the tears were not far off, and everything was unreal and vague.

It had all happened so suddenly, almost without consciousness of it, and only now that it was over, in a revulsion of feeling she told herself that she had been unfair.

After all, how was Bill to blame?

It was wrong of her to have hurt him just because Nelly had chosen to be unkind; a dozen times during a wakeful night she was on the point of relenting; once she got up, and lighting the gas wrote him a little note saying she was sorry and asking him to forget what she had said, but in the morning she destroyed it.

After all he had belonged to Nelly first, and she did not want anybody else’s friends; so she went to business trying to harden her heart, carefully looking the other way when outside Lorne and Dodwell’s she saw Nelly Sweet.

Nelly was looking a trifle ashamed, although she held her head in high defiance; it

was not a happy day for either of them.

During the morning Robert Lorne passed the lace counter where Linda was winding off yards of baby Valenciennes insertion with hands that were not quite steady.

He stopped a moment when he saw her.

"Good morning, Miss Lovelace; how is the invalid?"

Linda looked up with a grateful smile.

"Thank you, she's much better. It was so kind of you to let me stay at home."

"Not at all. I'm sorry you had the worry."

But in spite of the kindly words, they sounded perfunctory, and Linda sighed as he went on.

She could not understand men; they all seemed so difficult and changeable, and her thoughts went for a moment to the Black Prince.

He seemed to have vanished utterly from her life; she wondered if she would ever see him again. Not that it mattered—not that he counted at all in comparison with Bill Sargent; but of him she would not allow herself to think—she had finished with him.

"Mine be a cot beside the hill." The words haunted her, and would not be banished.

At lunch-time Nelly Sweet sat far away, and Linda wondered if it was her imagination that all the other girls seemed to avoid her.

"I'm tired and upset, and so everything seems wrong, of course," she told herself. "To-morrow I shall be all right."

"Have you a headache?" Miss Gillet asked during the afternoon. "You are so quiet, and you look so pale. If you would like some aspirin——"

Linda thanked her hurriedly, but declined. Her heart had warmed to Miss Gillet since her kindly thought for her grandmother. She was beginning to realise that it was not always the people who said the most who were the most sincere.

"What did Mr. Robert say to you this morning?" Miss Gillet asked presently. "As a rule he never speaks to any of us. I hope he is not annoyed with you about anything."

Linda smiled. "Oh, no! He only asked after my grandmother. He knew she had been ill."

Miss Gillet's face tightened a little, and she pursed her lips.

"Very kind of him, I'm sure," she said rather tartly. She had a rather weak spot in her own heart for Robert Lorne, and she was vaguely jealous of his little courtesy to Linda.

But Linda had more important things of which to think as she went on with her work. When would she see Bill again? What would he say to her? That he was a man of his word she was sure, and she knew he would make no further overtures to her; any olive branch of peace now must come from her.

"And that is not at all likely!" she thought scornfully as she hurried home. "After all, there are heaps of men in the world."

But only one Bill, so her heart whispered sorrowfully, and the tears welled into her eyes as she climbed the dark staircase to their rooms.

Only one Bill! Only one so kind and unselfish, at any rate.

As she opened the sitting-room door, she heard his voice in the hall below through which she had come, and with a sudden feeling of terror, she hurried on, closing the door against him.

Mrs. Lovelace was dozing by the fire; she looked very frail and weak, Linda thought, with a fresh pang of fear, and she stood for some seconds looking down at the old lady before with a start she woke.

"My dear, how long have you been there?"

"I've only just come in." Linda bent to kiss her hurriedly before she took off her hat. "I'm going to have tea now. I'm hungry. I didn't care for the lunch we had to-day."

"What did you have?" Mrs. Lovelace asked interestedly. She found every detail of her granddaughter's life of absorbing interest.

Linda had forgotten, but she pretended to remember.

"Mutton, I think—Irish stew—and jam pudding." She moved about, laying the table. "Has anyone been, Grannie?" Then she laughed at her own question; so few people ever came to see them, only Mr. Stern and Bill—and now he would never come again.

"No, I've only seen Jenny all day," Mrs. Lovelace said with a little shake of her silvery head. "But I haven't been at all dull; as a matter of fact, I believe I've been asleep half the time."

"It will do you good," Linda said brightly. She could hear Bill's tread overhead now, and the sound of a drawer opening and shutting. Perhaps he was going out; he always made a great to-do about getting dressed when he was going out; perhaps he had arranged to meet Nelly.

They were at tea when she heard him go downstairs again; his steps never faltered as he passed their door; presently she heard him bang the street door, and his footsteps dying away down the road.

Mrs. Lovelace must have heard him too, for after a moment she asked

diffidently.

"Linda, have you and Mr. Sargent quarrelled?"

Linda managed to laugh.

"Quarrelled! My dear, why ever should we?"

"I don't know," the old lady answered. "But last night . . . ." she broke off with a little frown. "And he has not been in at all to-day," she added. "And lately he has never missed coming at least once."

"He's going out with Nelly to-night," Linda said indifferently. "I suppose he was in a hurry."

There was a little silence, then Mrs. Lovelace said, in her emphatic way: "I do not consider that Miss Sweet is at all suited to him."

Linda smiled, an April smile.

"Oh, Grannie, why?"

"She is not serious enough; not deep enough. Mr. Sargent is a man capable of a great affection——"

"Mine be a cot beside the hill——," sang the mournful voice of Linda's heart.

She rose hurriedly, pushing back her chair with a scraping little sound. "Well, he is quite old enough to judge for himself," she said sharply; then broke off as there came a low knocking at the door.

Mrs. Lovelace put her slim hands up to her hair, nervously smoothing it.

"Oh, dear. I'm so untidy. I do hope it is nobody that matters."

Linda laughed ruefully.

"Who is it likely to be?" she asked; and she stifled a sigh as she crossed the room to the door. She knew well enough whom she could wish it to be. Then she turned the handle, and fell back with a sharp cry of anger and distress as she saw her mother standing there.

If it had been possible to shut the door in the powdered face of Mrs. Goring-Wells before her grandmother had recognised her, Linda would have done so, but there was no time.

Mrs. Goring-Wells was in the room, and smiling triumphantly before anybody could move or speak, and Mrs. Lovelace rose to her feet with a little choking cry of protest.

"You!"

Linda's mother laughed; she crossed the room, and would have bent to kiss the old lady, but she was waved emphatically away.

"How dare you come here! I hoped I should never have to see you again. How dared you come here!"

"Grannie, darling!" Linda ran forward and put her gently back into the chair. "Don't excite yourself so; you'll be ill, you know you will; oh, please, I beg of you!"

But for once Mrs. Lovelace would not listen; she was shaking from head to foot, and there was an angry spot of colour in either of her pale cheeks.

"How dare you come here?" she panted again. "After the way you have treated your child; how dare you!"

Linda's mother smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"Dear me, how melodramatic we are," she said impatiently. "I imagined you would be pleased to see me, or else I assure you I should not have taken so much trouble to find you out." She looked round the room with disparaging eyes. "Heavens! why did you choose such a place?"

"Beggars cannot be choosers," Mrs. Lovelace said in her shaking voice, which yet maintained its full dignity. "But such as it is, this is my home, and I request you to leave it at once."

Mrs. Goring-Wells replied by pulling forward a chair and sitting down.

"A very nice reception, I must say," she said. "Most charming in every way. My own mother and my own daughter!"

"Your mother who it ashamed to own you," Mrs. Lovelace said.

Mrs. Goring-Wells laughed.

"Linda has been coaching you, I can see." She looked at the girl, who still stood with one arm round her grandmother's shoulders. "I suppose you have not said anything about our meeting the other day, Linda?"

"No. I haven't. I hoped you would not find us. I hoped I should never see you again," Linda answered passionately.

Mrs. Goring-Wells glanced at the modest meal still lying on the table.

"A high tea!" she said sneeringly. "I see that you live up to the best traditions of Hammersmith."

Mrs. Lovelace broke into helpless weeping, and with a passionate exclamation Linda crossed the room and opened the door.

"Will you please—go!" she said.

Mrs. Goring-Wells powdered her nose with the aid of a small gold mirror and a piece of velvet-backed beaver.

"My dear Linda, I most certainly will not," she said calmly. "So you may as well both reconcile yourselves to listen to what I have to say." She glanced at her mother. "It's no use upsetting yourself so——" she said with a touch of impatience. "I've shed all the tears I mean to shed in my life. It's useless. Nobody minds if you cry yourself blind, and it makes you look years older——" she added with a sort of

weary cynicism.

Mrs. Lovelace had covered her face with her frail hands; she was infinitely pathetic as she sat there, and such a wave of passionate bitterness rose in Linda's heart that for a moment she was afraid of herself. With a great effort she controlled her voice.

"Grannie is ill; she has been very ill—and you will make her worse with all this excitement. Please, if you have anything to say, come to my room and say it to me. Please, if you have any pity."

For a moment she thought that her mother was going to refuse; then, with a little careless shrug of her shoulders beneath their expensive furs, she rose.

"I shall come and say good-bye before I go," she said as a parting shot to the weeping little figure in the chair.

Linda closed the door, and followed her mother to her own bedroom across the landing.

Her heart was beating fast with indignation, and tears of passionate anger were not far from her eyes.

She was terrified of the effect of this agitation upon Mrs. Lovelace's delicate constitution: the doctor had warned her that she must not be excited or upset.

"The least thing—the least shock or worry may undo all the good we have done in the past week," he had said to her; and now, after all their care, this had happened.

"What do you want to say to me?" she asked.

Mrs. Goring-Wells applied an absurd handkerchief to her eyes.

"Linda, you are very cruel! You are all I have in the world, my only child, and you look at me as if you hate me."

"You have your husband," Linda said. For the life of her she could not have kept back the words. What had this woman cared for her, or for the man who had ruined himself in order to satisfy her extravagances. "If that is all you have to say to me ——" she went on.

She was longing for her mother to go. She was longing to go back to Mrs. Lovelace and comfort her. "Oh, please, please be quick and tell me what you want to and go——" she broke out in an agony of impatience.

But Mrs. Goring-Wells was thoroughly enjoying herself, and refused to be hurried. She loved scenes, which was partly the reason why she had treated poor Thomas Dawson to so many during his lifetime.

"In spite of your treatment, I am willing to give you everything the heart of a girl could wish for," she went on. "I am a rich woman now, and all I have is yours, Linda

—if only you will come and live with me."

Linda took a step forward, her eyes very bright and hard.

"I shall never leave Grannie, never!" she said. "And if that is all you want to say ——"

Mrs. Goring-Wells mopped her eyes very carefully, lest she should spoil her darkened lashes.

"You don't realise what you are refusing," she said. "Look at this—place!" The tone of her voice said "Hovel." "How can you exist in such rooms? Look at the wall-paper! Look at the furniture!"

"It's clean and comfortable," Linda said, defensively. A moment ago she had thought it terrible, but she resented her mother saying such things.

"At any rate, we are happy in our own way," she insisted. "And we are not in debt; we pay for everything we have."

"For a high tea, and bread and butter for breakfast," Mrs. Goring-Wells sneered. "After the careful way I brought you up; after all the delicate nurturing you had——"

Linda almost laughed; then checked herself. After all, there was nothing to laugh at; surely it was only a tragedy?

She said in brave defiance: "I am happier now than I have ever been; I——" she broke off with a little smothered exclamation, turning her head; then suddenly she wrenched open the door and rushed across the landing to the sitting-room where they had left Mrs. Lovelace.

Mrs. Goring-Wells, following at a little distance, saw Linda open the door, and heard the wild cry she gave.

"Linda! what is it? what——" then she, too, cried out, and ran forward to the little still figure lying stretched on the floor by the fire.

"Grannie! Grannie! oh, darling, darling!"

At sound of the agonised cry Jenny came running, and presently Miss Dallow, and between them they lifted Mrs. Lovelace and laid her on her bed—the little single iron bed with its hard mattress.

Mrs. Goring-Wells stood silently by, white beneath all her rouge and powder, trembling from head to foot.

Miss Dallow, gaunt, but wonderfully gentle now, bent over the bed, trying to force some drops of brandy between the old lady's white lips. Once she looked up at Linda, and her beady eyes were infinitely compassionate.

They had sent for the doctor, but it seemed an eternity till he came, though in reality it was but a few moments.

He looked at Mrs. Lovelace and touched her hand—Linda's terrified eyes watching him all the time—then he moved back a step.

Linda broke out—wildly.

"Doctor!" she caught his arm with frenzied fingers. "Doctor . . . Grannie?"

But she knew before he told her that Mrs. Lovelace was dead.

Everything that followed was just a confused nightmare to Linda, through which she walked like a frozen statue.

She had a vague memory of her mother in hysterics; of Miss Dallow, a tall, austere figure, who seemed suddenly to come to life and behave like a human being—of Jenny in floods of tears, and of the doctor giving orders which nobody seemed to obey.

The shock to her own heart and brain was so great that all emotion and sense of pain was numbed.

She knew that her grandmother was dead just as she knew that night must always follow day, but as yet it conveyed nothing to her; she sat beside the bed where the little dignified figure lay, still holding one small, cold hand, which she mechanically chafed, as if in the despairing hope of bringing back some warmth to its iciness; she resisted everyone's efforts to take her away; she only shook her head to Jenny's prayers, and Miss Dallow's kindly urging.

"Let me alone; let me alone." That was all she wanted.

The doctor took his leave, promising to come again; Mrs. Goring-Wells departed in a swirl of draperies and loud sobbing, and presently the house was quiet once more.

A Miss Tripp, who lodged in a bed-sitting-room behind Linda's bedroom, came timidly to the door once to ask if she could do anything.

She carried a large cup of strong tea in one hand and a well-worn book of poems in the other, which she said always comforted her when she was unhappy, but Linda refused both the tea and the book, even while she vaguely realised the kindly thought which prompted the offer.

"People are kind, very kind," she thought, in a queer, detached way, but she felt as if she was shut off from them all in a world where no sunshine or hope could penetrate again, and in her heart was a great and abiding hatred of her mother.

She had done this thing! If she had not come to the house and made such a scene Mrs. Lovelace would have been alive now—might have lived for many years.

A thousand little memories of her childhood passed before her eyes as she sat there alone in her sorrow, and in every one of them the sweet face of the dead woman seemed to stand out, the most beloved and vivid influence of her life.

"Ribbons and laces for sweet pretty faces,
Oh, come to the market and buy . . . ."

As a tiny child, Mrs. Lovelace had adored Linda, and done everything in her power to amuse her and make her happy; as a gawky schoolgirl when her mother had tried to overdress her and make her life a burden, there had always been Grannie to fly to—always Grannie's room, where one could be happy and laugh and chatter.

It was all ended now; life lay at Linda's feet an empty thing, wherein nobody loved her.

Miss Dallow came to the room again; she took Linda's hand and tried to rouse her.

"My dear girl, you cannot possibly stay here. Please try and rouse yourself and come with me."

Linda raised her tragic eyes.

"Leave me alone—oh, please! Please!"

Miss Dallow tried once more, then she shrugged her shoulders and departed.

In spite of her sympathy, she was very much perturbed at a death having occurred in her house; such a thing had never happened before; she was afraid that the effect on her other lodgers would be bad; she felt genuinely worried and distressed as she went downstairs again to her own domain.

It was past ten then; almost time for her to go to bed, for she was an early riser and a hard worker, and was always ready for sleep; but obviously she could not leave Linda alone; she was at her wits' end to know what to do, when there was the sound of a latchkey in the front door, and the next moment Bill Sargent walked into the hall.

Miss Dallow knew, as she knew everything else that went on in her house, that there had been a friendship between Bill and Linda, so it was with relief and eagerness that she turned to him now.

"Oh, Mr. Sargent! How providential! We are all in such trouble."

Bill looked up indifferently from his task of boot-scraping on the mat.

"Oh! What's up?" he asked casually. He knew Miss Dallow well, and as a rule the things which she considered great troubles were small and unimportant.

"Mrs. Lovelace died suddenly this afternoon."

Bill turned round as if he had been struck.

"Mrs. Lovelace! Dead!" His face paled; he made a swift movement towards the stairs, then stopped, remembering that Linda no longer had any use for him.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said stiffly. "Is—is anyone there—with her granddaughter, I mean?"

"No, and that is just my trouble. We can't rouse her; she won't move, or eat anything; and how can I go to bed and leave her alone like that? It's beyond the possibilities of humanity."

Bill's face seemed to tighten.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked curtly. He knew well enough what he wanted to do; what every instinct in his body was urging him to do, but he possessed an obstinate sort of pride which had been cut to its quick by Linda's unjust dismissal of him.

Miss Dallow hesitated.

"I thought . . . I know you have been friendly—if you would just try and see if you can do anything . . . I have done my best and failed. I——"

Bill was halfway up the stairs before she had finished speaking; Linda could but shut the door in his face he told himself grimly, if she did not want him; but the sitting-room door stood open, and by the yellow light from a table lamp he saw the empty room and the closed door beyond leading to Mrs. Lovelace's bedroom.

For a moment he stood irresolute; then he went forward with a determined step, and, crossing the room, opened it.

"Linda!"

He spoke her name with indescribable tenderness, and she looked up, and for the first time the blank shutter which seemed to have fallen across her face, lifted a little, and he saw the faint foreshadowing of all she was to suffer when the first shock had passed.

Her lips moved as if she would have spoken, but no words came, though he saw that she was trembling from head to foot, and that she was white to the very lips.

Bill was naturally a masterful man, and he saw at once that arguments or persuasions would be useless; so he just went across the room and picked her up in his arms as if she had been a child.

"It's all right, dear, you've got me," he said.

She made the faintest movement as if to resist, then suddenly she gave in and her head fell to his shoulder, and so he carried her into the sitting-room and put her down in the arm-chair, keeping his arms about her and kneeling down beside her.

Miss Dallow had followed him hesitatingly upstairs, and stood now in the doorway.

Bill turned his head and spoke to her.

"Get something hot—milk—anything! Brandy if you've got any, and send Jenny

to light this fire. She's like ice!"

He began gently to chafe Linda's hands, holding them against himself for warmth.

Jenny lit the fire and brought a glass of hot milk and some thin bread and butter, and Bill gently forced Linda to eat and drink.

"You've got to stay with her to-night, Jenny," he said presently. "Do you hear? I won't have her left alone, and presently I'm going to get a sleeping draught for her from the doctor's."

He rose from his knees, and instantly Linda, who hitherto had paid no attention to him and merely obeyed him dumbly, looked up, stretching out her hand imploringly.

"Oh, don't leave me—don't leave me!"

Bill took her hand and held it fast, regardless of Jenny's amazed eyes.

"I shall never leave you—unless you send me away," he said.

What was to become of her in the future? That was the one thought in Linda's mind when the first shock of her grandmother's death began to pass.

That she could not go on living in these rooms, where everything was such a painful reminder of her loss, was certain, and she determined that nothing should ever induce her to accept her mother's offer of a home.

Mrs. Goring-Wells sent an enormous wreath to the funeral with a heart-broken message attached, and herself followed in a Rolls-Royce car with drawn blinds.

She invited Linda to ride with her, but the girl refused; it cut her to the heart to see her mother in such luxury when she remembered the circumstances of her grandmother's death.

Once when Bill Sargent gently remonstrated with her, she turned on him fiercely.

"I don't care if she is my mother. I never wish to see her again."

"She is your only relative now, that is all I was thinking," Bill said.

He was terribly worried about Linda. He was sure that she cared nothing for him save as a friend, and that reason, and her extreme youth, prevented him from asking her to marry him.

She was only seventeen, and as yet had seen nothing of the world. It was not fair, he told himself, to rush her into a promise which she might afterwards regret and blame him for.

But her loneliness and sorrow cut him to the heart. What would become of her?

"She must have some relations somewhere, surely," he said to the sympathetic Jenny. "We've most of us got too many," he added with a grim memory of his own family.

"That we have," Jenny agreed. "The best way in my opinion is to be born an orphan."

She proceeded to tell him the story of her own life—of her many quarrels with her mother and elder sister; of the trouble her brothers had been, and of how her father had drunk himself to death.

She might have gone on indefinitely but Bill cut her short by walking out of the room.

He liked Jenny, but he was in no mood just then to listen to her confidences.

It was the day following the funeral and he knew that down in Mrs. Lovelace's room Linda was crying her heart out.

Robert Lorne had behaved unusually well, and had given Linda another four days' leave. Miss Gillet was inclined to be aggrieved; she told Nelly Sweet that she had not had so many days off in all her many years of faithful service to the firm; she considered that Mr. Robert showed Miss Lovelace distinct favouritism.

Nelly Sweet tossed her head.

"She's artful!" she said, bitterly. "She seems to me to have a way of getting round all the men."

She had seen nothing of Bill for some time, and he had not answered her last letter, so she was amazed when on leaving the store that night she found him waiting outside for her.

"Bill!" She rushed at him with flushed cheeks and excited eyes.

This was like the old days of their friendship; she put out an eager hand to grasp his arm, but something in the expression of his face checked her, and she gave a hard little laugh.

"Well, what do you want?" she asked.

Bill was not a man to beat about the bush; he told her why he had come without preamble.

"It's Linda—Miss Lovelace! You know her grandmother is dead! Well, she's in great trouble and alone. I—I know how kind you are, and I know you have been a good friend to her, so I thought——"

She broke in roughly:

"You thought I'd do the ministering angel stunt, and go round and dry her tears, eh? Well, you've barked up the wrong tree this time, my boy." She laughed shrilly; in her jealousy and anger she was even more slangy than usual; there were hectic spots of colour in her pretty face, and her eyes blazed.

"I've had enough of Linda Lovelace and her airs and graces," she stormed. "She pretended to be my friend, but she's a sneak—a mean sneak—and I've done with her, and you can tell her so."

Bill's obstinate mouth was set in grim lines he knew Nelly had a temper, because she had given him a taste of it on one or two occasions before, but he had never seen her like this; he raised his hat stiffly and without another word turned to go.

But Nelly was not to be dismissed so easily; she rushed after him, the tears in her eyes, almost repentant.

"Oh, Bill! Don't go like that. We've been such good friends. Oh, how can you be so unkind——"

Bill would not look at her.

"It is you who are unkind—unkind and unjust," he said, in a voice of flint. "Miss

Lovelace is quite alone, and very unhappy. I thought if you had any kind feeling in your heart——"

She stamped her foot.

"Well, then, I haven't! Has she ever considered me, I should like to know? All she cares about is men. First the Black Prince—look how unhappy she made Joan the night we went to that dance——"

His lip curled.

"Oh, Joan!" he said cuttingly.

"Yes, Joan," Nelly insisted. "You may not like her, but she's got her feelings same as the rest of us. Linda tried for him—tried all she knew, but it didn't come off, so she turned to you! Oh, yes, she did, and I shan't shut up!" she cried, as he turned on her furiously. "She knew you belonged to me—she knew I . . . I liked you—and she only went to live in that house because she knew you were there, too——"

"You're mad! You don't know what you're saying."

"I know quite well, and I'm right! She's done her best to take you away from me, the sly—mean . . . ."

"Nelly, will you be quiet—remember where you are! Do you want a crowd round us?"

"I don't care. I don't care what happens!" She was sobbing with anger now, the tears running down her cheeks.

"I've been unhappy enough. You haven't been near me for ages, and you never answered my last letter. I thought you liked me——"

"We were never anything but good friends——"

"Oh, weren't we!" she flashed back at him. "I never thought of you as a friend, nor did you of me till that little snake came——"

"If you say another word about Miss Lovelace I will not stay another moment."

Her face was scarlet with anger and bitter jealousy.

"I shall say what I like," she stormed. "She's made a fool of you, that's what it is. You happened to be the only man handy at the time, but if anyone else comes along ——"

He caught her arm in fingers of steel.

"Nelly, I warn you, if you won't stop——"

She laughed scornfully.

"You're in love with her, that's what it is!" she taunted him. "You're in love with her—with that designing little——" She broke off, frightened by the white fury of his face.

"You're right for once," he said, in a voice of deadly calm. "You may as well

know that you're right. I do love her; I'd marry her to-morrow if she'd have me, and that's the truth." He waited for a moment, his eyes fiercely challenging her; then he dropped her hand and turned away without a word of good-bye.

Nelly walked on like one in a dream. The blood was singing in her ears, and her heart was beating so fast that she thought she would suffocate.

She could not believe that all this had really happened—it seemed more like a scene in a play at which she had been an onlooker.

Bill had thrown her over! It seemed too horrible to be true, and he had thrown her over for a girl of seventeen whom he had only known for a few weeks—a girl whom she herself had befriended.

"I loved him—I loved him!" she told herself frantically, but it was not quite the truth. She had been fond of Bill, and had looked upon him as her own property, but it was true that there had never been anything more than friendship between them, true that he had never given her to understand that he intended asking her to marry him.

But her rage at losing him magnified what affection she had given him a thousandfold, and all sorts of wild schemes and thoughts filled her mind as she walked blindly on.

She would commit suicide! She would not live without him! He would be sorry then! He would perhaps realise how much he had really cared for her when he saw her lying somewhere, stiff and cold, with closed eyes, and her hair all wet with river water.

Nelly Sweet loved melodrama; she went to all the plays at the Lyceum, and dreamed of them for nights afterwards, picturing herself as the ill-used heroine.

Now this would be a real-life drama, and Bill would break his heart when he knew what had happened. . . .

But Bill was not at all the sort of person to break his heart for such a cause, and very well she knew it; he would be much more likely to say that she had behaved like a silly little fool and dismiss her entirely from his thoughts.

She woke from her reverie with a start to find that she had almost cannoned into a man who was coming in the opposite direction.

She murmured an apology, and went on more briskly.

No, she would not put an end to her life after all; she would be brave and endure her pain! It pleased her to think of herself in a black frock, with lines of patient suffering in her cheery face, and her bobbed head drooping like Ophelia's.

But Nelly hated black, and she hated feeling miserable, and before she had reached the rooms which she still shared with Joan Astley she had decided upon a

third campaign—revenge.

She would not give in so easily; she would not tamely submit and hand Bill over to Linda—she would make a fight for him.

But how? Over her tea she took Joan Astley into her confidence—Joan who was busy altering an evening frock, and who sat huddled up by the window in order to catch the last of the daylight, her mouth full of pins, and her head too full of her own concerns to be really interested in Nelly's, until Linda's name was mentioned.

"She's stolen Bill from me," Nelly wailed, adding a third knob of sugar to her tea. "I was kind to her, Joan, you know I was! and this is how she repays me."

Joan looked up.

"Who? Who are you talking about?"

"Linda Lovelace—the sly little monkey! I always knew she was artful by her eyes. Looks as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth——"

"Oh—Linda!" Joan momentarily dropped her work, and a hard look crept into her eyes. She knew very little of Linda, but she had her own reasons for disliking her, and her voice was more interested when presently she asked: "What do you mean by saying she's stolen Bill?"

Nelly explained. "We had an awful scene this afternoon. He wanted me to go and see her and be 'kind' to her, as he put it"—her voice dropped into bitter mimicry—"and when I just told him what I thought about her, he admitted that he loved her, that he'd marry her if she'd have him!" Nelly put down a bun she was eating and real tears trickled down her cheeks. "He belonged to me, you know he did!" she sobbed. "He always took me everywhere; he gave me two pairs of gloves for Christmas."

Joan sniffed rather inelegantly.

"Gloves don't mean anything," she said. "I've had dozens of pairs in my time—if you said diamonds, now!"

"Bill c-couldn't af-ford diamonds," Nelly wailed. "He'd give them to me if he could—at least he would have done. Bill was never m-mean."

There was a little silence during which she finished the bun, then she broke out again:

"I'll not hand him over like an old pair of shoes I've done with, or a new pair that don't fit me. I won't give him up without a struggle. I'll fight her for him——"

"Perhaps she doesn't want him," Joan Astley suggested.

"Not want him!" Nelly's eyes flew wide open. "Of course she wants him," she declared. "You bet your life she does. Why, any girl would be proud of Bill, he's such a man!"

“She may not think so,” Joan said again quietly. “And, anyway, if you feel so badly about it all, why not go to her and tell her the truth.”

“Tell her what?”

“That he was engaged to you.”

“But he wasn’t!” Nelly said.

Joan made an impatient movement.

“Well, you can say so, can’t you? She’s proud, that Lovelace girl, from what I know of her—she’s got no end of silly pride. You tell her that he was engaged to you and she’ll drop him like a hot potato, that’s my opinion. I’ve no cause to love her, goodness knows, and if you want him——”

Nelly rose from her chair, she flew across the room, and gave Joan a violent hug.

“You darling! What a perfectly splendid idea.”

Joan frowned and pushed her away.

“Don’t be so boisterous! I’ve just had my hair waved.”

Nelly did not mind the rebuff; she thought Joan’s idea was excellent; her mind leapt ahead to the scene she would make, the appeal she would adopt.

She would cry, and say that her heart was broken! She would be very gentle—very subdued. She would remind Linda that they had been good friends—she would appeal to all that was best in her, and Nelly knew well enough that Linda would be an easy subject.

She would wear her old hat! Not the new one with the yellow wing in it, because it didn’t look miserable enough; nobody could look really broken-hearted with a jaunty yellow wing in one’s hat. She would wear her old one, and her winter coat, which was shabby and gave her a rather forlorn look. She quite enjoyed herself in anticipation of all she would say and do.

“I shouldn’t let the grass grow under your feet,” Joan said laconically. She rose and put her needle and cotton away. “If you mean to do a thing, do it at once, that’s my motto.”

Nelly gulped down the rest of her tea.

“I’ll go now—this evening!”

Joan flashed a little contemptuous look at her; she lived with Nelly because at the moment it suited her plans, but she looked down on her and thought her uncontrolled and foolish.

“Well, good luck!” she said lazily as she trailed out of the room.

Nelly put on her hat and coat and went out.

As she walked along she went over again and again those angry words with Bill Sargent, and they helped to strengthen her determination. She thought of all the

happy times she had had with him, the Sundays they had spent together and the Saturday afternoons; last winter he had taught her to skate on rollers—at Christmas time he had taken her to the pantomime. Nelly Sweet would have been almost equally pleased to share either of these enjoyments with any other man, but for the moment at least Bill seemed to be the only man in her world.

"She shan't have him! She shan't!" was the fierce thought in her wilful mind as she hammered on the door of Miss Dallow's house.

Linda opened the door to Nelly Sweet herself, and for a moment the two girls stood looking silently at one another, and the hard defiance of Nelly's face softened a little as she saw the change in her friend.

There was a subdued note in her voice when she spoke.

"May I come in?"

Linda stood aside for her to enter; she had been hurt by Nelly's silence during her trouble, but it had seemed only a small thing in comparison with her grandmother's death, and she felt quite indifferent towards her now as she shut the door and pushed forward a chair.

"Won't you sit down?"

It was the unconscious superiority in her voice that scattered Nelly's kindlier feelings to the four winds; she raised her head with a little toss as she answered:

"I don't want to sit down. I'd rather say what I've come to say standing up."

Linda's pale face flushed; so it was not a friendly visit—well, the sooner it was over, then, the better!

She stood quietly waiting for Nelly to speak, but her heatbeats were uneven, and there was a shadow of dread in her eyes.

Nelly took the plunge with desperate bravado.

"I've come about Bill."

"Oh!"

"There's no need to pretend," Nelly went on, gaining courage with the sound of her own voice. "You know what I think about you and him already—well, now I think some more!"

Linda did not speak; there seemed nothing to say; but her heart gave a little frightened flutter.

And then all at once Nelly's manner changed; she took a swift step forward and dropped on her knees in a very theatrical manner, her hands clasped.

"Don't take him away from me. Linda—don't!"

Linda drew back a step, flushing nervously.

"Oh, Nelly, do get up—do get up! Whatever is the matter with you? How can

you be so . . . silly?"

"Silly!" Nelly got quickly to her feet, brushing her skirt with an angry hand.

"Very well, if it's to be war"—she said darkly—"you had better understand, once and for all, that I'm not giving Bill up to you. He belonged to me before he ever heard of you—he promised to marry me——"

"You told me that you were only friends," Linda gasped.

Nelly tossed her head.

"Do you think I tell you everything? We were engaged, I tell you. Everybody at Lorne's knew it. Ask Joan! Ask your precious Miss Gillet. We were only waiting till he got another rise to get married. Last Boxing Day he came to tea with my sister—everyone looks upon it as a settled thing; and if you think I'm going to hand him over to you without a struggle——"

Linda winced; she felt as if she was listening to this flow of extravagant words in a dream, and the cheapness of them made her feel sick and ashamed.

To fight over a man! What would her grandmother say if she could know? She found her voice with an effort.

"You're mistaken, Nelly, quite mistaken. I don't . . . want him, as you put it. Mr. Sargent is nothing to me, and never will be."

Nelly gave a short laugh.

"That's what you say, but I don't believe you. Why, only this evening he told me he liked you better than me—he said he would marry you if you would have him!"

The hot blood rushed in a wave of great confusion from Linda's chin to her forehead.

"He said—that!" she faltered.

"Yes, he did—but I suppose you made him!" Nelly retorted.

She wished now that she had not been quite so communicative; after all, there was no need to have told Linda what Bill had said; in her anger and mortification she resorted to a burst of tears.

"It's all very well for you! Lots of men like you," she sobbed. "I've never had anyone but Bill. I love him! I love him most awfully!" she added.

Linda walked over to the window and stood looking out into the darkening street.

So she was to lose Bill as well, for she knew that her pride would never allow her to take him now, even supposing he asked her!

She listened to Nelly's theatrical sobbing with a curious sense of hurt.

She had liked Nelly, and been glad of her friendship, and it had all come to an ending because of a man! A man—quite an ordinary man, with kind eyes and a

masterful mouth, whom they both loved.

She turned round with an effort.

"Oh, don't cry," she said, with a touch of anger. She was ill and overstrung, and she felt that she could stand no more. But Nelly sobbed on. "I suppose you call it common of me to come to you like this, but I can't keep things to myself. If I think a thing, or want to say a thing, I have to say it. I have to have it out. I should go mad if I kept it to myself and brooded over it."

She was watching Linda cautiously from behind her pink-edged handkerchief.

"You can't love him like I do," she said as a last thrust. "You've only known him for such a little while, and he's years—years older than you are!"

He was years older than she was, too, if it came to that, but for the moment, at all events, she had forgotten it.

Linda gave an unhappy little laugh.

"You need not say any more," she said hardily. "I am not at all likely to see much more of—of Mr. Sargent. I am leaving this house as soon as I can find somewhere else to go."

Nelly's tears dried as if by magic.

"Leaving here! When?" she asked.

"I have told you—as soon as I can find somewhere else to go."

"Does Bill know?"

"I have not told him."

Nelly stowed her handkerchief away; in spite of her noisy sobbing she did not seem to have shed many tears.

"Are you going to stay on at Lorne's?" she asked after a moment.

"Yes. I suppose so."

Linda spoke indifferently; she did not care at all what became of her; she felt as if someone had suddenly built an impassable wall across the roadway of her life, bringing her to a full-stop in everything.

Nelly began to put on her gloves; she walked to the mirror and straightened her second-best hat. She was not at all sure that the interview had been quite satisfactory, even though she seemed to have achieved the object for which she had come.

"I'm sure I was awfully sorry to hear about poor Mrs. Lovelace," she said with glib awkwardness. "I thought she was so much better."

"So she was." Linda could hardly control herself to answer; it hurt dreadfully to hear Nelly speak of her loved one so carelessly.

"She died very suddenly in the end," she felt forced to add in order to prevent

further questioning.

But Nelly had not done yet.

"Yes, so we heard; you found her dead on the floor, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"How dreadful! I should have died myself if it had been me."

Linda passed her and opened the door.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not very well. If you would not mind going——"

Nelly tossed her head.

"Oh, very well. If you prefer my room to my company——"

She flounced away, and downstairs Linda heard her slam the front door after her.

She walked up and down the room, wringing her hands; too unhappy to cry, not knowing what to do with herself.

She hated going out—she felt more lonely in the busy streets than in this quiet room, and yet here everything served to remind her of her loss.

She bore it for a few moments, then put on her hat and went out. As she reached the path a big car turned noiselessly into the street and drew up at the curb. Linda glanced at it casually, then she stood still, for she knew that the car was Andrew Lincoln's, before the door opened and Lincoln himself got out.

When he saw Linda he came forward with a little exclamation of pleasure.

"Miss Lovelace! At last!" He took Linda's unresponsive hand in his, looking eagerly into her pale face; then he seemed suddenly to realise that she was dressed in mourning, and his expression changed. "What is the matter? You have had some trouble?"

She tried to smile, but her lips trembled too badly, and the tears welled into her eyes.

"It's my grandmother . . . I told you about her, didn't I? We lived together—and she . . . died."

"Poor little girl!"

He was still holding her hand, regardless of his own chauffeur, or the interested eyes of a group of small boys who were watching.

He was a man who utterly disregarded appearances; in fact, he rather liked to do things which aroused comment.

"You were going for a walk," he said. "Well, won't you be kind and let me take you for a drive? It will do you good. We'll go round the park if you like, or anywhere else."

Before she knew she had accepted they were driving away together, watched by

Miss Dallow from the shelter of her starched lace curtains.

She had never liked Linda, and she was glad to have witnessed the little episode at her gate.

"I always knew she was that kind of girl," she told herself as the big car swung noiselessly round the corner and disappeared. "It's a good thing she's going. I should have given her notice anyhow."

And in the shelter of the car the Black Prince still held Linda's hand and volubly explained why he had not been to see her before.

"I've been ill. Nothing serious, but it was a nasty touch of 'flu, and I wasn't allowed to go out; and when I did you were away from Lorne's and I couldn't find out where you were. I went to your old address, but they could tell me nothing, and Joan Astley was like an oyster and refused to speak."

Linda laughed shakily. There was something irresistible in this man's breeziness, and, in spite of herself, she was glad to see him again. She felt as if someone had opened a window in her life and let in a refreshing breeze. Presently she drew her hand away from his.

"It was kind of you to come to see me."

"Kind! I've been wanting to come for weeks. I'm only so sorry about this——" he touched the black sleeve of her coat.

Linda looked away from him.

"Yes. It's like . . . like the end of everything for me," she said piteously.

"Oh, you must not say that," he told her gently. "You are so young, and you've got all your life before you. We all forget, thank God! Life would not be possible if one went on grieving always."

She made no answer, and presently he asked, as Nelly had done, "Are you staying on at Lorne's?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I must for the present at least. They've been very kind to me."

He hesitated, looking away from her.

"There is nothing else you would prefer to do?" he asked.

Linda smiled; there were a great many things which she would prefer to do, but they were beyond the limits of possibility.

"Beggars cannot be choosers, can they?" she said.

He seemed to be considering something, and then suddenly he said:

"Miss Lovelace, how would you like to start in a business of your own?"

Linda turned her head and stared at him with eyes of frank amazement; she was sure that he must be laughing at her.

"Of my own? I couldn't," she said.

He laughed.

"Oh, yes, you could," he contradicted her gently. "Lots of women go into business without knowing a thing about it. But they get a good manager or manageress, and influence does the rest."

"But you see I haven't any influence," said Linda, dazedly.

The Black Prince looked at her with a diffident smile.

"There's me," he said.

"You!" She stared at him with wide eyes. "What . . . what do you mean?" she faltered at last.

"I mean just what I say. Look here, I'll explain. I know a woman who's got a bit of capital, and all the knowledge that's necessary. She's been a buyer to one of the big firms for years—never mind which! She quarrelled with them, and she wants to start on her own, but she hasn't got quite enough money, so she's been looking round to find someone who can help her."

"But I haven't any money," Linda said.

He laughed.

"I know, but I have! At least, I could get it if I chose."

But still she did not understand, and he went on patiently.

"I've told her—this woman—that I'm willing to put up the rest of the capital she wants on condition she takes a friend of mine into partnership with her. She's no beauty herself—she's middle-aged, for one thing, and nowadays it wants someone young and pretty to run the sort of show I propose to run. All you've got to do is to wear pretty clothes and be nice to the customers!"

Linda gasped.

"But—but I couldn't! However could I? I'm too young—I'm not eighteen yet."

His handsome eyes ran over her casually.

"We could soon make you look a year or two older," he told her with confidence. "You want differently dressing, of course, but the thing's easy enough. I've seen just the place that will do. I'll have it all done up properly—striped curtains and cushions, and grey paint, and all the usual stunts. And then we must think of a name—'Dorreen' or 'Loelia,' or something like that." He laughed. "Why do you look so amazed?" he asked.

Linda gasped.

"But . . . but . . . Oh, how could I do such a thing, with your money? Why should you be so kind to me? Why should you spend your money on me?"

He had the grace to flush beneath her innocent eyes.

"Well, I must spend it on somebody," he said rather shortly. "And if I like to help you—well, why not? It's the sort of thing that's done every day. How do you think all these little shops and bonnet-boxes are run? They've all got a backer."

Linda drew a long breath.

"I never knew there was so much kindness in the world," she said.

His eyes fell, and for a moment he was silent, then he said with a shade of diffidence:

"I don't want to rush you into anything; but Lorne's is not the place for you. You're fit for much better things. Lorne's is all right, of course, for girl's like Nelly Sweet——"

"And Joan Astley," Linda said as he paused.

He frowned at that, then laughed.

"That was a nasty one, certainly," he admitted. "But you're not Joan Astley; you're the sort of girl who will do great things if you're given the chance. Well, I want to give it to you."

"I don't know what to say—how to thank you! Nobody has ever been so kind to me before—" and then, with a little passionate note of regret in her voice, she added, "Oh, I wish Grannie could know!"

The Black Prince cleared his throat. Perhaps he knew how strongly Mrs. Lovelace would have objected to his scheme had she been alive; perhaps he knew that if she had been there to consult he would not have made the suggestion at all.

"If you've got anybody you'd like to consult about it," he said diffidently. "There's no hurry. I should like you to take your time."

Linda shook her head.

"There isn't anybody," she said rather painfully.

But she thought of Bill Sargent, and it hurt.

A little flash of triumph lit the dark eyes of the man beside her.

"Well, supposing we have a little dinner together somewhere and talk it over?" he suggested.

He spoke to his chauffeur, and the car was turned about.

"Where are we going?" Linda asked.

She was feeling better for the fresh excitement, and for the moment her troubles had receded a little into the distance. This man was a kind friend; she had never thought it possible for any one to be so disinterestedly generous to her. She was too young and inexperienced to realise that few kind actions are without an ulterior motive; she felt full of excitement as she looked into the future.

To be in business on her own account, and at the very young age of seventeen!

She wished passionately that her grandmother could know of this wonderful luck which had befallen her; she wondered what Mrs. Goring-Wells would say when she heard about it.

"Of course, it may not ever happen. He may change his mind," she told herself, but at any rate the thought of the possibility was wonderful.

The car stopped at a big block of buildings, and the Black Prince got out, turning to assist Linda.

"But this isn't a restaurant!" she said, amazed.

He laughed. "No—I've got a flat here. I thought we should be quieter alone. Restaurants are such noisy places when you want to talk business."

"Oh!" she drew back a step; for the first time a doubt crept into her mind. "I'm not sure if I ought to go to your rooms," she said, then flushed, wondering if he would think her very old-fashioned.

But he only answered calmly that it was a very ordinary thing to do nowadays. "I assure you I've had lots of ladies to lunch and dinner in my rooms," he said, which was the truth. "Besides, I should like you to see them. I flatter myself they're worth seeing."

He dismissed the car, and led the way up the steps to the building, and there seemed nothing further to be said, so Linda followed.

There was a large man at the door in uniform who saluted respectfully when he saw who was her companion, and there was a smart little boy in buttons who whirled them upstairs in a noiseless electric lift, and deposited them on the third floor.

Linda looked around her with pleased eyes. Although she had made the best of their rooms at Miss Dallow's, she had often thought wistfully of the luxury with which she had been surrounded in her childhood, and this was like a return to it.

The room into which Lincoln led her was carpeted with soft, rich blue pile, and there were curtains of real lace.

Linda's eyes dilated as she looked at them; they must have cost a small fortune, she was sure.

There was not much furniture, but it was all expensive and in exquisite taste, and the few pictures on the plain white walls were gems of artistry.

Lincoln drew up a chair for her.

"Please sit down! I'll go and hunt up my man."

He disappeared through another door, and Linda was left alone.

She sat as still as a little mouse and looked around her.

There was a cut-glass bowl of yellow roses on the polished table, and several pieces of antique silver on the mantelshelf.

Everything breathed the perfection of taste and the height of luxury; she had risen and was bending over the bowl of roses to inhale their perfume when the Black Prince came back again.

"I've ordered dinner, and it will be ready in half an hour. You would like to take off your hat. You will find brushes and everything you want in there——"

He indicated a second door on the other side of the room, and Linda went to it timidly.

She supposed she was very silly and unsophisticated, but in spite of her pleasure in her surroundings, she did not feel happy or at her ease.

She found herself in a small bedroom with a fitted washstand, and a silver mirror hanging above it.

There were ivory brushes on a marble shelf, and even a box of powder.

She took off her hat diffidently and brushed her hair.

In the silver mirror she thought that her black-robed reflection looked out of keeping with the beautiful room, and again a sense of great timidity seized her.

"But how absurd, when he is so kind," she chided herself.

She put on her hat again, and went back to the sitting-room.

Lincoln was standing, back to the fireplace, reading a paper which he put down at once, when she entered.

"Rather keep your hat on?" he asked casually. "Won't it make your head ache? Very well, just as you like, of course."

He spoke so naturally and seemed so ordinary that her courage rose again. After all, if other girls had been here it must be all right, and, anyway, what could happen to her?

"And how do you like my rooms?" the Black Prince inquired.

Linda's eyes glowed.

"I think they're lovely. I should like to live here for ever," she said, impulsively, and then stopped with a quick breath, realising that she had said too much, and at the same moment an unkind memory of Bill flashed across her mind—

"Mine be a cot beside the hill—
A beehive's hum shall soothe my ear,
A willowy brook that turns a mill
With many a fall shall linger near——"

And with the memory of that sunny afternoon and the fresh air of the open country, and Bill with his gruff voice wonderfully softened as he spoke the words, back came her sense of fear and uneasiness.

She half rose to her feet, the words: "Oh, I think I would rather not stay here," came to her lips, but they were never spoken, for at that moment the door opened, and a man-servant entered with a tray, and a white cloth across his arm.

He began to lay the table for dinner, and Linda watched him with fascinated eyes, feeling sure that she was just dreaming all this, and that in a moment she would wake up, and find herself back in her loneliness at Miss Dallow's.

The Black Prince broke in upon her thoughts.

"Are you fond of photographs, Miss Lovelace? I have a fine collection of my many travels if you would care to see them."

He brought a large album across to her and opened it.

His manner was purely impersonal and polite, as he explained the different views and pictures.

"I took this in the Tyrol last summer. You've never been there, I suppose? Well, you must go some day. I think I prefer Austria to any other country I ever visited."

Linda smiled. "I am afraid I am not very likely to go abroad at all," she said. "It costs so much money."

"Somebody will take you some day," he answered. "And this—this is Venice! you must go there, too—that is a photograph of the Doge's Palace. It's a wonderful place—full of romance. Are you fond of romantic spots, I wonder?"

"I think I should be if I had the chance," she told him.

"Dinner is served, sir," said a voice behind them, and the Black Prince closed the book and rose to his feet.

"Good! I hope you are hungry, Miss Lovelace. I am."

They sat opposite one another at the small round table, and the manservant waited on them.

There was soup and some sort of entrées which Linda had never eaten before, and tiny spring chickens and asparagus.

"What would you like to drink?" Lincoln asked, and he laughed when she said firmly, "Water, please."

"Only water! Isn't that rather dull?"

"I'd prefer it, please."

"Very well, then I'll drink the same. Water for us both, please, Gran."

There was an enigmatical smile on Gran's grave face as he turned to obey.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before Linda got back to Miss Dallow's that night.

Andrew Lincoln himself brought her back in a taxi, acceding to her timid request to stop at the corner of the street and let her walk to the house alone.

It had been quite a successful evening, and he had been most kind, but as she said good-night to him and hurried away through the darkness it suddenly struck Linda with a sense of surprise, how very little business had been discussed.

He had shown her photographs and books, and treasure which he had bought in odd corners of the world, but only just as she was leaving had he mentioned the greatest subject of all between them.

"Then I have your permission to go ahead and arrange things? We must fix a meeting between you and the lady I spoke to you about. Her name is Mrs. Johnson."

Linda thanked him rather agitatedly.

"Then you did really mean it?" she said. "I thought perhaps it was . . . . well, that you had only just said it."

He laughed. "I always mean what I say."

She thought of that now as she ran up the steps to the front door of Miss Dallow's house and let herself in.

There was a dim light burning in the hall, and she slipped off her shoes and went upstairs in her stockinged feet so as not to be heard.

But as she closed her bedroom door, almost instantly there was a sound outside and someone tapping softly.

She stood still, breathing fast.

"Yes, who is it?"

"It's me! Bill! I only wanted to know if you were all right."

She managed a shaky laugh.

"Yes, of course!"

There was a little silence, then Bill asked, with a gruff note in his voice: "Where have you been?"

"Only out with a friend."

"Oh." There was a little silence, then "Good-night" Bill said, and she heard him go upstairs again.

But in the morning, when she left the house for Lorne and Dodwell's, he was

waiting for her down the road.

He looked rather tired and his face was a little grim as he greeted her.

"You gave me a scare last night," he began bluntly. "I could not imagine what had become of you. Why were you so late home?"

"I told you. I went out with a friend."

"What friend?"

The directness of the question sent the blood racing to her face, but she remembered the many bitter things which Nelly Sweet had said to her, and she answered defiantly that she did not see what business it was of his.

"It's my business because I love you," said Bill.

He had not intended to say it; it was the last thing he had intended to tell her, but the words escaped him against his will.

He had been racked with anxiety on her account last night and torn with jealousy.

He had wandered about the street for hours looking for her, and had found it impossible to rest until he knew she was safely in her room.

Linda caught her breath with a little gasp, and Bill said again in his dogged way:

"I didn't mean to say that, but I couldn't help it. I do love you, Linda, and I want to marry you."

She looked at him with a wild hope in her eyes. Was this the truth? Then back came the memory of Nelly, of her tears and her pleading. "Don't take him away from me, oh don't."

She found her voice with an effort.

"You can't mean that. You hardly know me."

"One doesn't need to know a person for years before it is possible to love them," Bill said. "And I love you. I shall never love anyone else. I want to look after you, and make a home for you. You're so young and lonely. What are you going to do with your life?"

"I'm going to start in business for myself," Linda said.

Bill stared at her, then he laughed. "Is it a joke?" he asked.

"A joke!" Indignant colour dyed her face. "Certainly it is not a joke. I have a friend who is going to start me in business."

They were at the end of the road where their ways diverged, and Bill stood still.

"There is no time to argue now," he said, harshly. "Will you spend the evening with me?"

"I can't . . . ." She could not meet his eyes. "At least, no, I am afraid I can't to-night, thank you all the same."

"You mean that you don't want to?" he challenged her.

She would not answer that, and Bill said again: "You are not going to turn me down again without some good and sufficient reason, so the sooner you understand that, the better for both of us, Linda. I'll say good-bye for the present."

He raised his hat and turned away.

Linda went on, her heart beating fast.

"It is my business because I love you."

They were the sweetest words she had ever had spoken to her, and yet . . . . "He belongs to Nelly. I don't want him," she told herself proudly. She was late at business.

Miss Gillet greeted her with an acid smile. "Did you oversleep yourself, Miss Lovelace?" she asked.

Linda flushed, and made no answer; it rose to her lips to say that she would not be at Lorne's much longer, that she was going into business for herself, but she was afraid. Miss Gillet's eyes were so keen and critical, and Linda could not bear to be laughed at.

Nelly Sweet ignored her at lunch, and Joan Astley swept past her as if she did not exist.

Linda told herself she did not care.

"I'll make them sorry. I'll make them all sorry for it," she thought, with great bitterness.

But she felt lonely and unhappy, and the thought of going back to empty rooms chilled her heart.

She was afraid of meeting Bill again; there was something brutal in him when he was angry, and she knew that he was angry! She could not imagine what he would say when she told him with whom she had been last evening, or who was the friend who had offered to finance her in a business venture.

"I don't care! It's nothing to do with Bill," she comforted herself, but it was poor comfort.

Bill would have cut off his right hand for her and never felt the pain, she knew, and tried not to know it.

Well, she would show him! She would make him proud of her! The little shop with her name over the door dazzled her eyes, and put everything else out of perspective, as the Black Prince had intended it should do.

Only seventeen, and running a business of her own! What would Robert Lorne say? What would Nelly Sweet say?

She went home by a circuitous route when she left the shop that evening; she

had her tea out. The thought of those silent empty rooms was a nightmare, and at the same time a reproach.

Mrs. Lovelace had liked Bill and trusted him; Linda wondered what she would have thought of the Black Prince.

"I shall make my own way in the world," she told herself. "I shall make a name for myself."

It was her father's commercial, ambitious instinct making itself shown in her and crushing other and better emotions. Her mind was full of the future and the great things she would do when at last she turned her steps to Miss Dallow's.

Jenny met her in the hallway, looking mysterious and important.

"Your mother's upstairs," she said in a stage whisper. "She's been waiting an hour or more."

Mrs. Goring-Wells was sitting by the table in Linda's sitting-room, swathed in heavy mourning, and with a look of martyred resignation on her face.

She rose dramatically to her feet when the girl entered and held out her arms.

"At last! I thought you were never coming."

Linda drew back from her embrace.

"I am sorry if you have had to wait," she said stiffly.

Mrs. Goring-Wells sat down again.

"You are growing up so quickly," she complained. "I am losing my little girl all too soon."

Linda's face hardened.

"I suppose you haven't come to say that?" she asked.

Mrs. Goring-Wells mopped her eyes.

"You are very cruel to me; cruel and unforgiving; but I bear no ill-will to you, Linda, and that is why I am here. I had a long heart-to-heart talk with your stepfather last night, and he is willing, more than willing, to receive you into his house."

Linda drew a deep breath.

"He is very kind, but I shall not come," she said, quietly.

Mrs. Goring-Wells gasped.

"Not come! You must be mad! You are throwing away the chance of a lifetime. He is a rich man—a very rich man! And you are all we have to consider. Some day you may be an heiress. Any other girl would be mad with delight at the prospect. Look what we can do for you! Look how I can take you about with me! Your father knows all the people who are worth knowing; you may make a great match."

Linda stood immovable, not answering, and for some moments her mother went

on, painting the future in exaggerated, roseate hues, promising things far beyond her power.

When she found it was all of no avail she changed her tactics.

"Then what, may I ask, do you intend to do?" she asked.

The glimmer of a smile crept into Linda's face.

"I am going to start in business on my own account," she said firmly.

Mrs. Goring-Wells screamed.

"The girl is mad!" she flung her eyes up to the ceiling, she wrung her hands. "My poor child, what do you know about business, and where can you get your capital from?"

"A friend will see to that for me,"

"A friend!" Mrs. Goring-Wells snapped her fingers. "What friend have you who can be of the least assistance in such a case?" she sneered.

Linda did not tell her.

"I shall bring your stepfather to reason with you." Her mother went on: "You are headstrong and foolish, as your poor father was. Allow me to remind you also that you are not of age and that I can use my authority to prevent you from such foolishness."

Linda smiled.

"I don't think you can; you left me, you know—I don't think you can do anything."

But there was fear in her heart. She knew nothing of the law, and she knew that her mother might be right in what she said.

"At any rate it is impossible for you to go on living here," Mrs. Goring-Wells insisted. "I had a little talk with the maid before you came in, and she seems a nice honest girl. She tells me that there is a young man living upstairs—a bank clerk—who has been very kind to you. Is that so?"

"Yes."

Her mother sneered.

"He probably knows whose daughter you are, and imagines that you will have money. I know the type of man exactly—small and dapper, with a spotted tie, and no ambitions. Linda, let me beseech of you——"

There was a knock at the door; Linda turned and opened it.

"Here is Mr. Sargent, mother," she said, quietly. "Now you can see for yourself what he is like."

Bill walked into the room, and Mrs. Goring-Wells rose.

"Oh, how do you do?" she said sweetly. "I think we have met before. But now

the opportunity is here, I feel that I must just thank you—thank you very gratefully for your kindness to my little girl. She tells me that she does not know what she would have done without you."

Bill did not believe her, but he bowed gravely and stood waiting.

"You look a sensible man, Mr. Sargent," Mrs. Goring-Wells went on, "a good man of business also I do not doubt, so I feel I am doing right when I appeal to you to influence Linda against this absurd idea which somebody has put into her head."

"It is not an absurd idea," Linda interrupted firmly, "and I shall do it."

Mrs. Goring-Wells applied her handkerchief to a tearless eye.

"Your place is with me," she faltered. "Mr. Sargent, a daughter's place is with her mother—you will agree."

"It all depends," said Bill.

He listened patiently while Mrs. Goring-Wells bewailed the world's ingratitude and her own many bitter disappointments and disillusions; when at last she had done he escorted her downstairs and called a taxicab for her. He was patient and polite to the last, but when she had gone he went up the stairs two at a time, and into Linda's sitting-room.

"Has she gone?" Linda asked.

Bill ignored the question.

"Put on your hat and come out. I want to talk to you."

"I've not been in very long: I'm tired."

Bill's face darkened. "Put on your hat and come out. I'll wait downstairs."

"Very well."

She had got to listen to him, she knew, and the sooner it was over and done with the better. But she took her time, hoping against hope that she would wear his patience out and find him gone, but Bill was not a man to be turned from his purpose, and presently they were walking together down the road.

Linda wondered what he was going to say—her heart beat a little faster at the memory of what he had said last night—

"I love you. I want to marry you."

She hoped yet dreaded that he would say it again. She did not intend to marry Bill—she did not intend to marry anybody. Ambition had her in its grip, and her eyes were straining far ahead into a future wherein she would be successful.

But what Bill said was—

"Well, I've found out who your friend is."

She was so amazed that she stood still, staring at him, and he went on in a voice of flint:

“I’ve found out that you went to that . . . that blackguard’s rooms last night, and had supper there.”

“And if I did?”

His self-control broke down.

“Don’t you know the world any better than that?” he raved at her. “Hasn’t anybody told you what that man’s character is? Are you such a child that you cannot judge for yourself?”

“How dare you say such things? He is my friend.”

She was as angry as he now, and her voice trembled with indignation. “There is nothing to be said against him. I like him—I know I can trust him——”

“Trust him! bah!” Bill laughed bitterly.

“Trust him! Yes, about as much as you can trust a mad dog.”

“You don’t know what you are saying; you would not dare say all these things if he were here.”

“If he were here!” Bill spoke from between clenched teeth. “If he were here, I would kick him into the gutter for daring to take you to his rooms last night.” Then his mood changed suddenly and his rough voice was wonderful in its tenderness.

“Oh, my dear! It’s only because I think so much of you that I am saying all this. You’re so young! You don’t know the world as I do, and you’ve nobody to look after you.” He laid his hand on her arm, and she could feel how he was trembling. “Give me the right to protect you, Linda. Give me the right! I’ll make you so happy; I’ll love you so well——”

They were walking on again, down a side street which was quiet and deserted, and Bill’s earnest voice seemed the only sound in all the world.

He went on: “I’m not a rich man, but money isn’t everything. I know you don’t love me—not as I love you; but you will! I can make you. Answer me, Linda—answer me, my dear.”

Linda listened like one in a dream.

It was very sweet to be told that he loved her, and yet she was still blinded by thoughts of the future which had been promised to her by Andrew Lincoln.

To be someone, to carve a way for herself in life, seemed a great ambition—an ambition which could never be realised if she allowed her heart to govern her head, if she listened to the man beside her.

She was so young, and independence seemed to have been thrust upon her so suddenly that it left her dazed and confused, unable to sort out right from wrong, happiness from unhappiness.

Then she thought of Nelly Sweet, and pride rose again.

Perhaps she had walked with Bill and listened to his pleading as she was listening now; perhaps it was true, as Nelly had said, that he could change quickly from one allegiance to another.

She took refuge in an unworthy subterfuge.

"I don't want to get married yet."

"You mean that you don't want to marry me?" he said quickly.

"No—at least . . . . there is Nelly——"

His face darkened.

"And she has been talking to you. I might have known she would. What has she told you? I have a right to know."

"She has not told me anything."

He laughed scornfully.

"You expect me to believe that?"

She was angered by the contempt in his voice.

"I don't care if you believe me or not. I don't care what you say or think."

She contrasted his manner with Andrew Lincoln's irreproachable charm and courtesy; she was not sufficiently versed in the ways of life to realise that veneer only covers cheapness and unworthiness.

Bill Sargent controlled himself with an effort.

"We don't want to quarrel," he said, more gently. "My only desire is to protect you and keep you from harm."

She cried out indignantly.

"Anyone would think I am a stupid baby."

Bill checked a smile.

"Well, you are only a child," he submitted.

She flushed. "I am not such a child but that I can look after myself."

His face hardened.

"You mean that you have no further use for my friendship?"

She did not answer for a moment, then she broke out impulsively:

"Why do you treat me as if I was quite ignorant? Why are you so horrid about Mr. Lincoln? I——"

He broke in ruthlessly.

"Lincoln is not the sort of man you should know; I despise him. I don't trust him ——"

"He is a gentleman," she flashed back.

"And I am not, you mean," Bill said grimly. "Very well, I am content with that, if otherwise I have to share the honour with him. If you persist in this friendship—

acquaintance—whatever you like to call it, you will be sorry, Linda . . . . I beg of you——"

But she was thoroughly roused now; tired, ill, and unhappy. Her nerves were almost at snapping point.

"I never said you might call me by my Christian name."

Bill stood still. He did not look at her; he stared down the road blindly for a moment, then he laughed.

"It serves me right for allowing myself to be whistled back once already. I blame myself. I am the fool——"

She grew alarmed.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I understand at last that I am no longer welcome. I suppose I should thank you for your candour."

Her heart gave a throb of fear.

"You are trying to quarrel with me," she accused him.

Bill made no answer.

"I think I should like to go back to Miss Dallow's," Linda said.

He turned without a word and walked beside her.

It was rapidly growing dark; when she glanced up timidly she could no longer see his face, but the very dark outline of his tall figure looked stiff and angry.

"I will not be ordered about by him," she thought. "How dare he treat me as if I were a child." And she thought of Andrew Lincoln again. He treated her as if she were a grown woman, and his equal.

Then Bill broke out with uncontrollable passion.

"Oh, my God, Linda, think what you are doing! I know this man and you do not. Don't think I am blaming you, my dear. I love you for your sweet innocence. But no good can come of such a friendship. I know him, and if you let him do this thing, you will be sorry for it as long as you live. Why should he put up money to start you in business? The idea is monstrous and absurd! If he were an old friend or a relation it would be different."

"All friends have to be new before they can be old," Linda said with dignity.

He went on, ignoring her. "If the man respected you or cared anything for you, he would never make such a suggestion."

Linda looked up at him with passionate eyes. "He does respect me; he likes me very much."

"Likes you!" Bill laughed roughly. "How long will he like you, do you think, once you are in his power? How long does he like anybody? Ask Joan Astley . . . ."

“You’re jealous, that’s why you say such things,” she accused him.

“Jealous!” Bill took off his hat, baring his forehead to the cool night air. Yes, he was jealous, so jealous that he saw the world red, and his heart was filled with hatred.

And Linda went on blindly. “I like Mr. Lincoln. He’s very kind, he’s a good friend to me.”

Bill lost his temper; he said hot, passionate things which made her shudder, and which for ever afterwards he remembered with shame.

“Perhaps you think he will marry you,” he stormed, beside himself with pain. “I tell you he will not. He is not the sort of man to marry a girl who allows him to make a friend of her after a casual meeting at a dance. I daresay when he is amongst his friends, he laughs at you and tells them what an easy conquest you were. That’s the kind of man he is! A low, contemptible——”

He broke off, choking, and there was a tragic silence, then Linda said very quietly.

“If you’ve finished, I think I will say good-night.”

They both stood still looking at one another by the light of a street lamp overhead. Bill’s face was so distorted with passion that she could hardly recognise it.

“If it’s good-night, it’s good-bye too,” he said with set teeth.

“Yes, I think it had better be good-bye,” Linda agreed in a cool, little voice.

She waited a moment, but he said no more, and with a slight inclination of her head, she turned away and left him.

Linda went back to Miss Dallow's feeling rather stunned.

Why was it that Bill Sargent angered her so easily and made her say so many things which she always repented as soon as she had left him?

She got some supper for herself and sat down to eat it, but she had no appetite, and she put it away again and went to bed.

In the morning Miss Dallow came to her sitting-room before she left the house.

"I should like to speak to you a moment, if you please," she said in her prim way.

Linda turned round.

"Yes, what is it?" she asked, surprised.

Miss Dallow folded her hands together and stood stiffly, looking like an old-fashioned illustration in a magazine of fifty years ago.

"I should be glad if you can tell me how soon it will be convenient for you to vacate these rooms," she said.

Linda flushed scarlet.

"But . . . but you said I could stay until I had made other arrangements," she faltered.

Miss Dallow ignored the reminder of what she had said in the first flush of her sympathy following Mrs. Lovelace's death.

"I have had an excellent offer to take the rooms," she said, "and I cannot afford to ignore it. You told me that you would be leaving very shortly, so possibly it will not inconvenience you to hurry on your arrangements a little."

Linda looked at her in helpless silence. Where could she go? What could she do?

She thought of Mr. Stern, but dismissed him from her mind: he would counsel her as he had done once already—to go back to her mother, and that she would never do.

She thought of Bill, but Bill had done with her, and there was nobody else in the world to whom she could turn for help, except the Black Prince, and the memory of his kindness and courtesy sent a thrill of warmth to her cold heart.

"I will make arrangements to go at the end of next week, if that will suit you," she said with an effort.

Miss Dallow turned to the door.

"That will suit me very well," she answered, and went away.

Linda wrote a hurried note to Lincoln, asking when she could see him.

He would not fail her she was sure; he was a friend upon whom she could always rely; she felt comforted when she had safely posted it, and she went to business with renewed courage.

Miss Gillet was away ill, and Mr. Flynn told her that for the day she would be in sole charge of the ribbons and laces.

"We are reposing a great trust in you," he said. "You must remember what a short time you have been here. I hope you will do your best."

Linda promised eagerly; she was very anxious to show the firm what she could do, but thoughts of Lincoln and his promises kept creeping in, and she saw the future in roseate colours.

During the afternoon the Countess of Star came into the department. She was alone, and as she sat down at the counter she lifted her lorgnette and stared hard at Linda for a moment before she stated her requirements; then she said irrelevantly:

"You look very young! Where is the young lady who usually attends to me?"

Linda explained. "Miss Gillet is away ill. I think she will be here to-morrow."

The Countess said "Ah!" and she continued to stare at Linda all the time.

"If there is anything I can show you, madam——" Linda said nervously.

She kept remembering that this handsome old lady was Andrew Lincoln's aunt. She wondered if by any possible chance she could know of her friendship with her nephew.

"You can show me some black velvet ribbon," the Countess said at last. "The best quality. I hate inferior articles."

When she had chosen what she wanted, and Linda was making out the bill, the old lady asked again—

"How old are you?"

Linda told her rather shyly.

She half expected some complimentary remark about her efficiency, but instead all she got was—

"Humpn, I was in the schoolroom when I was your age."

Linda made no reply, and Mr. Flynn, the shop-walker, came up, bowing and urbane.

"I hope everything is entirely satisfactory, your ladyship."

The old lady glanced at him with her shrewd eyes.

"I was telling this young lady that when I was her age I was in the schoolroom," was the only answer she vouchsafed.

Flynn walked away, looking rather crestfallen, and the Countess said again to Linda: "How do they treat you here? Well, I hope."

"Very well, thank you, Madam," Linda said shyly.

The Countess said "Humph! I suppose you would feel obliged to say that anyway, but I happen to know Robert Lorne very well, and I am sure that he is a man who would treat his staff justly."

"He is very kind," Linda said.

She handed the old lady her change, which was carefully counted through.

"Humph, well, I'll wish you good-afternoon."

Linda looked after her with amused interest. She wondered what Lincoln thought of his aunt, and how they got on together. She wondered when he would answer her note, and how soon she would see him.

She had not long to wait for there was a letter for her when she got back to Miss Dallow's.

It was written differently to any letter Linda had ever received, and she thought it charming:

> "I have just found your dear little note—" That is how Andrew Lincoln began. "Unfortunately, I have to go out to-night, but I have rung up Mrs. Johnson—you will remember I spoke to you about her in connection with our project—and she will be delighted to lunch with us to-morrow if you can arrange to meet me. I know you are free at one o'clock on Saturday, so shall we say two? I will call at your rooms for you.
>
> Yours ever."

Linda's spirits went up like rockets; she had been sure he would not fail her; she sat down at once to reply; she wished she had some expensive note-paper like that on which he had written to her; she took a long time to pen the few careful lines:

> "Dear Mr. Lincoln,—
>
> "Thank you for your letter. I shall be very pleased to lunch with you and Mrs. Johnson to-morrow, and will be ready at two o'clock as you suggest.
>
> "Yours sincerely,
> "Linda Lovelace."

She addressed it to his rooms, stamped it, and went downstairs to the post.

It was like the first step to fame and fortune as she dropped it into the pillar-box; she walked back feeling as if she trod on air, and met Bill Sargent at Miss Dallow's gate.

Her heart gave a great throb, then seemed to stand still.

Would he speak to her? For a moment she felt as if she were choking, but Bill only raised his hat formally as if she had been the most casual acquaintance, and, without a smile, passed on.

Linda went into the house feeling a little sick.

All her joy and excitement had faded; an uplifting shadow seemed to have fallen on the face of the world.

The lunch in Andrew Lincoln's flat with Linda and Mrs. Johnson was, from Linda's point of view at least, a great success.

Mrs. Johnson was different to any woman she had ever met before. She was tall and beautifully dressed, with dark eyes which, to Linda's ignorance, seemed to know everything, and she was kindness itself to the girl.

"So you're the little lady I've heard so much about?" was her first greeting. She took Linda's hand, looked hard at her for a moment, then, stooping, kissed her in friendly fashion.

"I need not say how delighted I am to meet you," she said.

Linda thanked her shyly; her heart was fluttering with excitement; this was the first step to fame, and everything she had ever longed for; this was the beginning of her attainment to her great ambition.

At lunch she was treated as a guest of honour. There was a large bunch of scented violets lying beside her plate, and for a moment a little sick remembrance went through her as she thought of that day with Bill down at Chorley Wood, and the wild sweet freshness of the open country—

"Mine be a cot beside the hill——"

Just for an instant the handsomely furnished room seemed to stifle her; she longed to throw wide the windows, or to get up and run away from it all, but with an effort she controlled herself, and smiled a reply into Andrew Lincoln's eyes as he toasted her health and success.

"Here's to you, and here's to me—
And here's to everything that will be!"

he said, then laughed. "How's that for an original toast on the spur of the moment?"

he asked.

"You really are incorrigible, Andrew," Mrs. Johnson murmured.

Nobody had asked Linda to drink wine; Lincoln's man Gran served her with an iced lemon squash.

Linda thought it was delightful of them to have remembered; she sat there with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes while the other two talked what they were pleased to call business, and said that she need not worry her head about anything.

"Mrs. Johnson will see to it all for you," the Black Prince said in his easy way. "All you have to do is to wear pretty frocks and look charming, and be charming to clients." He laughed. "Not a very arduous task, is it?"

Linda said she was not sure.

"But when—how——" she stammered.

He told her that he was already negotiating with the owner of a small business just off Maddox Street.

"It will all be settled quite soon," he declared. "So you can send in your resignation to Bobbie Lorne as soon as you like."

"But—but if it doesn't get settled?" Linda asked, anxiously.

Mrs. Johnson answered that anything Andrew undertook was always a success. "You are a very lucky little lady," she added.

Linda thought of Miss Dallow.

"I forgot to tell you," she said, looking at the Black Prince, and flushing nervously, "but I have got to leave my rooms. They don't seem to want me there now—now—there's only me! The rooms are let, and I have to leave at the end of next week."

"What could be better?" Lincoln said enthusiastically. "We must hurry things on so that you can move in right away. Oh, I forgot to tell you, there is a small flat over the shop—quite a small one, of course—a sitting-room, kitchen, two bed-rooms. But you will be comfortable there."

Linda gasped.

"I am to live there?—alone?"

He looked slightly uncomfortable.

"Well, you will have a maid, of course."

Linda's face changed.

"I am sorry, but I could not possibly afford anything like that," she said decidedly. "I haven't any money except just a little from my grandmother, and Mr. Stern would not approve, I am sure."

"And who is Stern?" Lincoln asked.

"He is our lawyer; he has always managed our affairs."

"And have you told him about this?"

Linda shook her head.

"No. You see"—her colour rose beneath his dark eyes—"you see, I did not think he would care about it for me. He thinks I ought to go back and live with my mother."

"Your mother?"

"Yes. My mother has married again, and she found out that I am in Lorne's and she does not like it. She wants me to go to live with her."

Mrs. Johnson looked interested.

"Where does she live, dear?"

Linda told her.

"Her name is Mrs. Goring-Wells now," she added.

"Goring-Wells? What, not the financier?" Lincoln asked sharply.

Linda hesitated. "I am not sure," she said doubtfully. "I believe that's what he is though. She told me, but I've forgotten. And anyway," she added determinedly, "I am not going to live with her, whatever anyone says."

There was a little silence, then she asked interestedly:

"Do you know Mr. Goring-Wells, Mr. Lincoln?"

He laughed shortly. "I know of him."

She leaned a little towards him.

"Please tell me what he is like."

Andrew raised his brows.

"What he is like? Well, he is a keen business man, but not a man I care for. Not a man you would care for either, I should say."

"I am sure I should not."

"This is a young lady who knows her own mind," Mrs. Johnson said, smilingly.

Luncheon was at an end and the Black Prince rose.

"So everything is settled?" he said.

"Settled!" Linda looked a little anxious. "But nothing is settled yet," she protested. "I don't really know what is going to happen, or anything."

The Black Prince held out his hand.

"Can't you trust me?"

"Of course, but——" Uneasiness touched her heart; she looked apprehensively at Mrs. Johnson, who smiled encouragingly. "You may trust Mr. Lincoln," she promised.

Andrew drew up an arm-chair. "Come and sit here, and ask me any questions

you like. I promise to answer them all."

Linda obeyed silently, and he stood opposite her, leaning his shoulders against the mantelshelf.

"Now then, number one!" he said, cheerily.

Linda hesitated, her hands clasping one another nervously.

"Please—I hope you won't mind," she faltered, "but do I get paid?"

"Paid!" He threw back his handsome head and laughed. "Why, you silly child, of course you get paid! A handsome salary, too! Not a paltry pound, or whatever they hand out to you at Lorne's. What do you say to three pounds a week for a start, and everything found?"

Linda stared at him, her lips parted, her eyes wide.

"Three pounds!" she gasped.

"That is what I said."

"Three pounds!" she faltered again; she could not believe she had heard aright. "And everything found!"

He smiled in amusement.

"I believe that is what I said. Why do you stare at me like that? Isn't it enough?"

"Enough!" Linda stood up and caught his hand in both hers. "Oh, I think you are the best and kindest man that ever lived," she said.

The Black Prince blushed scarlet. He drew his hand sharply away and made no answer.

Linda gave in her notice at Lorne and Dodwell's on the following Monday.

She had spent a wonderful week-end and her head was turned with excitement and thoughts of the future.

On Sunday Lincoln took her and Mrs. Johnson out for the day in his car.

They drove down to Maidenhead, and had lunch at Skindles Hotel, sitting out on the lawns afterwards to drink their coffee. Linda had never been there before; she had not guessed there were such attractive places in the world.

There was a band playing all the time, and there were so many pretty girls about that she felt as if she were moving in a scene from a play, and not in real life at all.

Mrs. Johnson looked rather bored; she sat back in a low chair, smoking endless cigarettes, and sipping something that looked very sweet and golden from a tall thin glass.

She said she had been to Skindles hundreds of times; she and the Black Prince exchanged amused glances at Linda's open excitement.

"What it is to be young and full of enthusiasm!" Mrs. Johnson sighed.

It was warm and sunny for early spring, so they stayed on all the afternoon.

"We might as well have tea here, don't you think?" Lincoln asked about four o'clock. He looked at Linda. "Are you in a hurry to go back, little lady?"

In a hurry! Linda could have stayed there for ever, and said so with a fervent breath.

He ordered tea to be brought to them on the lawn. The fine afternoon had tempted many people on to the river. Someone in a passing punt had got a gramophone on board, and the sound of a popular waltz tune was wafted across the water.

Linda listened and felt herself in fairyland.

"Fancy being able to come here every day if you wanted to," she said breathlessly.

Mrs. Johnson raised her brows.

"You would soon get tired of it," she answered.

"Never! Never!" Linda declared.

They stayed on to dinner as well.

"We may as well finish the day here while we are about it," the Black Prince said lightly. "If we go back to town, there's nothing to do, and one can breathe here."

He persuaded Linda to have just half a glass of champagne with her dinner, "Just to please me!" he urged.

Linda looked doubtfully at the bubbling wine. "I've never tasted it in my life," she said.

"Everything must have a beginning," he told her; "and I am sure you will like it! Just a sip."

In the end she had half a glass.

"Like it?" he asked, as she made a little grimace.

Linda was not sure. "I've never tasted anything like it," she said.

"There is nothing like it," he assured her.

People were dancing in an attractive ballroom which led out of the dining-room. The windows were all wide open to the gardens and the river beyond, and the garden was hung with fairy lights and Chinese lanterns. Little boats passing on the river through the gathering dusk were hung with lanterns too, and the click of rowlocks and the sound of merry voices stole musically through the evening.

Halfway through the dinner Lincoln asked Linda if she would dance with him.

She flushed nervously.

"Dance here! Amongst all those people! Oh, I couldn't!"

"Why not? It's not the first time you and I have danced together."

"I know, but——" She hesitated, looking down at her black frock.

"To please me," he urged softly.

Well, to please him! He had been so kind to her, so more than good and wonderful; to please him she felt that she would do a great deal.

He took her hand and they went to the ballroom together.

After the first few moments all Linda's shyness and awkwardness vanished. The music seemed to force her to dance against her will; it seemed to take her body in its wonderful rhythm, and bend her to and fro in perfect time and control.

"Oh, it's lovely! Lovely!" she said, when they came back to Mrs. Johnson, who had remained at the table watching them.

"We'll have another directly," Andrew Lincoln said. He refilled her glass with champagne, and being thirsty and excited, Linda drank it off without realising it.

When dinner was over they danced again.

"I could go on for ever," she told him when he asked if she was tired. "I don't believe I shall ever be tired again."

When the music stopped they went out into the garden.

The Black Prince kept her hand in his, and they stood together looking at the river, and the coloured lanterns on the boats, moving here and there like will-o'-the-

wisps in the darkness.

"I must bring you here again," Lincoln said. "You will come with me again, Linda?"

"Oh, I should love to," she answered eagerly. "But isn't it rather dull for Mrs. Johnson?"

He laughed.

"We'll leave her at home next time," he said.

He drew Linda closer to him, slipping his hand through her arm. "Happy?" he asked.

"I've never been so happy before," Linda said, then stopped with a sense of dismay.

She had thought the same thing when Bill took her down to Chorley Wood that Sunday.

They had gone in a third-class carriage from Baker Street, and had had tea at a little wayside inn, and the whole day had probably not cost more than a few shillings, whereas to-day . . . she could not imagine how much money this wonderful day would cost Andrew Lincoln.

"Mine be a cot beside the hill . . . ."

It was unkind of memory to flash back those words to her; she shivered, and the man beside her asked at once:—

"Are you cold? Shall we go in?"

"I'm not tired, but my head aches a little." She laughed rather self-consciously. "You know, I believe it is the champagne."

"Nonsense!" He would not admit that. "Champagne bucks you up and makes you feel young and ready to jump over the moon. But if your head aches, we'll go home."

She agreed at once.

"Yes, let us go home."

But he detained her yet a moment.

"Linda—if you have had a happy day, may I not have a little reward?"

She looked up at him.

"Reward? What do you mean?"

"If you will . . . ." he broke off. "But I suppose you will not," he added.

"I don't understand."

He laughed, and released her.

"I was going to ask if I might kiss you, but on second thoughts I will not," the Black Prince said. "Let us find Mrs. Johnson, shall we?"

It was clever of him to move away at once, clever not to urge his wish a second time.

Linda followed, half frightened, half happy.

He must care a great deal for her if he wished to kiss her, she thought in a turmoil; she hardly knew whether she was glad or sorry.

So she gave in her notice at Lorne and Dodwell's on Monday morning. She woke with a headache and an unusual sense of weariness to find that she had overslept herself.

She had to dress hurriedly and go off to business without any breakfast; so she felt out of sorts and not too happy when she arrived.

Miss Gillet was not in a very good temper either, and when Linda timidly asked her how she set about giving in her notice, she rounded on her sharply.

"Giving notice! You mean to say you are leaving us?"

Linda flushed uncomfortably.

"Yes—at least—yes, I am," she said desperately.

Miss Gillet's lips tightened ominously.

"You will not find it so easy to get another berth," she said in her frigid way.

"I don't want another berth," Linda said proudly.

Miss Gillet stared.

"Has somebody left you a fortune?" she demanded icily. "Or are you going to get married?"

Linda checked a smile; they would all be amazed when they knew what she was going to do, but as yet she had no intention of giving her secret away.

"You had better speak to Mr. Flynn," Miss Gillet said formally.

Linda spoke to him on her way to lunch.

"I wish to give in my notice," she said nervously. "Miss Gillet said you would tell me what to do."

Mr. Flynn looked at her and raised his brows.

"I hope there is nothing wrong, Miss Lovelace. I am sure that Mr. Robert would be very sorry if he thought you were unhappy with us."

Linda shook her head.

"I'm not unhappy at all, and there isn't anything wrong," she answered. "I just want to leave, that's all."

"I will speak to Mr. Robert," he promised. "He may like to see you himself."

Mr. Flynn knew, as nearly everyone in Lorne and Dodwell's knew, that Linda was suspected of being a protegée of Robert Lorne's.

Linda went in to lunch with a fluttering heart. She hoped that Miss Gillet had not

spread the news that she was leaving, but apparently Miss Gillet had, for instead of avoiding her as she had done lately, Nelly Sweet came quickly up to her as she entered the dining-room.

"Is it true you are leaving here?" she demanded in her sharp way.

"Quite true."

Nelly caught her wrist in trembling fingers.

"Linda, are you going to marry my Bill?"

Linda flushed scarlet, and tried in vain to free herself.

"Of course not. How can you ask me such a silly question," she said impatiently, but her heart gave a quick leap.

To marry Bill! Well, she could have had him if she had chosen; he had asked her.

"I love you. I want you to marry me." Those had been his words.

Nelly released her with a long breath of relief.

"Phew! You gave me a fright," she said frankly. "Well, what on earth are you going to do then?" she demanded with a touch of her old friendliness.

"I don't know yet," Linda said, turning her head away. She did not see why she should make a confidante of Nelly after all that had passed between them.

But Nelly's natural kindness of heart asserted itself now she thought Linda was in trouble.

"I say, they haven't given you the push, have they?" she asked sympathetically.

Linda smiled then.

"Oh no!"

"And you're not going because of anything—well, anything to do with me? I know I was rather a pig, but—but you did try and get Bill away from me," she added.

"It isn't anything at all to do with you," Linda said.

She went to her seat at the table and tried to eat, but she was too excited.

Opposite, Nelly Sweet and another girl talked in whispers, and from the end of the table Joan Astley stared at her with cold, haughty eyes.

What would they all say if they knew the truth? Linda wondered. What would they say if she told them where she had been yesterday?

It already seemed like a dream that had never happened. The ride down to Maidenhead through the sunshine in Lincoln's big Daimler, and the ride back through the cool, fresh night air.

He would take her again, many times, so he had said; he had held her hand longer than was quite necessary when he said good-night to her outside Miss Dallow's.

Oh, life was beautiful after all! There was still much happiness to be had, even though a sweet old lady who had loved and cared for her lay asleep in an ugly London cemetery, and Bill was angry with her.

She wished she could forget Bill, but his was not a personality easily forgotten. She wished she could keep him as a friend, and go her own way at the same time, but that, too, she knew to be impossible. Bill hated Andrew Lincoln—it was very unjust of Bill.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked a girl beside her. "Aren't you well?"

Linda roused herself with an effort and smiled.

"I ought to be hungry," she admitted. "I overslept myself this morning, and had no breakfast."

"Late last night?" the other girl asked with a little meaning smile.

"No, not very."

Linda knew that every one at the table was listening; for a moment it trembled on her tongue to tell them all where she had been, but she checked the impulse. She was unpopular with many of the girls now, she knew, thanks to Nelly Sweet and Joan Astley; what was the use of making things any worse?

When she got back to the lace and ribbon counter Miss Gillet said tartly:—

"You are to go to Mr. Robert Lorne in his office."

"Oh!"

Linda caught her breath; she was always a little afraid of Mr. Robert. "What does he want me for?" she asked timidly.

Miss Gillet tossed her head.

"To ask you to reconsider your determination to leave, I should imagine," she said with sarcasm.

Linda made no answer, but she gave an anxious look at herself in one of the big mirrors behind the counter before she made her way to the office, where she had been given her first step to success.

There was a feeling of fatalism in her heart as she hesitated outside the door with its frosted glass panels and two names painted below them.

"Mr. Samuel Lorne."
"Mr. Robert Lorne."

Somehow it no longer seemed such a wonderful or magic spot as it had done the last time she stood here, and with renewed courage she lifted her hand and knocked.

"Come in."

Mr. Robert was there alone, to Linda's great relief; she felt she could not have

faced his uncle's sharp eyes.

She shut the door behind her and took a nervous step forward.

Robert Lorne rose and drew forward a chair.

"Good-morning. Won't you sit down?"

Linda obeyed silently, the colour coming and going in her cheeks; she felt it was going to be difficult to explain to this man why she had so suddenly made up her mind to leave, when at one time it had been the height of her ambition to procure a berth in his firm.

There was a little silence, then he said kindly:—

"Well, now tell me what it's all about? Why have you so soon grown tired of your ribbons and laces?"

For some reason which she could not explain, the tears rose in Linda's eyes at the kindly raillery in Robert Lorne's voice, and she faltered out: "It isn't all about anything! I've been quite happy here, and I thank you very much for having me, but ——"

He smiled involuntarily, she was so like a little girl nervously thanking her host for an enjoyable party, and not at all like the independent young woman of whom he had been told by Miss Gillet half an hour since.

Miss Gillet had expressed the opinion that Linda was suffering from a swelled head.

"She thinks she is too good for us, that's what it is," so she had said. "I suppose she has come into some money from her grandmother, or something like that, or else she has had her silly little head turned by the attentions of some man who has no serious attentions at all."

It was Miss Gillet who had made Lorne decide to see Linda for himself. He was interested in the welfare of all his staff, but Linda had interested him especially from the first moment of their meeting in the rain. He had recognised then that she was different from any other girl in his employ, and he acknowledged it again now as she looked at him with the tears in her eyes and her lips quivering.

"You are tired of work, is that it?" he asked, "or perhaps there is no longer the need for you to work?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no, indeed it's nothing like that. It's—oh, Mr. Lorne, I'm afraid you'll laugh at me if I tell you the truth."

He leaned a little closer to her across the table.

"You are going to be married, is that it? Well, I think you are a little young, perhaps, but it's what we all hope to do some day, I suppose. I only hope you have made a wise choice. Is it anyone in the firm—anyone I know?"

“Oh, no, no!” Linda was crimson with distress. “I’m not going to be married, I’ve never thought of such a thing,” she protested. “It’s not anything to do with a man at all; it’s——” She hesitated, then took the plunge: “I’m going to start in business on my own account.”

There was an eloquent silence; Robert Lorne did not smile, though for a moment the corners of his mouth quivered suspiciously.

“What sort of a business, Miss Lovelace?” he asked very quietly.

Linda took heart. He was apparently not amused; he was not going to laugh at her and ridicule the scheme.

“It’s a little millinery and frock shop—at least, I think so. There are lots of them about, aren’t there? and all you want is a little capital to start with, and then influence ——”

She was echoing Andrew Lincoln’s words.

“And have you—pardon me!—but have you the necessary capital and influence?” Robert Lorne asked gently.

Linda shook her head.

“I haven’t; of course I haven’t; but my friend——”

He sat back in his chair, a queer flash of understanding crossing his face.

“Ah, I see! You have a friend helping you?”

“Yes,” she went on eagerly. “Of course I don’t know anything about business, and I could not start alone; but there is a lady who is going to help me—she was a buyer for one of the big West-end firms. I don’t know which one but that is what she was.”

Again she was merely repeating in parrot-like fashion the explanation given to her by the Black Prince, and she went on glibly:

“We’re going to call it ‘Marie’—it’s going to be painted over the door in gold letters. I haven’t seen the shop yet, but it’s in a little turning off Maddox Street. We’re buying the business, you see—at least, my friend is. And there’s a little flat over the shop, and I am going to live there——” She broke off, realising his gravity.

“Oh, don’t you think I ought to do it?” she asked impulsively.

Robert Lorne rose to his feet; he paced the length of the room twice before he answered, then he came back and stood beside her, looking down at her with kindly eyes beneath their shaggy brows. “How old are you?” he asked abruptly.

She told him at once. “Nearly eighteen,” and then, as he did not speak, “but I can make myself look older,” she added eagerly. “I can do my hair differently, and clothes alter one, don’t they?”

He ignored the appeal, and after a moment he said, “Miss Lovelace, forgive me,

but do you think if your grandmother was alive, and could know of this—this venture, that she would approve?"

Linda stared at him helplessly, the tears welling to her eyes, and he went on urgently.

"It is no business of mine, I admit, but you are so young, and you have told me yourself that you are in a very lonely position. I have a sister myself who is just about your age, and I should not like to know that she was contemplating doing a thing like this without someone to help and advise her, and see that she came to no harm. I do not know who your friend is, of course——"

Linda broke in eagerly.

"He's the best and kindest man in the world; nobody has ever been so kind to me as he has."

She made her defence of the Black Prince with enthusiasm, and yet she felt herself colouring beneath the steady eyes of Robert Lorne, and he said abruptly:—

"Miss Lovelace, may I speak to you frankly—very frankly?"

She nodded dumbly, and he drew up his chair again, and sat down beside her as if they were friends, great friends who understood and trusted one another, and not in the least as if he was the great Robert Lorne, head of a wealthy firm, and she one of many obscure little girls who worked for him.

"I know much better than you do, much better than I hope you ever will know, how many temptations and dangers there are in the world for a girl who finds herself in your friendless position," he began earnestly. "You told me yourself that you and your mother are estranged, and I know you have just lost someone who was very dear to you, and who would, I am sure, were she alive, be saying to you just what I am trying to say now. I could see, the first time I ever spoke to you, that you were not quite like the modern girl. You are not quite so worldly-wise, Miss Lovelace—you are too unsuspecting and innocent. And that is why I am going to ask you to look upon me just for the moment as a friend—a brother, if you like! and tell me the name of this man who . . . this man who is starting you in this . . . this business."

Unconsciously there was a note of contempt in his last words, and Linda's colour rose indignantly.

Was he, after all, amused at her? Was he, like everyone else, antagonistic towards her, in spite of his kind words?

Instead of answering his question she rose to her feet and began angrily to defend herself.

"I thought you would understand. I didn't think you would laugh at me. Anyone would think I was a child, and not able to take care of myself. . . . You're not the

only one who thinks so, or pretends to think so. Why should I tell you who is helping me? He's a kind friend, anyway. He knows I can work and make a success. . . ." She stopped with a little breath of dismay at her own daring, realising to whom she was speaking. "Oh, Mr. Lorne, I'm so sorry—so sorry!" she said in a frightened whisper.

There was a little silence, then Robert Lorne rose also; his face was a little stern, the kindliness of his eyes had changed to coldness.

"You know your own business best I am sure, Miss Lovelace," he said in an impartial voice. "I wish you every success in the new venture. You will leave us a week to-day then." He bent over a paper on his desk and made a note, then he passed her and opened the door.

"I need detain you no longer," he said formally, and the next moment Linda found herself outside again and the door shut.

She found her way back to the shop feeling dazed and frightened.

What had she done, what was she doing, that everyone should turn against her like this?

She had quarrelled with Nelly Sweet, and she had angered Miss Gillet, Miss Dallow had asked her to leave, and Bill had done with her, and now Robert Lorne. . . .

"I don't care, I don't care!" she told herself defiantly. "It's jealousy, that's what it is. I'll show them what I can do. I'll show them that I'm not such a child after all."

The last week at Lorne and Dodwell's seemed to fly.

No sooner had one day begun than it had ended; she seemed to have no time to think, no time to realise what was happening.

She saw Andrew Lincoln nearly every day, and Mrs. Johnson nearly as often.

They took her to the little shop over which the new name of "Marie" had been painted in gold, and they let her choose fresh curtains for the windows and a soft grey carpet for the floor.

She was like a child with a new toy; the business side of the venture she never considered at all.

She asked no questions as to capital or loss, or profits; she only knew that she was being treated like a queen, that the little doll's house flat upstairs was to be her own, and that she was to have some new smart frocks.

Linda had much of her mother in her after all; she went down and worshipped before pretty frocks and hats and dainty surroundings almost as easily as Mrs. Goring-Wells had done years ago.

She trusted Lincoln and Mrs. Johnson implicitly, and so the days fled by.

Of Bill Sargent there was no sign, though she knew that he was still in the house, for she heard his step often overhead or on the stairs, and Jenny sometimes spoke of him.

Once she informed Linda that she was sure he must be ill. "He's that bad-tempered. I hardly know him, that I don't," she said, pausing in the doorway for a moment's gossip. "And so different to what he used to be! Always a smile and a cheery word."

"People can't always be the same," Linda said, but her heart sank.

Bill, dear Bill! She wished she could see him just for a moment. She wished she could tell him of all the wonderful things that were happening to her.

The night before she was to leave Miss Dallow's she deliberately left the door of her sitting-room open about the time she knew he was due to come in, but he was either aware of it, and stayed out on purpose, or else he must have crept quietly upstairs when she was not listening, for she saw nothing of him.

Did he know she was leaving? She was sure he must do. Jenny would certainly have told him.

Mrs. Goring-Wells wrote that she was ill in bed with influenza.

"What are you doing, Linda, and why don't you come to see your mother? Some day you may know what it is to be ill and lonely as I am now, and to long for a little kindness."

Linda thought she knew what it was already, she destroyed the letter without answering it.

She felt sad at the thought of the coming change. She rather dreaded leaving Miss Dallow's, and the rooms where for a little while she had been happy with Mrs. Lovelace; she cried a great deal as she packed their few possessions.

It was like closing a chapter of life and starting on a new one which was quite unknown.

She cried when she said good-bye to Miss Gillet.

"You've been ever so kind to me," she said. "I hope I shall see you again."

The story of her new venture had of course filtered through the entire shop, and everyone knew now who's influence was at work.

"You're a little fool, that's what you are, my dear," Miss Gillet said sharply as they shook hands. "But I don't wish you any harm. For goodness sake keep your eyes open and take care of yourself."

Linda thought that was unnecessary advice; Mrs. Johnson and Andrew Lincoln were both taking care of her in the most wonderful way.

She hesitated about saying good-bye to Nelly Sweet, but Nelly sought her out.

“Well, I suppose you won’t want to know me any more now,” she said in her downright fashion. “I suppose you’ll run a motor soon, while I still pay a penny for a seat on a bus, eh?”

Linda looked distressed.

“I shan’t be any different,” she protested. “Why should I be?”

Nelly opened her eyes wide.

“What! Not with the Black Prince!” she scoffed.

The colour rose in Linda’s face.

“I’m not with him,” she said impatiently. “Why does everyone say such silly things? We’re only just friends.”

Nelly sneered. “Oh, yes, we know that!” she answered briskly.

“We know that our dear, darling Andrew is an angel without wings, looking after a poor orphan child and all the rest of it!” Her manner changed suddenly, and she stamped her foot.

“Oh, you make me tired!” she said impulsively. “How you can be so taken in I don’t know! Ask Joan what she thinks of the Black Prince! I know you don’t think much of her, but she wouldn’t touch him with a pair of kitchen tongs now, and that’s the truth!”

“Because he wouldn’t let her, I suppose,” Linda said childishly.

She turned to go, but Nelly followed.

“Here, let’s shake hands and be friends,” she said with an effort. “I don’t bear you any ill-feeling now you’ve let Bill go. I know you haven’t been out with him again since I asked you not to. You’re a sport.”

Linda was touched and surprised, she took the offered hand gladly.

“And I do hope you’ll be happy,” she said earnestly. “I do hope that Bill——” She suddenly choked at mention of his name, and could say no more.

Nelly laughed rather grimly.

“If you’ve done with Bill, he’s done with me,” she said, unhappily. “I’m not good enough for him now, and perhaps he’s right! Bless his old heart, anyway!”

Linda was driven to ask a last question:—

“Do you—do you ever see him now?”

Nelly made a grimace.

“I’ve seen him once in the last fortnight and that was by accident,” she said with a mock sigh. “But I saw Archie Lang the other night, you remember him? He was at that dance with us. Well, he sees a lot of Bill, I think, and he told me that Bill had asked for a shift.”

“A shift? You mean—he’s going to leave the bank?”

Nelly nodded. “He’s going to leave the town branch anyway; he hates London, you know, he’s all for the country. I don’t blame him; there’s something forced and unnatural about London when you have to live the sort of life we do, isn’t there? I always used to feel it when Bill took me down to the country for the day. It is all the difference between a greenhouse and an open field, isn’t it?” She laughed rather self-consciously. “Heavens! hark at me!” she jeered at herself. “I ought to write a book.”

“I know what you mean,” Linda said slowly, and remembered how she had felt something of the same emotion which Nelly was trying to describe that Sunday when she and Bill went down to Chorley Wood.

What was the good of looking back? she asked herself impatiently. The best and wisest thing to do was to look on—on! Surely there must be something more pleasant in the future than a few hours in woods and fields walking with a man who had done with her—who wished never to see her again.

Mrs. Johnson was to call that evening and take her and all her possessions away from Miss Dallow’s, and Linda was ready waiting in her hat and coat when she heard a step on the landing outside.

Bill! Her heart seemed to leap to her mouth, and she was across the room and at the open door in a second.

It was Bill right enough, but he would have passed her without a look or a word if she had not spoken.

“Mr. Sargent . . . I’m leaving here to-day.”

He stood still. His eyes, hard and unfriendly, met hers.

“Yes, I know.”

“Oh!”

There was a little silence. Linda felt as if she was choking. She wanted to burst into tears; she wanted to grip hold of him so that he could not go on up those stairs and leave her; she wanted to hold him fast. Wild, foolish things crowded to her lips, but she kept them back.

She wanted to say, “Oh, Bill, don’t be angry with me.” She wanted to say, “Oh, Bill, I’m not really happy a bit! I’m really lonely and frightened and miserable,” but pride prevented her.

Then Bill spoke:

“Well, I won’t detain you,” he said formally. “I’ll say good-bye. I wish you every luck.” And he was gone.

The first week in the new little shop went by like a fairy story to Linda.

She had never dreamed that such things could be; she had never realised that there was such great kindness in the world as that which was shown to her by the Black Prince and Mrs. Johnson.

Her slightest wish was gratified; she lived like a princess in the little flat above the shop.

Mrs. Johnson had tactfully suggested a change in her hairdressing, and guided her choice in clothes.

Sometimes Linda looked at herself in the mirror, and could not believe it was indeed she.

She had always worn her hair loosely dressed, parted on one side, and gathered into a loose knot at the back of her head.

Now she wore it brushed straight back, and flattened over her ears. It made her look much older and more interesting she knew, but often she found herself wondering what Mrs. Lovelace would say if she could see her.

There was no lack of customers at the little shop.

Although Linda was unconscious of it, they were all influenced either by Lincoln himself or Mrs. Johnson. Often there was quite a string of motorcars in the quiet little street, and Mrs. Johnson laughingly said that they would either have to take larger premises or enlarge.

She herself did all the business; Linda merely walked about and smiled and made herself agreeable, and tried on the latest blouses and jumpers to show them off to prospective purchasers.

Once the Countess of Star came.

She stared at Linda through her lorgnette for a long moment before she said in her downright way,

"I've seen you before somewhere?"

Linda flushed in embarrassment, whereupon the old lady tapped her arm in friendly fashion and said:

"Pooh! pooh! Nothing to blush about, though I must say I like to see a modern girl who is still capable of blushing."

She bought a few articles and took them away without paying.

"My secretary, Miss Fernie, will send you on a cheque," she said, as she left. "I

never carry money about with me. I always lose it."

"I suppose she will send it, will she?" Linda asked doubtfully when she had gone. She had grown rather distrustful of the world in general since she had been thrown on her own initiative.

Mrs. Johnson looked annoyed.

"The Countess is a very rich woman," she said.

"Oh, I know that," Linda answered. "But it isn't always the rich people who pay their bills, is it?"

"The Countess came here to please Mr. Lincoln," Mrs. Johnson said again.

Linda opened her eyes wide.

"Did she? Then she knows that he is really the owner of the business?"

"Of course. I've no doubt she lent him the money," said Mrs. Johnson calmly.

Linda felt perplexed.

"And does she know he did it for me?" she asked innocently.

The elder woman stared at her and then smiled rather acidly.

"There are some things which it is not wise to tell to a wealthy aunt from whom one has prospects," she said.

Linda did not understand; she thought the words over for a moment, then she said:—

"Oh, you mean she might not like it because I've been in a shop before?" she asked.

Mrs. Johnson shrugged her shoulders.

"Never mind what I mean."

But Linda did mind; the little conversation had left her with a feeling of vague discomfort. When Lincoln came to the little shop later in the evening she asked him about it.

"Does the Countess of Star know that you put money into this business for me?"

He looked slightly uncomfortable.

"She probably guesses," he said at last.

Linda looked worried. "Is she angry with you about it?" she urged.

"Angry!" he laughed. "My dear little girl, my worthy aunt has long since ceased to be angry or concern herself seriously with any escapade of mine." He drew up a chair and sat down. "We are very good friends, but she does not approve of me, and she knows that I don't approve of her. But I'm her only near relative, and she knows that there is always one thing I shall never do without her consent."

"And what is that?" Linda inquired interestedly.

"Get married," he answered.

"Oh!" She felt the colour mounting to her cheeks beneath his gaze. "And supposing she does not like the girl you wish to marry?" she asked.

Andrew Lincoln laughed.

"I shall make it my business to see that she does," he said; he put out his hand and took hers.

"Well, are you happy?"

"You know I am."

There was nobody in the shop at the moment, and Mrs. Johnson's back was discreetly turned, so he lifted Linda's hand to his lips and kissed her soft palm.

"Bless you!" he said.

She drew away from him, her heart beating fast.

She could not analyse her feelings with regard to this man; she knew that she liked him, and that she was proud of his friendship for her, but there were times when he made her feel uncomfortable; times when something in his manner and the way in which he spoke made her feel as if she belonged to him—as if he considered he had bought her along with the business.

"But that's absurd, of course," she argued. "He is only a good friend to me—and I ought to be very grateful to him—I am!"

"And what about a little trip in the country this evening?" Lincoln asked presently. "It keeps light so late now; we should have time for a spin."

Linda began to say eagerly that she would love it, then stopped.

"Oh, I can't! I forgot! I'm so sorry, but I promised to go to supper with Miss Gillet——"

He frowned. "Miss Gillet! Don't know her!"

"I was with her at Lorne's," Linda said. "She was always very kind to me in her own way, and I met her a few days ago, and she asked me to have supper with her to-night."

"You can put her off," he said easily. "I come first, surely?"

Linda looked distressed. "You do! Of course you do; but I promised!"

He laughed. "Pooh! I promise a dozen things a day which I have no intention of doing!"

She looked at him reproachfully.

"Oh, I couldn't do that! I like to keep my word. We can go some other night, can't we?"

"I particularly want you to-night."

She shook her head. "But I promised. I can't break my promise."

He pleaded and argued with her in vain. A promise was a promise, Linda said

firmly. She would hate anyone to break their word to her, and she would stand by hers. Miss Gillet had been very kind when Mrs. Lovelace was ill—she could not forget that.

Andrew Lincoln took a dignified departure at last without saying good-night, and Mrs. Johnson looked at Linda reproachfully.

"You have offended him. You will not see him again for some time," she prophesied.

"Oh, but what nonsense, and how unfair!" Linda protested, half amused, half frightened. "How could I break my word."

"You owe a great deal to Mr. Lincoln," was all that Mrs. Johnson would say.

"He is not really angry, I am sure he is not," Linda said after a moment. "Nobody could be so foolish! He will come to-morrow and will have forgotten it."

But Mrs. Johnson was right, and it was nearly a week before the Black Prince came to the little shop again. It was with rather a heavy heart that Linda went to Miss Gillet's supper party.

She had understood that she was to be the only guest, and that they were to spend a quiet evening together, but when she arrived she found several other people there, and amongst them two girls from Lorne and Dodwell's.

Neither of them had been friends of hers, but they made her feel uncomfortable by the way in which they stared at her, at her clothes, and the style of her hair, and she wished she had not come.

Archie Lang was there, too, and after the first little awkwardness he was very kind and friendly.

"By Jove, you've altered since I saw you," was his first friendly greeting. "You've gone up in the world, eh?"

Linda flushed sensitively.

"I was very dowdy before, anyhow," she defended herself.

"Been to any dances with Lincoln?" he asked.

The question was spoken naturally enough, and without any wish to be offensive, but Linda winced.

Why was everyone so unkind about the Black Prince? Why were they all so jealous of her good fortune?

When she was taking off her hat in Miss Gillet's bedroom she spoke about it.

"Why does everyone ask me about Mr. Lincoln?"

Miss Gillet turned round from the task of powdering her nose and stared at Linda blankly.

"Well, isn't it a natural thing to ask?"

"I don't see why. It makes me feel uncomfortable."

Miss Gillet smiled rather acidly.

"Oh, well, if you feel uncomfortable about him, you shouldn't have done it, that's all," she said.

"Done what?" Linda asked.

Miss Gillet shrugged her shoulders.

"I often wonder whether you're as innocent as you seem to be," she said energetically.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Linda protested.

She felt as if a second cloud had fallen on her happiness. She wished she had not come; she was sure she was not going to enjoy the evening at all; she was sure it was not worth while having quarrelled with Lincoln about.

She was very silent during supper, and after a few attempts to draw her into the conversation the rest of the company rather let her alone.

She was just casting about in her mind for some excuse which could take her away, when there was a ring at the bell below, and a moment later Bill Sargent was announced.

Linda felt herself growing white.

Had Miss Gillet done this on purpose? she wondered; and then remembered that Miss Gillet had not known of their friendship.

Bill looked very much the same as usual, and he shook hands with her unconcernedly enough.

"This is a surprise," he said calmly.

"It's a surprise to me, too," she answered with an effort.

She wondered what he thought of her frock, and the new way of dressing her hair: she felt more ill at ease than ever now he had come.

He avoided her, and talked all the time to one of the girls from Lorne's. Linda found herself straining her ears to listen to what he was saying.

"Yes, I go next week. . . . Yes, right down in the country. I was jolly lucky to get it. I'm to live over the bank, too. Quite a small house, of course, but there's a garden, and I'm fond of a garden."

Linda found her voice with an effort.

"Are you going away?"

He glanced at her impersonally.

"Yes, they've moved me. I've been lucky: I've got a branch managership down in Surrey."

"Oh!"

"What will Nelly do without you?" Miss Gillet asked maliciously.

The younger of the two girls from Lorne's answered for him.

"Nelly's got a new young man; didn't you know?"

"I have not seen Miss Sweet for some time," Bill said casually.

Linda's heart gave a little throb.

"Who—who is the new young man?" she asked of the girl beside her.

"I don't know, but she's always about with him. He's got a small business of his own somewhere, and a two-seater! Oh, she's up in the world, is our Nelly."

There was no longer any thought in Linda's mind of leaving Miss Gillet's early now Bill had come; she sat and watched him, and listened to his voice and his laugh with a real heartache.

Once when she found herself beside him for a moment, she ventured to congratulate him on his new berth, he looked at her with hard, disinterested eyes.

"Yes, you and I have both been fortunate," he agreed. "You have realised your ambition, and I have realised mine."

". . . . Mine be a cot beside the hill . . . ."

Linda tried in vain to close her ears to the haunting words.

She could picture Bill so well down there in the country; she could see long summer evenings, during which he would potter about in the garden in his shirt-sleeves, smoking his pipe, whilst she——

It was strange that things which had seemed yesterday to spell perfect happiness to-day were no longer quite so wonderful.

> "Around my ivy'd porch shall spring
> Each fragrant flower that drinks the dew.
> And Lucy at her wheel shall sing
> In russet gown and apron blue . . . ."

Some day, of course, there would be a Lucy! Lucky, lucky girl, whoever she was.

Bill had moved away, and Miss Gillet came to her side.

"You know you don't look very well," she said, in her blunt fashion. "Success hasn't improved you, my dear."

Linda flushed.

"Hasn't it? Perhaps it's the new way I do my hair that you don't like," she said uncertainly.

"Oh—that! Of course, I don't like that," Miss Gillet answered frankly. "But I suppose it's smart. Still, it seems a pity for such a child as you are."

“I don’t feel a child,” Linda said with a little hard laugh.

Miss Gillet felt a wave of compassion; she had often been angry with Linda, and sometimes jealous of her, but to-night she could only feel vaguely sorry for her.

“It’s a pity Mrs. Lovelace died,” she said unthinkingly, and was horrified to see the tears start to Linda’s eyes.

“There, I didn’t mean to say that,” she hastened to add. “And for Heaven’s sake don’t cry!”

Linda controlled herself with an effort. Everyone in the room but herself seemed laughing and happy, and yet she supposed that she was better off and with better prospects than any of them.

What was wrong with her? What was wrong with life? What was it that she really wanted to make her happy?

It was raining hard when the time came to go.

“Is Mr. Lincoln calling for you, dear?” one of the girls from Lorne’s asked in a too-sweet voice, audible to everyone present.

Linda flushed sensitively.

“Oh, no, of course not. Why should he?”

The girl laughed.

“I’d jolly well make him if I were you,” she said emphatically. “You look after yourself; that’s my advice.”

Linda looked puzzled.

“I do look after myself,” she protested.

Archie Lang chuckled.

“Trust Linda to know which side the bread is buttered,” he said meaningly. “Even if the butter is rank,” he added in an undertone, but Linda heard and caught up the words furiously.

“I don’t know what you’re all insinuating,” she said in deep distress. “If you are trying to insult me——”

Miss Gillet caught her hand.

“Heavens! don’t be so silly,” she said in annoyance. “Can’t you take a joke.”

Linda looked imploringly at Bill, but he had turned away.

Bill Sargent and the two girls from Lorne’s, and Linda all went the same way home, but Bill went on in front with one of the girls, leaving Linda to follow.

She had borrowed an umbrella from Miss Gillet, but the pouring rain splashed up and drenched her thin shoes and silk stockings, and there was an unkind wind blowing that buffeted her first this way and then that.

Bill looked in vain for a taxi-cab, and every omnibus that passed was crowded.

“Sorry, but you’ll all have to walk,” he said, in his cheery way. “It’s not far, take hold of my arm, Miss Smith, then my umbrella will cover us both.”

Miss Smith giggled and obeyed delightedly.

She was a plain girl, who had never had any attention, and this was an event for her.

Linda watched them with jealous eyes.

She thought Bill might have helped her; after all, they had once been good friends.

They passed the street corner where the other two girls lived, and bade them good-night.

There was much laughing and joking before they parted.

Bill had loaned them his umbrella, and had promised to call for it the following day.

“Come to tea,” they invited him. “Tea and shrimps, if you like shrimps.”

Bill said he adored them; he promised to turn up at four o’clock (it was a Saturday) without fail.

Miss Smith and her friend splashed off cheerfully through the rain, calling back many good-nights, and Linda was left to Bill.

“I’m afraid you’re rather wet,” he said politely.

Linda said she was quite dry, but her feet were sodden, and her thin skirts flapped round her uncomfortably.

They walked some little way in silence; and then, against her will, Linda broke out impulsively—

“Don’t you think you are very unkind to me?”

“Unkind!” He repeated the word and laughed. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

She answered with trembling lips. “You mean that you don’t choose to.”

She felt rather than saw that he shrugged his shoulders.

“You gave me to understand that you wished our friendship to definitely cease.”

His voice sounded like that of a stranger, and there was a little lump in Linda’s throat that almost choked her, but she managed to say faintly—

“And if I’m . . . sorry!”

For an instant he stood still, as if surprise checked him, then he walked on again more rapidly than before.

“Sorry . . . for what, Miss Lovelace?”

“For . . . for sending you away.”

“You are very kind.”

She was trembling in every limb; she wanted to cry badly. Why was he so hard,

so unforgiving? Somehow she had imagined that at one word from her he would have held out his arms.

She struggled on with the desperate feeling that it must be now or never.

"If I say I'm sorry . . . if I ask you . . . to forgive me, and—and take me back. . . ." She caught her breath on a sob. "Will you?"

"Forgive you? Take you back?" his voice was almost brutal in its harshness. "After everything that has happened? . . ." He laughed roughly. "Good heavens, what do you take me for?"

"What do you mean? After everything that has happened? I'm just the same as I always was . . . and you said you loved me. . . ."

Bill stood still; they were close to a street lamp, and in its wavering yellow light his face looked drawn and almost ugly.

"Loved you! So I did! But now . . . I only hope to God I shall never see you again. If I had known you were to be at Miss Gillet's to-night, no power on earth would have dragged me there——"

He stood for a moment, breathing hard; then without another word he turned and strode away from her.

She cried out after him shrilly:

"Bill, oh Bill, come back!"

But he took no notice, and presently he was lost to view.

"I hope to God I shall never see you again."

The words had sounded like a curse, and there was a panic of fear in Linda's heart as she went the rest of her way home.

Why had he said that? What had she done? Nothing sufficiently bad to deserve such harshness she was sure. What had he meant?

She had been unkind and ungrateful to him, but nothing more.

She knew now that always at the back of her mind had been the thought that whatever happened there would always be Bill in the background; faithful Bill, who would always love her and come if she wanted him.

And now that thought had been killed. Bill had done with her; the rock of his love had failed her; there was no longer anyone to whom she might turn.

Mrs. Johnson was waiting up for her when she got home.

"Wet through!" she said aghast. "You've ruined your frock and those expensive shoes. Why on earth didn't you take a cab?"

"I couldn't find one."

"Humph, well you'd better hurry up and get to bed, or you won't be fit for anything to-morrow."

Linda went to bed and cried herself to sleep.

She passed a lonely week-end.

There was no sign of Lincoln, and Mrs. Johnson was out every day with friends of her own.

On Sunday afternoon Linda could bear her own company no longer, so putting her pride in her pocket, she dressed and went to call at her mother's house.

She felt that she must talk to someone, or she would go mad.

Lincoln had never neglected to take her out over the week-end since the little shop was opened, and she missed him, and felt piqued by the neglect.

Mrs. Johnson had not been very kind about it either.

"Well, you wouldn't put off your supper party for him," she said. "Why should he put himself out for you? He has already done more for you than any other man would have done, and so far I can't see what he's got for his money," she added tartly.

"What does he expect to get?" Linda asked with dignity. "I shall pay him back as soon as I can."

An enigmatical smile crossed Mrs. Johnson's face.

"Ah, well, we shall see," was all she said.

Linda thought of that smile as she made her way to Mrs. Goring-Wells' house; it had been so subtle and full of meaning.

Miss Smith from Lorne's had smiled in just the same way, and Archie Lang! Without knowing why she felt her face growing hot.

What was the matter with everyone? Why were they all so jealous? She tried to dismiss them from her mind.

At her mother's house a fresh disappointment awaited her, for Mrs. Goring-Wells had gone to the South of France to recover from her recent illness, and they did not know when she would be returning.

"What name shall I say?" the maid asked.

Linda shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I'll call again."

She went back to the little flat dispiritedly.

Surely London was the loneliest place on earth!

Monday came and went, and there was no sign of Lincoln.

Tuesday came, but still he stayed away.

"Can't we go out somewhere to-night?" Linda asked Mrs. Johnson restlessly.

"I should be only too pleased," was the answer she received, "but I'm engaged. I promised some friends a week ago, or I would have gone out with you with pleasure."

Linda spent another lonely evening in the silent little flat.

She was too nervous to go out alone, and the long evenings were getting badly on her nerves.

The next night the same thing happened—Mrs. Johnson had an engagement, and Linda was once more alone.

It seemed the final straw that broke her down. In desperation she wrote to Lincoln. After all, he was her only friend.

"Why are you angry with me? Aren't you ever coming to see me any more? Please come.—Linda Lovelace."

She slipped out into the dark night and posted it, then she felt happier. He was her friend; even if he was angry, he would forgive her; he would come.

When Mrs. Johnson and Linda met the following morning, the elder woman said:

"I'm free to-night, if you care to go anywhere. What about a little dinner and a theatre?"

Distress signals flew in Linda's cheeks.

"I can't—not to-night," she faltered. "At least . . . I'm expecting Mr. Lincoln to come."

Mrs. Johnson raised her brows and laughed.

"Have you heard from him, then? Is he back in town?"

"I didn't know he was away. I wrote to him at his flat."

"He is not back, then," Mrs. Johnson said calmly. "He went down to Brighton for the week-end, and I had a note from him yesterday on some business matter, in which he said he did not intend to return before Saturday."

"Oh!" Linda felt as if a cold hand had touched her heart, and again she asked herself desolately why it was that it seemed impossible for her to keep a friend.

There was a little silence; then she said impulsively:

"Mrs. Johnson, why are people so horrid to me about Mr. Lincoln?"

Mrs. Johnson looked at her in mild surprise.

"Horrid? Are people horrid? If they are, it's jealousy, I am sure, because you are so much prettier and luckier than they are."

Linda had never thought herself pretty, but now she stole a shy glance at her reflection in one of the show-case mirrors.

She had not yet grown used to her new clothes and her changed hairdressing. She never felt quite comfortable, and often longed for her old, not very well made clothes.

But Andrew Lincoln had decreed that she must alter her appearance, therefore she had done so.

But Andrew was away, down at Brighton.

"Who is he at Brighton with?" she asked abruptly.

Mrs. Johnson was busy folding crepe-de-chine underskirts into a box, and answered rather absently:

"He went with a party of friends, I believe. He did not tell me who they were, and I am not curious."

But Linda was, and her heart swelled with a faint jealousy, which increased later

in the day, when, going out to post some letters, she ran into Nelly Sweet.

Nelly stood still with an unkind little gasp.

"Fine feathers make fine birds, don't they?" she said unkindly.

Linda coloured. "Don't you like my clothes?" she asked.

"Like 'em!" Nelly shrugged her shoulders. "I should like 'em if they were mine," she said frankly. "But as it is . . . well!"

Linda would have gone on, but Nelly detained her for a moment.

"Have you heard the news about Joan Astley?" she asked.

Linda shook her head.

"No; what is it? Is she ill?"

"Ill!" Nelly grinned. "She's left! Nobody knows why; she went off in a great hurry—same as you did——" she added in unkind parentheses.

"Where has she gone?" Linda asked.

Nelly grinned.

"Ask Andrew Lincoln," she said.

Linda's cheeks were flaming as she turned away. She was sure that Nelly was deliberately trying to hurt her. As if Andrew knew! He had told her that he and Joan were no longer friends.

She went back to the little shop, to find two customers being waited on by Mrs. Johnson with great attention.

When she entered Mrs. Johnson looked up with her most artificial business smile.

"Here she is! We were just speaking of you, Miss Lovelace. These ladies are friends of Mr. Lincoln's, and have most kindly come to look at our pretty things." She carefully spread a cobwebby garment across a black velvet cushion, touching its lace and ribbons with expert fingers.

"This is our latest model. It only came from Paris last week," she said impressively. "We can copy it in any colour from five and a half guineas."

Linda listened with the feeling of amused scorn which she could never quite conquer. She knew as well as Mrs. Johnson knew, that the "model" in question had been made in poor lodgings not very far away from the Hammersmith Road, where she herself once lived, by a cripple girl, who stitched her fingers to the bone to keep herself in the necessities of life.

But the prospective customers seemed quite satisfied with the explanation vouchsafed to them, and gave elaborate orders to be executed immediately.

When they were gone, Mrs. Johnson's suave urbanity fell from her like a cloak.

"I shall have to write to Miss Mathews, and tell her to start on the order at

once," she said briskly to Linda. "It's no use waiting for her to call. Her leg was worse again last time she wrote. Such a nuisance, having to employ a cripple."

"Why do we employ her then?" Linda asked rather sharply.

Mrs. Johnson stared.

"You know quite well why," she said. "Because she is cheaper than anyone else we know, and her work is far better."

Linda's eyes grew passionately resentful.

"I think life is horrible," she said with energy.

Mrs. Johnson laughed unkindly.

"I don't quite see where your quarrel with life comes in," was her reply as she walked into the little room behind the shop and began her letter.

Linda folded up the dainty garments with which the tiny counter was strewn, her thoughts far away.

She was thinking of her childhood, of her grandmother, and the old Odds and Ends box, and her own dream of life in a shop.

> "Ribbons and laces for sweet pretty faces—
> Oh, come to the market and buy."

The dream had been shorn of a great deal of its romance during the last few months; she even thought there was something rather tragic and horrible in the fact that so much money was made because of the vanity of women.

And yet she knew that her own sex were not only to blame; it was to please men that they made themselves look pretty and attractive, men who paid them attention, and whom they liked; men such as Andrew Lincoln!

Not men like Bill Sargent; dear Bill! in her mind he was in a little niche apart. He would not care how shabby were the clothes worn by the woman he loved; Bill was not like Andrew Lincoln, who judged most women by their frocks and frills.

And her eyes grew sad as she thought of Bill, and his rough unkindness to her.

What had she done to make him look at her almost as if he hated her? What disgrace was there in taking an opportunity when it was offered, to help her nearer to a great success?

She had grown into a habit lately of turning things over and over in her mind, in a vain endeavour to find out why she was not more happy and contented.

She had plenty of money; she was always well dressed, and she was mistress of the little shop in which she stood. Most girls would have been wild with joy, and yet. . . .

The door opened sharply, and the postman came in. He handed Linda a bundle

of letters which she sorted through indifferently until she came to one addressed in her mother's handwriting.

The envelope bore a French stamp and postmark, and smelt faintly of some very expensive scent.

Linda opened it without much enthusiasm, but after she had read the first few lines her slim young body stiffened and her face grew white.

Mrs. Goring-Wells had written:

"The story of your disgraceful conduct has reached me, and I am sending this letter to tell you that from this moment you are no longer my daughter. Any communication from you will be returned unopened. Please understand that this is final."

Linda stood staring at the curt missive with horrified eyes.

Had her mother gone mad? Or had she?

Mrs. Johnson came bustling back into the shop, an unfolded letter in her hand, which she held out to Linda.

"You had better read this before it goes, and sign it. I cannot see why Mr. Lincoln wishes all letters to be signed by you, but as he does——" she broke off. "Why, what is the matter?" she asked in swift concern.

Linda tried to speak, but her voice seemed to have failed. She silently gave her Mrs. Goring-Wells' letter to read.

"I don't know what it means," she said with stiff lips. "I think she must be mad."

Mrs. Johnson read the strange communication quickly and laid it down on the counter amongst the silks and laces.

"Well!" she said expressively.

"But what can she mean?" Linda asked in distress. "What have I done? What does she mean by 'disgraceful conduct'?"

"My dear child, if you don't know yourself, how can you expect me to tell you? You have always told me that your mother is a very strange woman; possibly that is the explanation."

But she avoided Linda's eyes.

Linda stood staring out into the street; there was a vague fear in her heart.

"But it's only a little while ago that she begged me to give up work, and go and live with her," she broke out presently. "Nothing has happened since then—except that I have come here? Why, I went to her house on Sunday, but she was away ——"

"Well, I should not worry about it if I were you," Mrs. Johnson said briskly. "After all, you can't order your life to please everyone, can you?"

“It isn’t as if I care exactly,” Linda said with quivering lips. “But . . . but mother isn’t the first one to . . . to say that sort of thing to me. There was . . .” she checked the name of Bill Sargent that had risen to her lips. She could not speak of him to Mrs. Johnson.

But there had been something of the same feeling in Bill’s manner to her the other night, as there was in this letter. It was almost . . . disgust!

“Well, it’s no use worrying,” Mrs. Johnson said again in her most matter-of-fact way. “Gracious me, if I’d worried about everything that has been said of me during the last thirty years, I should have been in my coffin long enough ago.”

“I shouldn’t care if I was to go into mine to-morrow,” Linda said despondently.

Mrs. Johnson flung her a good-humoured smile.

“Silly child! Mr. Lincoln will be home soon, and then we’ll see what he has to say.”

“It’s nothing to do with me what he says,” Linda retorted proudly.

Andrew had failed her even as Bill had done; it hurt her pride to remember Nelly Sweet’s insinuation about Joan, even though she did not believe it.

If only she could see him! If only he would come! She was fond of the Black Prince in her own way, but her chief emotion was gratitude. He had done so much for her! More than anyone else had ever done.

But two days passed and there was no word from him, no sign.

“I think he ought to have answered my note,” she told Mrs. Johnson offendedly.

“But you wrote to his flat,” the elder woman protested. “It would have to be sent on to him, and all that takes time.”

The days dragged very much. Trade was not good. The weather turned very hot, and Linda drooped and pined for the country.

At night she would often dream of cool, shady woods where bluebells and primroses grew; would dream that she was walking there happily, with someone she loved beside her; would dream of the sound of a brook and the song of beautiful birds, and wake to the rumble of the traffic along Oxford Street, and the airlessness of her bedroom.

Mrs. Johnson watched her rather anxiously.

“Aren’t you well?” she asked once. “You’re getting so thin and pale, there’ll be nothing of you soon.”

“I’m quite well,” Linda answered rather snappily. “It’s only so hot.”

“A day in the country would do you good,” Mrs. Johnson said. “Mr. Lincoln will have to take you away when he comes back.”

“I don’t want to go to the country, and it doesn’t look as if he is coming back,”

Linda said, with a mirthless little laugh.

She met Archie Lang in the park that evening. Sheer longing for a breath of air had driven her out, and she was walking listlessly along when a voice beside her said:

"Hullo! A little maiden all forlorn and unattended. What luck is mine," and she looked up into Archie's face.

She had not felt very friendly towards him since that supper party at Miss Gillet's, and she greeted him coldly.

"Not pleased to see me, eh?" he asked in his cheerful fashion. "What have I done to annoy you?"

She flushed. "You haven't done anything. I was only surprised to meet you."

"Well, it's the last time you'll see me for some years," he promised. "I'm going out to India. Fed up with the starvation wages they give a chap in this country, so I'm off. Got a cousin in Rangoon, and he's found me a job." He grinned down at her. "So you might look a little more pleasant, and come and have some tea."

Linda relented. "I'm sorry you're going so far away."

He looked sceptical.

"Oh, London is finished as far as I'm concerned," he said breezily. "All my pals are gone. Sargent's moved—but I suppose you know."

Linda's heart gave a quick throb.

"I knew he was going," she said breathlessly.

"Well, he's gone," Archie told her. "We had a farewell supper at Pagani's before he went, and I'm going to look for a job for him in India when I get settled myself. He's fed up with England, too," he added, so cheerily that it was impossible to imagine he could ever be fed up with anything.

"I always thought he loved England," Linda said with an effort. "He used to say so."

Archie nodded as he guided her across the road to the tea kiosk under the trees.

"I know he did; but he's been crossed in love, though I'm dashed if I can find out who the girl is." He seemed struck by a sudden idea. "It's not you, by any chance, I suppose?" he asked, with a brilliant effort.

Linda managed to shake her head.

"What a bad guess!"

"Oh, well, I didn't mean it, of course," he said comfortably. "Especially as he's been saying such bitter things about her. Called her a little rotter and all sorts! Said he'd never been so taken in by a girl in his life. At first he thought her an innocent little darling, and all the rest of it, from all accounts; but the other night when he was

telling me about it he called her something she wouldn't thank him for if she knew! But that's like Bill; there's a lot of the brute in him. When he's up against it he says a lot more than he really means."

He dragged two chairs up to one of the little green painted tables.

"Sit down, will you? And what would you like—tea and cakes?"

"Anything. I don't mind."

Archie picked up a little menu from the table and ran his eye over it. "I'll tell her to bring the bally lot, that'll be the easiest way," he said, in boyish fashion. He strolled off to search for a waitress and Linda was left alone. She felt very cold and a little faint.

What had Bill said about her? If indeed it had been she of whom he had spoken.

Oh what had she done to make him hate her?

She felt sick with pain and misery; she felt ashamed to the depths of her soul that she had ever made her poor little overture to him that night in the rain.

Well, it was all over now; pride would help her to forget him, and there was still the Black Prince.

"I'll show Bill that I don't care. I'll show him I don't care," she told herself fiercely. Then she turned with a little forced smile as Archie came back.

He was a kindly soul in his way, and he felt sorry for Linda, though he hardly knew why.

For one thing he thought she looked ill.

"Not half the bonny thing she was when we first met," he told himself sententiously, and felt glad that he had not allowed himself to grow more attached to her, for he was very susceptible, and any fairly attractive girl could (as he would himself have expressed it) send him "tin hats" in no time at all.

For another thing, he thought she looked a "sight" in her new, too-smart clothes.

"Why on earth does she want to tog herself up like a woman twice her age?" he asked himself in perplexity. "She was ripping enough as she was. Suppose it's Lincoln, though."

He knew all about the queer partnership in the little shop, and, like the rest of the world, had drawn his own conclusions.

But, all the same, he felt a sort of affection and pity for Linda. He knew how very young she was, and he had a sister of about her own age of whom he was passionately fond, although he quarrelled with her whenever they met, and teased her mercilessly.

So he did his best now to laugh and talk nonsense, and drive the shadows from Linda's poor little face, while all the time his kindly mind was searching round for an

explanation of the change in her.

"Hope the brute's not unkind," he thought. "Ought to be thrashed if he is! Always knew he was a brute," then aloud: "Have another cake, Miss Lovelace! Those little chocolate ones are topping."

But Linda could not eat; she was only thirsty she said; it was too hot to eat.

"You want a holiday in the country," Archie said in brotherly fashion. "Why not get the Black Prince to take you?"

She flushed beneath his honest eyes.

"He's away down at Brighton," she said with an effort. "Besides, I don't suppose he wants to take me."

"So that's it!" Archie thought. "Humph! he's got fed up with her already, the pig."

"I should go down to Brighton after him, then," he said, so frankly that it was not possible to be offended, and Linda laughed.

"I don't think I should like Brighton," she told him. "I have always heard that it is like Regent Street with the sea thrown in."

He considered that remark, his head on one side.

"It's not a bad old place," he said at last. "I've had some good times there, anyway. Shouldn't mind living there if I'd got enough money to retire." His old cheery grin came again. "Not that I ever shall have enough to retire on, if I live to be a hundred," he added with a comical sigh. "I've never known what it is to possess a shilling that isn't already owed to somebody twice over."

Linda laughed.

"I shall live in the country when I marry," she said unthinkingly.

A little spark leapt into his eyes.

"Oh, are you going to be married?"

She shook her head. "Not yet, at any rate."

"I believe in marriage," Archie said with sudden profound wisdom. "It's a fine thing! Gives you a rock, as you might say! Something to cling to; a—what do you call it? A sheet anchor! You take my advice," he counselled. "If you get the chance, get married."

"I've had chances already," Linda said a trifle offended.

"I'm sure you have," he agreed quickly. "But don't jib at the next hurdle. The biggest rake often settles down and makes the best husband if he's properly handled."

He thought he was alluding tactfully to Lincoln, but Linda did not understand, and she only laughed.

"You are a funny boy."

"Well, if I amuse you I have not lived in vain," he answered.

They walked back through the park together; and he took her to the door of the little flat above the shop.

"Some swanky place!" he said admiringly, standing back and staring up at the silk curtains, and gold painted name. "You're making a fortune, I suppose?"

"Not quite, I'm afraid."

"Well, good luck, anyway," he said. "And send me a slice of wedding cake when the great event comes off."

He shook her hand warmly, and walked away thinking to himself comically, "Gee whizz! If she pulls it off she'll be the Honourable Mrs. . . . My word! Won't it make some of 'em sit up! She's keen on the blackguard, too! Any fool could see that. Dead keen."

He would have been thunderstruck if he could have known of whom Linda was thinking as she let herself into the little side door of the flat and went upstairs.

The windows were all closed, and the rooms felt hot and breathless. For the first time she realised that the very modern curtains and furnishings with which she had surrounded herself with such glee, had grown wearisome and too bright.

She opened the windows wide, and sat down in the dusk without turning on the light.

Mrs. Johnson had gone out, leaving a little note on the table to say she would not be home that night, but Linda hardly read the few pencilled lines. Mrs. Johnson was so often out, she had grown used to her absence.

She leaned back in one of the big chairs and closed her eyes. Her head ached, and she felt that she would have given twenty years of her life to find her grandmother alive and still with her.

To meet the sweetness of her eyes, and to hear the soft, comforting notes of her voice, would have been worth a king's ransom to Linda at that moment.

She was only a child after all, who had tried to play at being grown-up, and already she knew herself beaten at the game.

With a sense of impatient intolerance, she put up her hands and pulled the pins from her hair, letting it fall anyhow about her shoulders. She took off her smart frock impatiently and slipped into one of the simple little dresses which she had worn when she first went to Lorne and Dodwell's; then she went back to the big chair again and closed her eyes with a sigh of restfulness.

Oh to be able to wake and find that the last months were only a dream! to find her beloved grandmother beside her, and never to have known the many false hopes

and ambitions which, after all, seemed to have led such a very little way along the road to happiness.

The tears were wet on her cheeks when presently she fell asleep, to dream that she was down in the country once more with Bill Sargent; to dream of the kind, worshipful look in his eyes which had been driven out by something that had seemed almost like hatred; to dream of the fresh country air and the sunshine upon her tired face again, to hear Bill's earnest voice. . . .

She woke with a start to the darkness of the room, and the sound of the door-bell ringing.

She sprang up, a little shaken at being so roughly awakened from sleep. She gathered her hair up anyhow into a loose knot at the back of her head, and went out to open the door.

"Well, I thought you were all dead, or run away!" said the voice of Andrew Lincoln.

Linda had been so lonely and depressed all day that the sight of a friend almost broke her down; there was a little hysterical catch in her voice as she held out both hands to him.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you. I thought you were angry with me. I thought you were never coming to see me any more."

Lincoln shut the door behind him, and stood looking at her quivering face for a moment in silence, then he said:

"I thought you didn't want me to come again."

Linda laughed a laugh that was broken with sobbing.

"I think you're the only friend I've got left," she said.

Lincoln's handsome face flushed, and a look of triumph shot into his eyes.

He took a step forward, holding out his arms.

"Come here, you poor little girl," he said.

In Linda's state of nervous despondency, a kind word was a wonderful thing, and she went to Andrew Lincoln's outstretched arms with a sob of thankfulness.

"I thought you were angry with me. I thought you were never coming any more."

"Silly child! I was angry! but I only stayed away so that you should be pleased to see me when I came back." He tilted her head a little away from him, looking into her tear drowned eyes.

"Are you pleased?" he demanded.

She parried the question.

"I've been so lonely. I've been by myself all the week-end."

"Are you pleased to see me?" he insisted. She nodded "Yes."

He gave a little triumphant laugh, and, drawing her back into his arms again, bent and kissed her lips.

She uttered a cry of protest.

"Oh—please!" But he would not let her go. He kissed her many times with passionate lips till her face burned; he kissed her eyes and her throat, and the soft hair which had tumbled down again, and was hanging anyhow over her shoulders, making her look almost a child.

"Say 'I love you,' " he commanded rather huskily.

Linda turned her face away; her heart was racing, but she hardly knew whether she was happy or afraid.

No man had ever kissed her before, and she thought in a quick, frightened way of Bill.

"Do you love me?" the Black Prince demanded.

She met his eyes.

"Yes . . . at least . . . I like you very much."

He laughed at the faltering words.

"You cold little thing! Or is it that you are just shy? 'Like' is such a poor word. I can find you a better. Put your arms round my neck."

He gave her no time to refuse. He raised them and laid then on his shoulders, looking down into her confused face.

"Now—look at me! Nonsense, I want to see your face; don't turn it away."

She obeyed tremblingly, and he put one hand beneath her chin.

"Now—do you love me, Linda?"

The faintest smile quivered about her lips.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

He was taken aback at the question, and a shade of annoyance crossed his dark face, but after a moment he laughed.

"Love you! Of course I do! Should I be here if I did not? Of course I love you. I adore you when you look as you do now, with the tears in your eyes, and your hair all tumbling down."

"My head ached—and I do hate my new clothes so."

"Hate them?" he raised his brows in genuine astonishment. "Why, you said you loved them!" he protested.

"I know, but this evening my head ached, and I was miserable, and so. . . ."

"You wanted me," he said quickly. "Was that it?"

Hot colour flooded her cheeks, and her eyes grew wide.

Was that it? and did she want him? There was something comforting in the clasp

of his arms; something to be proud of in the fact that he loved her, and yet—she was not sure.

Her mind flew ahead to a day when they would be married—she was not sure that it would be a happy thing to be Andrew Lincoln's wife! Would there ever again be other women in his life? She remembered that he had once cared for Joan Astley, or, at least, had allowed her to think that he cared. How many more Joan Astleys had there been in the years that were gone?

She asked yet another anxious question:—

"But will you always love me? Always? Won't you get tired of me some day, perhaps?"

He shook his head; he found her very adorable in her childish anxiety. "You must be content to wait and find that out," he told her.

"But I want to know," she insisted, "because I shan't always be even as nice as I am now. I often have headaches and get cross; and when we are married——" She broke off to ask quickly: "Why, what is the matter?" for he had taken his arms from about her almost as if he was angry.

He gave a forced laugh.

"Nothing! I thought I heard Mrs. Johnson coming. Go on! What were you saying?"

Linda looked at him with apprehensive eyes.

"Mrs. Johnson is out," she said, slowly.

"Is she?" He took her hand, drawing her again into his arms. "Well, don't waste the precious time asking me foolish questions, and telling me things about yourself which I don't want to hear and don't believe. I don't believe you are ever cross! You couldn't be! I don't believe I should love you any less if you were—and I should love you more if your head ached."

With a little confiding movement she laid her head down on his shoulder.

"It aches now," she said, with a half sigh.

Lincoln turned his head and kissed her hair.

"You want a holiday. I'll take you away somewhere, shall I? Where would you like to go?"

"Mrs. Johnson said I ought to have a day in the country."

He laughed at that.

"Nonsense! You want a week, or a month! When shall we go?"

"Whenever you like."

He looked into her eyes.

"You will be pleased to go with me, Linda?" he asked slowly. "To go—alone

with me?" he said again with emphasis.

Linda nodded. "I shall love it."

Already she felt brighter and happier; she closed her eyes and tried to forget that there was another man somewhere in the world whose voice had been sweeter music to her than Andrew Lincoln's; then suddenly she looked up.

"I forgot to tell you. I had such a funny letter from—from my mother."

He raised his brows.

"Did you? Well—what did she say?"

Linda told him as well as she could.

"I should forget it," he said swiftly. "It's no use worrying over other people's peculiarities."

"That's what Mrs. Johnson said, but—all the same, I hate her to write to me like that."

"I thought you didn't care for your mother."

She shook her head.

"I suppose I don't, really, and yet . . . I wish she had not written like that."

He stroked her cheek.

"She will soon forget it."

Linda's face brightened and she smiled.

"Yes, she will be pleased when I tell her about you!" She gave his hand an affectionate little squeeze. "She probably knows that you have an aunt who is a Countess, and mother loves a title."

Andrew Lincoln looked away from her.

"What . . . what will you tell your mother about me?" he asked jerkily.

Linda answered readily enough.

"That you love me. That we are going to be married."

There was a little silence, then Lincoln bent and kissed her again, with almost passionate regret it seemed.

"Well, don't tell her yet," he said. "Don't tell anyone till I say that you may. We must have everything fixed up first."

Linda agreed readily.

"It will be much nicer to keep our engagement secret for the present," he urged fondly. "Something which only you and I know about."

He broke off sharply, turning his head, as there was a footstep outside the front door and the sound of a latchkey.

He moved away from Linda angrily.

"I thought Mrs. Johnson was not coming back to-night?" he said sharply.

Linda nodded, flushing in confusion.

"I thought so, too. She told me so."

But it was Mrs. Johnson, for at that moment the door opened and she came into the little hall.

She was rather pale and breathless, as if something had happened to upset her, and she stood for a silent moment looking at them before she closed the door behind her.

Linda began hurriedly to tidy her hair; she felt confused and shy; she was sure that Mrs. Johnson would guess now that Andrew Lincoln loved her; she waited with a fast-beating heart for him to speak.

But all he said was: "I thought you were not coming back to-night?"

Mrs. Johnson met his angry eyes coolly, almost with defiance.

"I changed my mind," she said. She passed him, and went into the little sitting-room, switching on the light as she went.

"Did you have a good time at Brighton?" she asked carelessly. "And will you stay to supper with us?"

Lincoln did not answer; he stood looking from Linda to the elder woman with a strange expression in his eyes, then he took up his hat.

"I can't stay, thanks all the same." He spoke jerkily; he took Linda's hand, and pressed it. "I shall see you to-morrow," he added, and without another word of farewell took his departure.

Linda looked puzzled; she felt piqued, too.

"Was he angry, do you think?" she asked, as she heard the slam of the outside door and his departing, hurried steps.

"Not with you, dear," Mrs. Johnson answered gently.

"With you then?" Linda urged.

Mrs. Johnson nodded, and to Linda's surprise she saw that her usually hard eyes were filled with tears.

"Oh, what is the matter?" she cried in swift concern.

Mrs. Johnson came across the room to her, and laid both hands on her shoulders.

"Don't you know?" she asked slowly.

Linda shook her head.

"What do you mean? What is there to know?"

"Tell me one thing, Linda. Do you love . . . that man?"

Linda gave a stifled cry and her face suddenly flamed.

"Why do you speak of him like that?" she asked shakily. "Why do you . . . oh,

Mrs. Johnson, what is the matter and what have I done?"

"Answer my question first, Linda. Do you love him?"

A half shake of the head, then: "Oh, I don't know!" the girl said piteously. "He's kind to me; he's kinder to me than anyone else has ever been, and yet . . . oh, I don't know!" she cried out in agitation. "He loves me . . . he has asked me to marry him."

"To marry you!" Mrs. Johnson turned her round, so that the light fell full on her face. "Has he asked you to marry him, Linda?"

"Yes. At least . . . he didn't in so many words; but he said he loved me—he said——" She broke off, a strange fear in her heart. "Oh, what do you mean?" she whispered, with pale lips.

Mrs. Johnson took her hand, and drew her down to the big couch, sitting beside her.

"Listen," she said quietly, "and try to understand if you can. Andrew Lincoln and I have known one another for . . . . more years than either of us would care to remember, I daresay! He is younger than I am, as you can see—much younger—and yet——" She turned her face away. "There was a time when I thought I loved him! When I really did love him, perhaps—and he pretended to love me. Well—he's pretended to love a great many other women since then, and before, I have no doubt. At any rate, he soon got tired of me, but . . . stupidly, I did not change. Perhaps I haven't changed now, because we've always been friends—in a queer sort of way. I've often helped him like—this before! Oh, Linda, do try and understand," she broke out passionately.

Linda sat very still, her lips parted, her eyes wide and scared.

"What do you mean . . . like this! before?" she whispered.

Mrs. Johnson kept her face averted.

"I mean that he is a man who cannot be constant to any woman. It's all for the day—for the moment, then it's finished. He took a fancy to you the first time he saw you; you were so young and untried! those were his own words! He told me about you weeks ago, and said he . . . said he wanted me to help him."

Linda echoed the words vaguely. "To—help him?"

"Yes. With this shop. It was all a scheme—a plan! Oh, my dear, do try and see him as he really is, and not as you think him! He's a bad man—unscrupulous—wicked! He has no love for you——"

Linda snatched her hand away angrily.

"How dare you say such things? He does love me—he told me so! I shall tell him what you have said——"

She rose to her feet, her breast heaving.

Mrs. Johnson laughed mirthlessly.

"Perhaps it serves me right for trying to tell you," she said at last. "I don't know why I trouble. But . . . you're so young . . . and so innocent!"

Linda stood looking at her with flashing eyes.

"You're jealous, that's what it is," she broke out in young passion. "Jealous because he wants to marry me."

Mrs. Johnson raised her mournful eyes.

"He does not want to marry you," she said quietly, but with such unmistakable meaning that Linda cried out.

"It was all arranged with me that I was to stay away to-night," the elder woman went on with an effort. "He wrote to me from Brighton I was not to come home. He had kept away because he wanted you to miss him—because he wanted you to be glad to see him when he came back. And then——"

"Yes—and then?" said Linda shrilly.

Mrs. Johnson could not answer, and for some moments there was unbroken silence in the gay little room, till Linda burst out in passionate anger:

"I don't believe you! You're a wicked woman! You're trying to set me against him. I don't believe you. He's been a good friend to me; look what he's done for me!"

"And for what reason, do you think?" came the quiet question.

Mrs. Johnson had risen to her feet; she was very pale, but there was something noble and dignified about her at that moment.

There had been many shady patches in her life, but to-night, at all events, she was sincerely trying to help this girl, and to save her from the consequences of her own wilful folly.

"Do you think a man like Andrew Lincoln would spend his time and money on you without some selfish reason?" she asked, patiently. "Do you think for one moment that he ever thought or wished to make you his wife? You told me the other day that your friends—those girls from Lorne and Dodwell's—had looked at you in a queer way when his name was mentioned! Can't you understand now what the reason was? Can't you understand now what your mother meant when she said in that letter that she never wished to see you again?"

Linda's face was infinitely pathetic in its dawning knowledge and struggling disbelief. But she was still loyal and honest enough to cling to her belief in Lincoln, and she cried out again, her voice broken with sobs and agitation.

"I don't believe you! I won't believe you! It's a vile thing to say! A vile thing! I'll

never believe it till he tells me himself, never!”

She caught up her hat from the chair, and before Mrs. Johnson could speak or attempt to stop her, she was out of the flat and down the stairs, her heart beating to suffocation, and her breath almost choking her, as she sped along the road through the darkness of the summer night.

There was only one thought, one hope in her heart.

To get to the Black Prince, to tell him what had happened, and to hear the truth from his own lips.

It was getting late when Linda reached the big block of flats where Andrew Lincoln lived. The tall commissionaire at the door looked at her with a slight smile as she passed him and rang for the lift.

She felt his eyes following her as she was whirled upwards; she felt the eyes of the lift-boy following her as with shaky steps she crossed the stone landing, and rang the bell at Lincoln's flat.

It was only then, when she waited with fast beating heart for a reply, that she began to think.

It was late! She had no idea of the time, but she knew that it must be very late.

Would he be angry with her for coming? Would he think she was mad? Almost she would have retreated, but that the door opened and Gran, Lincoln's valet, stood there.

Linda falteringly asked for Lincoln, and the man stood aside, his face inscrutable as ever.

"Yes, Mr. Lincoln was in; would she please to enter?"

Linda obeyed agitatedly, and when she heard the outer door closing behind her she turned with a start:

"Oh, please! I think I——" But it was too late; the sitting-room door had been opened and Lincoln himself stood there.

If he was surprised to see who his visitor was he concealed the fact admirably; he smiled and held out a welcoming hand.

"Come in. How sweet of you, Linda!"

Her fingers shook in his, and she looked round her with fearful eyes.

"Not frightened of me?" he asked gently. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it as he pulled forward a chair for her.

"Sit down and tell me all about it. Now, then——"

Twice Linda tried to speak before she could find her voice, then she broke out: "I came—I came—Mrs. Johnson said—oh, I came because I wanted you to tell me—I wanted to ask you——" She could not go on, she ended in a burst of pitiful weeping.

Lincoln stood looking at her silently for a moment, then he went down on his knees beside her, encircling her with his arms.

"You came because you love me—that's it, isn't it?" he asked, his lips close to

hers. "You came because you knew it spoilt our beautiful evening when Mrs. Johnson came in. You came because you wanted to be with me alone! That was it, wasn't it?"

Linda flung her head back as far as she could beyond his reach, her eyes searching his with an agonised question.

"I came to ask you if you really love me. If you . . . if you really want to . . . marry me?"

There was a tragic silence. He tried to answer, but before the honesty of her eyes his own fell ashamed, and Linda gave a choking cry of pain.

"Then . . . it *is* true, what she said! It *is* true that you . . . that I—that you . . . ." She tried to rise to her feet, but he held her fast.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

He laughed at her ineffectual struggles.

"You little fool," he said amusedly. "Why should I marry you when I can have you without? What do you think I've spent all this money on you for? Do you think I really imagined you were capable of running a shop? Do you think I'm such an idiot as that? My dear child, you're even younger and more innocent than I thought! When I marry it will be for money, and plenty of it, before I put my head in such an uncongenial noose. . . . Don't be silly, Linda! Kiss me and let's be happy. I'll treat you well, I swear I will! I'll give you a good time and lots of pretty clothes. I'll take you about. . . ."

She held her stampeding nerves in check for yet another moment as her white lips asked a question.

"And then? . . . when you're tired of me?"

That seemed to amuse him.

"So you've got a business head, after all, eh?" he asked. "You're not too innocent to try and make terms with me?"

He thought he understood her perfectly; he judged her by the standard of other women whom he had known and with whom he had amused himself. So it was to be the same old game, after all, even with this pretty child! He was conscious of disappointment; she had promised to be something fresh and interesting.

He loosened his hold of her, and in a flash she was on her feet and across the room.

Lincoln looked at her and laughed.

"You can spare yourself all that trouble," he said. "Gran won't answer or come if you call from now till the end of the world. He's a well-trained servant, I can assure you."

He advanced towards her, smiling good-humouredly.

"Now are you going to be sensible? What are you so frightened about? I'm not a brute. I'm not going to beat you."

"You *are* a brute!—a brute!—an unspeakable brute!" she panted.

She was as white as death, and her eyes were dark with fear as she stood there facing him with the courage of despair.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Call me names if you like! I don't care. You've got plenty of spirit, that's one thing, and I like a woman with spirit."

"Let me go!"

He lit a cigarette.

"I will presently. I promise you that. You came here to please yourself, so you can stay for a little while to please me."

"If you are a gentleman——"

That amused him immensely; he flung back his handsome head and laughed.

"You're changing your tactics, are you! First I'm a brute, and then, when you find that won't do, I'm a gentleman! Thank you very much. I'm much obliged, I'm sure."

She felt nearly dead with fear. She knew now what a terrible position she was in; knew that there was nobody to help her.

Her thoughts went to Bill in a wild, hopeless prayer.

She would have fallen at his feet and kissed them in humble gratitude and abasement, if only he could have come to her.

But Bill hated and despised her; he believed what everyone else believed, that she and this . . . profligate! . . . . she hid her face in her hands and shuddered.

Lincoln was lounging on the arm of a chair, calmly smoking, but his brows were frowning, and his voice was savage when presently he broke out.

"So I've Mrs. Johnson to thank for this, have I? Well, I shan't forget to thank her properly, I promise you. Turned saint all at once, eh? The beauty!" He laughed bitterly. "Trust a woman to let you down! Jealous, I suppose. Well!" he rose to his feet again, flinging the half-smoked cigarette into the empty grate.

"Come here, Linda."

She raised her tragic eyes.

"I would rather die."

He smiled cynically. "Oh, you won't do that. You haven't begun to live properly yet. Come here and be kissed! You were happy enough an hour ago with me . . . Linda."

He went towards her, but she evaded his outstretched arms and rushed across to the window.

The curtains were drawn, but as in her terror she tore them aside she saw that the window was wide open at the bottom.

She gave a wild sob of relief; she put both her hands on the sill, and, turning, faced him.

"If you come a step nearer, or touch me, I will jump out."

For the moment he was checked; he stood still, frowning heavily, then he took another step towards her.

"Don't be such a little fool! A nice scandal it would make. Linda, listen to me. I promise——" He broke off, his face paling as someone hammered heavily on the outer door of the flat.

Linda closed her eyes; there was no hope in her heart, and yet—she listened with strained attention to that repeated hammering.

Then she heard Gran's slow footstep crossing the hall, then the careful opening of the door; then a man's voice, and the sound of a quick scuffle before the sitting-room door was banged open beneath the touch of a giant hand, and Bill Sargent walked in.

Linda gave a choking cry and stumbled across the room to him, catching at his arm with shaking hands, but he swept her aside ruthlessly. He seemed to have no attention for anyone but Andrew Lincoln, and for an instant the two men faced one another without speaking, then Lincoln broke out blusteringly:

"What's the meaning of this? What the devil do you mean by coming here?" He took a stride towards the door and shouted for his man "Gran! Gran! What the devil ——"

Bill moved back till his stalwart figure almost touched the door; his face was white with rage, and his eyes were like steel points beneath his frowning brows.

"You can stop that," he said roughly. "I've told that fellow pretty plainly what to expect if he interferes. You've got to settle with me alone this time."

Lincoln dashed across the room and tugged at the bell.

"I'll fetch the police. I'll have you prosecuted."

Bill laughed without much mirth.

"Will you? I don't think you will," he said quietly. "I don't think you're particularly anxious for your murky past to be washed in the police-court; besides, by the time I've done with you you won't be a beautiful spectacle for anyone to look at. Now then—are you ready."

Linda screamed.

“Bill! Bill—don’t hurt him; what are you going to do?”

Bill flung her a glance.

“I’m going to do what a dozen other fellows ought to have done before now. I’m going to thrash him.”

He began to take off his coat as he spoke, but Linda flew to him, clinging to his arm with shaking hands.

“Don’t! don’t,” she sobbed in terror. “Let him go! Let him go!”

Bill shook her aside as if she had been a child; he was mad and blind with rage; he was naturally a strong man, but fury added to his strength.

Lincoln was at the telephone; he had got the receiver in his hand when Bill caught him round the waist and dragged him away.

“Oh, no, you don’t, you skunk! You’ll fight like an honest man, if you know how to; and if you don’t, you’ll take your punishment like the hound you are.”

Linda had fallen into the big chair, her face hidden in her hands, moaning and rocking to and fro.

During all that followed she never looked up, though she heard it all with agonising clearness; the scuffling—the blows—the curses and oaths, and then the sound of a heavy body falling, and silence.

She looked up at last, her face white with terror, her eyes wild.

Lincoln was huddled up on the floor. Tables and chairs were overthrown, and the expensive glass bowl which always stood on the writing-desk, filled with flowers, had crashed to the floor and lay in pieces.

Bill was standing over the other man’s prostrate form; his own face was bleeding and his lip was cut. His collar and shirt were torn, and he was shaking from head to foot with the storm of passion and emotion that had rent him.

Linda rose to her feet giddily.

“Bill!”

He took no notice of her, but he touched the man on the floor with a contemptuous foot.

“Get up you—cur.”

Lincoln struggled to his feet with infinite difficulty; he was a pitiable object, and Linda shuddered as she saw his face.

He fell into a chair, and sat there groaning and crying like the coward he was.

Bill picked up his coat and put it on; then for the first time he looked at Linda.

“Have you got a hat and coat?”

“Yes.”

“Put them on.”

She obeyed without a word, and Bill went to the door and flung it wide. Gran stood out there in the narrow hall; Bill flung him a word, "Go and get a taxi."

The man departed hurriedly, glad to escape, and Bill went back into the sitting-room, and for a moment looked silently at his victim. Then he said hoarsely:

"And you'll get it again if I hear of any more of your tricks."

Then he turned his back on him and stood breathing hard, his eyes fixed before him, till Gran came timidly to the door.

"The taxi, sir."

Linda had never heard him speak so respectfully before.

Bill turned.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

He led the way from the room, but she stopped behind for one moment to look at Lincoln.

The Black Prince they had called him! He looked anything but princely now. And she had thought so much of him, had been so proud of the thing she had called his friendship.

She whispered a question to Gran as he held the door open for her to pass out.

"Oh, is he very much hurt, do you think?" for the memory of that struggle and the sound of Bill's blows were still with her.

Gran flung his master a contemptuous glance.

"No need to worry, miss," he said. "It's what he ought to have had long enough ago."

Linda gave a little stifled cry; it seemed horrible to her—horrible that everyone but herself had known Lincoln for what he really was.

She followed Bill down the stone stairs to the street, her limbs shaking, and he stalked on in front, without looking to the right or the left, and opened the door of the waiting taxi for her.

"Get in!"

His voice was blunt, almost rude, but she did not care.

She was so glad to be with him, no matter what the circumstances; she realised now that Bill's bluntness was worth a thousand times more than the other man's gallantry and finished attention.

Bill got in beside her, and the cab started away.

Linda leaned back and closed her eyes. There were a thousand questions she wanted to ask. Why he had come. How he knew where to find her. And whether—oh! whether he would ever forgive her. But she was afraid.

They had gone half-way back to the little shop before she could summon enough courage to speak.

"Bill?"

No answer, and she moved her hand timidly till it touched his; a clenched hand it was, that jerked away from her instantly.

"Oh, I'm sorry! sorry!" she said passionately. "I've been silly . . . and vain. I thought I knew best, but . . . there isn't any reason why you should hate me so," she added in a whisper.

No answer, till suddenly Bill leaned forward, his face hidden against those clenched hands, and she heard the ugly sound of a man sobbing.

She longed to put her arm round him and try to comfort him, but she was afraid; and she sat crouched away in her corner, the tears raining down her face, and her heart breaking with remorse and grief for all that she had made him suffer.

Then the taxi-cab stopped outside the little shop, and Bill opened the door for her to get out.

She passed him without a word, her head down-bent, her eyes blinded with tears, but she knew that he waited till she was safely indoors again; then she heard the cab drive away.

Mrs. Johnson met her at the door of the flat. She had been crying, and her face was flushed and swollen.

She took Linda's hand, and drew her into the room before she asked an agitated question.

"Mr. Sargent?"

Linda's dazed eyes widened.

"Did you send him?"

Mrs. Johnson nodded.

"He came—just after you had gone out. It seemed so strange—almost as if he guessed! I told him what I knew, and he followed you."

She broke down into quiet sobbing. "Oh, Linda, if a man had ever loved me as that man loves you, I shouldn't be the lonely woman I am to-day."

Mrs. Johnson and Linda went away together quite early the following morning, before anyone was about, and the little shop with the gay silk curtains in the turning off Maddox Street remained closed.

Mrs. Johnson knew of rooms to which they could go; clean, quiet little rooms behind Kensington High Street, which were kept by a friend of hers, and she and Linda installed themselves there.

In the past twenty-four hours a great friendship seemed to have been established between them. Looking at Mrs. Johnson, Linda could hardly believe her to be the same calculating, worldly woman whom she had first known. There was a softened, almost motherly look about her, and she had kissed Linda with real affection when the girl haltingly tried to thank her for what she had done.

"What will you do now?" Linda asked, timidly. "What will become of you?"

Mrs. Johnson laughed. "Oh, I've been on the rocks before, lots of times," she said, almost cheerfully. "I shall pull through. I haven't any money, but something will turn up; it always does."

"I've got a little of my own—about a hundred a year, I think," Linda told her. "We can manage on that for a time, can't we?"

"It will keep us out of the workhouse, anyway," Mrs. Johnson said. "And you, Linda? What are you going to do now?"

Linda smiled with tremulous lips.

"I must work. I daresay I can get into a shop somewhere. Oh, if only I had never left Lorne's," she broke out in passionate remorse.

Mrs. Johnson shook her head.

"Be a sensible child and marry Mr. Sargent," she said.

Linda flushed, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Do you think he will ever ask me again?" she whispered.

"Do I think the sun will rise to-morrow morning!" Mrs. Johnson scoffed.

"He wouldn't speak to me last night," Linda said. "He looked at me as if he hated me."

"That shows he loves you, then," Mrs. Johnson said bluntly. "If he did not he would have been quite polite—beautifully indifferent, in fact."

"I'm afraid I don't understand men," Linda said wearily.

"You don't need to, if you understand one!" Mrs. Johnson said wisely.

“Goodness me, how old are you?”

“Seventeen—at least, I’ll be eighteen next month.”

She felt years and years older; her head ached with trying to think and sort out the complex emotions of the past weeks.

She had been so vain and egotistical; she had thought she knew so much; she had been dazzled by things that really mattered nothing, and had shut her eyes to the great happiness of life. “Mine be a cot beside the hill——”

She cried herself to sleep that night with Bill Sargent’s name upon her lips.

He would never forgive her! she would never see him again! she was not good enough for him; not worthy of his love.

In the morning she put her pride in her pocket and went to meet Miss Gillet on the road to Lorne and Dodwell’s.

“Do you think Mr. Robert would take me back?”

Miss Gillet stared, her cold, fish-like eyes scrutinising the girl stonily, then at sight of the tearstains and distress she saw written there she softened.

“Had enough of independence?” she asked.

Linda hung her head.

“Oh, I’ve been such a fool!” she whispered.

Miss Gillet considered a minute.

“You wouldn’t have a very pleasant time,” she said at last. “The girls will tease you, and perhaps be unkind.”

“I don’t care. I shouldn’t mind that.”

“Mind you, I don’t say that Mr. Robert would take you.”

“I could ask him.”

Miss Gillet held out her hand.

“Well, you’re a plucky little thing,” she said, warmly. “I’ll back you up if you really mean it.”

Tears welled into Linda’s eyes.

“Oh, Miss Gillet, you are a dear!”

Miss Gillet flushed in confusion.

“Don’t be sentimental,” she said bluntly, but her voice was kind, and she added, “You’d better come along now, if you really mean what you say. Mr. Robert will be alone I know; the old gentleman is away.”

So Linda walked down the long passage once again to the door with its frosted glass and two names painted one above the other:—

"Mr. Samuel Lorne."
"Mr. Robert Lorne."

And she was conscious of the old thrill of nervous dread as she tapped with timid fingers.

"Come in."

Mr. Robert was there alone, bending over his papers, but his eyes were kind as he looked up and met Linda's scared gaze.

"Good morning," he said. He rose to his feet, and brought forward a chair for her.

"Won't you sit down?"

It was just as if the past four months were wiped out or had never been, Linda thought giddily as she obeyed; it almost seemed as if when she walked out of this room again it must be to run home to her grandmother and tell her all that had happened.

She sat silent for so long that at last Robert Lorne urged again gently. "Well, what can I do for you? Don't be afraid."

She told him then impetuously, not sparing herself, but simply and straightforwardly confessing her foolishness and disillusionment.

He listened with kind attention, suppressing a smile now and then at her naïveness, and then when she had finished he asked:—

"And how can I help you in all this, Miss Lovelace?"

"Take me back here," said Linda.

"Take you back!" He raised his shaggy brows; somehow he had not expected this. "Are you serious? Are you sure that you really want to come? After your independence——"

Linda's eyes filled with tears.

"Please take me back," she begged.

Robert Lorne sat silently considering for some time; then he asked, "And Miss Gillet?"

"She would like me to come," Linda told him eagerly.

He held out his hand; there was something very young and appealing in Linda.

"Very well. Come back," he said.

Linda left the office hardly knowing if she was not in a dream. She had not expected such kindness; her sore heart felt comforted, and her courage was returning.

She could wipe out the past if she would; she could start again. She met Nelly

Sweet as she left the big building, and after the barest hesitation Nelly stopped.

"Hullo!" she said a shade uncomfortably.

"I'm coming back to Lorne's," Linda said, taking the plunge desperately.

Nelly stared.

"Good Lord!" She asked no questions, perhaps she guessed what there was to know. "Well, I'm leaving," she announced with pride. "I'm going to be married! No, not to Bill," she added casually as she saw a change in Linda's face. "You can have him if you like. I've got a new boy. He's got his own business and a car."

"I hope you'll be very happy," Linda said.

She went back to Mrs. Johnson feeling as if years of unhappiness and woe had been lifted from her shoulders; she ran upstairs with quick steps, eager to tell her great news; she broke open the door excitedly. "I'm going back to Lorne's. Mr. Robert says . . ." then she stopped with a little gasp, for it was not Mrs. Johnson who rose to meet her, but Bill Sargent.

Linda's first thought was to run away; she looked back at the door which she had impetuously banged behind her, and then desperately round the room as if seeking other means of escape, but there was none, and she broke out in nervous agitation.

"I thought you'd left London. I thought you were never coming back to London any more."

It was the last thing she meant to say, and she realised how ungracious the words must sound as soon as she had spoken them.

"They gave me a week's holiday to get settled into my new quarters," Bill explained. He spoke jerkily. "That's why I happened to be up last night." His tone of voice added, "Thank God," and then there was a little silence before he added, "I've only looked in to see if you are all right and to say good-bye."

Linda tried to answer, but her voice seemed to have gone.

To say good-bye! she lifted her eyes to his agitated face.

"I'm not . . . not ever going to see you again then?"

"Well, it's not very likely." He avoided looking at her. "I shan't often come to Town. I've had enough of it, and I don't suppose you're likely to visit my part of the world; you're not fond enough of the country."

She crept a little closer to him.

"You . . . you mean that you don't *wish* to see me again?"

He half shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know that it's much use," he protested.

Linda put out a trembling hand and touched his arm. She felt as if the end of the

world had come now that Bill seemed no longer to want her; somehow at the back of her mind there had always been the conviction that whatever happened, he would forgive her in the end.

She broke out into faltering pleading.

"Bill! I didn't know what he was. I didn't understand. I know what you think—I suppose you had a perfect right to think it, but I swear to you that nothing has ever happened in my life that I should be ashamed to tell you about."

The flush deepened in his face, and his eyes looked infinitely distressed, though the hard lines of his mouth were unyielding.

This girl had made him suffer very deeply, but since his breakdown last night his heart seemed to have turned against her, and to realise the futility of his love.

And yet he had been unable to keep away from her this morning; the desire to see for himself that she was safe and well had driven him to come to the address which Mrs. Johnson had given him.

There was a little silence, then he said constrainedly: "There is no need for you to explain anything, or—or to try and put yourself right in my eyes. I'm glad if I was of use to you last night. I'm glad I had the chance to thrash that scoundrel——" He laughed bitterly. "He didn't look much of a hero when I'd done with him, did he?"

Linda shuddered; she wondered if she would ever forget her last sight of the Black Prince.

Bill shifted uneasily; this interview was getting badly on his nerves, and he was beginning to regret that he had come.

"What . . . what are you going to do with yourself now?" he asked presently with an effort.

She told him readily enough.

"I'm going back to Lorne's. I went to see Mr. Robert Lorne this morning, and he was very kind to me."

"He's a very decent chap," Bill said.

"So I shall go back," Linda said again. "And I shall live here with Mrs. Johnson. She says that I may. She has been very kind to me, Bill."

"Yes," said Bill.

And the silence fell again, which he broke by taking up his hat. "Well, I'll be going; there's nothing else I can do for you?"

Linda took her courage in both desperate hands.

"Yes, you can forgive me."

"Forgive you?"

"Yes." She was scarlet now, and there were tears in her eyes. "I've been a little

fool, I know, but I'm sorry! I can't tell you how sorry! I should like to go on my knees to you and——"

"Linda, for Heaven's sake!"

"So I should," she declared, passionately. "I don't wonder you despise me ——"

"I don't despise you."

Tears welled over and fell down her cheeks, and she brushed them away before she said in a whisper:—

"But you don't—love me any more, do you?"

"Love you!" His voice was unsympathetic as he repeated her faltering words. "What's the use of loving you? I'm not the sort of man you want. I'm not rich enough, or smart enough——"

"Bill!" She caught at his hand. "Don't say such things; it hurts me. Please don't say such things."

He looked at her, and quickly away as he saw the tears on her face. He had lost faith in himself badly during the last weeks; he had lost confidence in his power to make her or any other woman happy.

"I'm sorry," he said stiffly. "I don't want to hurt you. Let me go now—I'll say good-bye."

She stood back, struck to the soul. So this was the end. The Bill she had known, who had sworn to love her all his life, had gone, and in his place was this hard-faced, relentless man who would not forgive her.

She let him go as far as the door before her pride melted, and with a little choking cry she ran after him.

"Bill, dear Bill!"

He turned, but did not speak, and Linda realised in despair that if peace was ever made between them again it would be she who must do it, that he would not even come half-way to meet her.

Tears were streaming down her face now, but she met his gaze steadily.

"Please forgive me—please love me again."

Bill took a step back towards her.

"Love you! For how long?" he asked sternly. "Until the next man comes along who will flatter you more than I do—and give you a better time. Till the next plausible scoundrel with a motor-car and a title looks at you as that . . . that——"

"Bill!" The rage in his voice frightened her, and he turned away, breathing hard.

"I beg your pardon. Let me go, please."

She slipped between him and the door; she felt as if she was fighting for her life

—for her safety!

Bill's love was such a sure, strong thing; it would be like an impregnable fortress between her and the world; something which temptation could not break down.

"And if I ask you to stay?" she said faintly. "If I—if I say that I love you—that I can't be happy without you?"

For an instant she thought she had won; a flicker of light crossed his face, and he half turned to her, then he drew back again. "I'm sorry," he said with stiff lips. "It's kind and—and generous of you, but—but—it wouldn't do. I'm not the man for you, you've shown me that. You wouldn't be happy with me. Far better say good-bye now and part good friends."

Linda felt as if she had been struck to the heart, the colour drained away from her face, and she closed her eyes with a sick feeling of defeat; then, with a tremendous effort, she clutched at her courage again.

"You're saying this because you are angry with me. Oh, Bill, don't make us both miserable for the rest of our lives just because I've been foolish. You said you would always love me—you said you would never change."

"Apparently I was wrong. Nobody knows what they will do until the time comes. You changed! You're not the girl you were when I first knew you. You've grown more worldly—the simple pleasures I could give you would not be enough now. If I—if I loved you ever so well I should be afraid of the risk."

When she moved forward and laid a hand on his arm he shook it gently away.

"You're tired and overstrung. You'll see things differently to-morrow, and in the end you'll thank me for having gone away and not having taken you at your word. You've got all your life before you——"

She broke in passionately.

"I haven't anything, without you! Bill, it's unkind of you to make me say it all, but I do love you—I do——"

He looked at her with sad eyes; she was such a child!

How had he ever expected her to know her own mind; he had spoken no less than the truth when he said that he was afraid to take the risk.

She saw the hesitation in his face, and, suddenly brave, she went to him and put her arms round his neck.

"Don't go away, dear," she sobbed. "I'll do anything, anything—oh! can't you see that I mean it? that I'm sorry—sorry——"

Bill stood immovable, though his face was white.

Her tears hurt him, and the touch of her arms about his neck was like a mighty force breaking down his defences, but he would not give in.

It was with great difficulty that he at last found his voice.

"I'll come back in a year—six months!—and if you still want me——"

"You will never come back if you go now; you'll forget me."

"Forget you," he laughed queerly. "Shall I? I don't think so."

"Then if you still care for me, why won't you stay? I'll marry you—I'll marry you as soon as you like."

He lifted his hands and unclasped hers from his neck with gentle force.

"For your own sake, no!" he said hoarsely. "I love you—I do love you. I can think of no greater happiness than to make you my wife, but it's not right or fair; it's taking advantage of you because of—of last night. Linda, don't cry like that! I can't bear it. Let me go, and I'll come back . . . I'll come back, and then if you want me ——"

She was sobbing broken-heartedly.

"I shall never see you again. I know I never shall."

Bill stood irresolute; his every impulse was to take her into his arms, but he was afraid—afraid of the future, afraid of her youth, and he knew that if he lost her again it would break his heart.

He went to her; he took her face between his hands and, bending his head, kissed her once, very gently, and then before she could speak or stop him, he had gone.

Mrs. Johnson, coming in an hour later, found Linda still sobbing.

"Why, whatever is the matter?" she asked in alarm. She had known all about Bill Sargent's visit, and had hoped great things.

Linda told her as well as she could.

"I asked him to stay. I said I would marry him, but he didn't believe that I meant it; he said he was afraid that I should get tired of him—he said I was so young! as if I'm not old enough to know my own mind," she finished indignantly.

Mrs. Johnson smiled, a faintly sympathetic smile; she could remember the hot impulses of her own youth and understand.

"I think Mr. Sargent must love you very dearly," she said at last. "Come, stop crying, and be a sensible girl. He'll come back; he only wants you to be sure of yourself; he wants to teach you a lesson."

Linda cried out indignantly.

"How dare he! Anyone would think I am not old enough to take care of myself. I will not be dictated to by him!"

Mrs. Johnson looked resigned.

"In that case I should say that Mr. Sargent has done the right thing by going

away," she said.

Linda fell to crying again.

"I didn't mean it. I'll do anything, anything, if only he'll come back."

"He will; you need not be afraid," Mrs. Johnson said gently.

But during the next few weeks, at all events, it looked very much as if Bill had departed for good.

There was no letter from him, no sign of him, and Linda began to look pale and listless.

She seemed to have no interest in anything but her work; she was Miss Gillet's devoted slave at Lorne and Dodwell's till even that martinet remonstrated with her.

"You'll kill yourself if you go on like this, Miss Lovelace," she said one day. "Why don't you go out into the country or to a theatre sometimes? All work and no play is bad, you know."

But Linda did not care; she was only in the smallest degree happy when she was working; she dreaded going home even to Mrs. Johnson's kindliness; it gave her too much time to think and to realise how foolish she had been and what she had lost.

Then one day she saw the announcement of Andrew Lincoln's engagement in the paper, to a widow.

Mrs. Johnson apparently knew all about it.

"They've been friends for a long time," she told Linda. "She is at least double his age, and very rich. I always thought that he intended to marry her if she would have him."

"I'm sorry for her, whoever she is," Linda said passionately.

"I should think she is probably quite capable of looking after herself," Mrs. Johnson answered.

It was the following afternoon that Miss Gillet came to Linda in great excitement.

"Mrs. Ervine is in the store," she said.

"Mrs. Ervine!" Linda echoed the name unrecognisingly, then she flushed. "Oh!" she said softly.

Mrs. Ervine was the widow who was to marry Andrew Lincoln.

"She's coming across now," Miss Gillet said in a whisper.

Linda's heart beat fast as she looked at the woman who was approaching. She was small and overdressed, with hair that was too yellow, and cheeks too pink. She looked haggard, too, as if she found life exhausting, and she carried a little Pekinese under her arm, with a huge pink bow round its neck.

Linda left Miss Gillet to attend to her; she kept at the far end of the counter till she had gone.

“They’re to be married in a month,” Miss Gillet informed her later. “And all I can say is that it serves them both right.”

Linda made no comment. She only wished to forget them both as soon as possible.

She caught cold going home that night. She had on a thin frock, and it came on to rain steadily, soaking her to the skin before she had time to get shelter.

She was shivery and her head ached at business the following day, and when she got home at night she had a temperature, and was promptly put to bed by Mrs. Johnson, in spite of her protests.

“Do you want to get pneumonia and die?” Mrs. Johnson demanded vigorously.

Linda said she didn’t care.

“You’ll have to stay in bed,” the elder woman went on. “I’ll make it right with Lorne’s. Now, is there anything you’d like?”

“No, thank you.” Linda turned her face away. There was only one thing she wanted in the world—to see Bill! And Bill, she knew, would not come.

Linda's chill developed with alarming rapidity, and before another day was over the pneumonia with which Mrs. Johnson had threatened her had set in in earnest, and she was very ill indeed.

The doctor came twice during the first day, and again at night; he looked grave, and talked of alarming symptoms and a weak constitution.

"But she has always seemed so strong," Mrs. Johnson protested in anxiety.

The doctor shook his head.

"Are you any relation to her?" he asked.

"No—we are only friends."

"Has she a mother—father? Anyone of her own?"

"She has a mother, but they never see one another. I am sure it would be bad for Linda to send for her."

"Humph! Well, if there is anyone else——" he said vaguely.

He took his departure, leaving Mrs. Johnson greatly agitated.

In her own way she was very fond of Linda, and the thought that perhaps she might die was terrible to her.

It was on the second day, when Linda was lying with closed eyes and difficult breath, that Mrs. Johnson thought of Bill Sargent.

Linda had not mentioned his name, but, taking matters into her own hands, Mrs. Johnson sent him a telegram.

"If he comes, well and good," was her philosophy. "If he does not, well, she is no worse off, poor child."

But Bill came. He caught the first train from the country after banking hours, and was at Mrs. Johnson's door as quickly as train and taxi-cab could bring him.

Mrs. Johnson gave one glance at his agitated face and smiled, well pleased.

"So you've come," she said.

"Come! of course I have! How is she? Can I see her? What is the matter?"

"She caught cold; it's turned to pneumonia. She's very ill."

"Not——" He could not say the word that had been hammering at his heart ever since he read the telegram.

Mrs. Johnson shook her head.

"No, but she's very ill, and the doctor thought——"

Bill cut her short unceremoniously.

“Can I see her now?”

“Yes.”

He went into the room, and down on his knees beside the bed.

“Linda!”

She had been lying with closed eyes, but she opened them at once when she heard his voice, and tears came into them slowly, falling down her pale cheeks.

“You poor little child!” said Bill huskily.

He slipped an arm beneath her head, drawing her to him, and laid his cheek to hers.

“I’ve come back, you see,” he said. “I’ve come back and I’m not going away again—not even if you send me!” he added, trying to laugh. “And you’ll get well, and we’ll be married, and——”

“You do love me, then?” she whispered.

“I adore you,” said Bill.

So Linda began to get well.

“It would have been a disgrace if you had not,” Mrs. Johnson told her when she was first allowed out of bed. “What with me waiting on you hand and foot, and Mr. Sargent racing up from the country every evening to see you! No queen ever had more fuss made about her.”

“Isn’t it time he was here?” Linda asked anxiously, for it was Saturday and Bill’s half-day.

But even as she spoke the bell rang, and a moment later Bill was in the room, and Mrs. Johnson had discreetly vanished.

Linda looked at him with shining eyes as he came across the room and, bending, kissed her.

“I’m up, you see,” she said eagerly. “Do you think I look better?”

“So much better that I shall have to go and get that marriage license,” he declared. He drew up a chair and sat down beside her. “Well, aren’t you ashamed of yourself for the scare you’ve given me?” he asked, for there had been anxious days when Linda’s life had hung in the balance.

She leaned her head against his shoulder with a little sigh of contentment.

“I’m glad I was ill; you wouldn’t have come back if I hadn’t been ill.”

“That’s all you know,” he said severely. “Every day after I left you here I was on the point of giving in and coming back. I came up to Town a dozen times at least, and then——”

“Oh, Bill, how unkind!”

He kissed her with passionate remorse.

“This has been worth the waiting! You are so young.”

“I’m not too young to know that I love you better than anyone in the world.”

“And always will?” he urged jealously.

“Always! Always!”

He looked at her for a long moment with happy eyes, then bent and kissed her lips.

“I shall never be a rich man, Linda.”

“What does it matter?”

“You’ll never be a great lady with me.”

She shivered as she thought of her foolish dreams.

“I’m glad!” she said fervently, and then, with childish eagerness that made him laugh, she asked, “And we can get married soon, can’t we?”

“Are you so impatient to change your name for mine?” he teased her.

She snuggled her head on to his shoulder.

“I should feel so—safe!” she whispered.

“I shall bully you dreadfully,” he warned her.

She sighed; then smiled.

“And I shall love being bullied by you.”

“So it’s to be good-bye to the ribbons and laces,” Mrs. Johnson said when she was told that they were to be married as soon as Linda was strong enough.

Linda looked at Bill and smiled.

She had no regrets; she had lost her ambition to make a great name and a lot of money; she had no ambition now except to be with Bill for the rest of her life.

“I wonder if Grannie knows how happy I am,” Linda said dreamily, the night before her wedding.

“I daresay she does,” Mrs. Johnson said, with unwonted gentleness. “I’m not a religious woman—far from it!—but I do believe that people who love us, and who have died, know what we are doing down here.”

She and Miss Gillet were the only two guests when Linda was married, and afterwards she and her husband went straight away to Devonshire.

As the train started, Linda let the window down with a little run, and, leaning out, sniffed at the air.

“Bill, I can smell the country already.”

“Nonsense!” Bill laughed. “Why, we’re miles away from it.”

He put an arm round her, and drew her back to him.

“And to think it used to be my idea of happiness,” she said, in a puzzled voice.

“What did?” he asked.

“Ribbons and laces!” she made a little grimace. “I thought that the world and life began and ended with money and pretty clothes and things like that. It was my idea of having a good time and of being perfectly happy.”

“And what is it now, my little wife?” Bill asked in faint anxiety.

Linda flushed like a wild rose, and her lips trembled as she answered him in the words of the poem which once he had spoken to her:

“Mine be a cot beside the hill.
A beehive’s hum shall soothe my ear,
A willowy brook that turns a mill
With many a fall shall linger near.”

“I loved you from the day you said that to me,” she told him. “I used to hate to think that perhaps I might never be the Lucy to sing in your little house, Bill.”

“There would never have been anyone, if not you,” he said.

And they kissed as the train carried them on through the sunshine.

THE END

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Ribbons and Laces* by Ruby Mildred Ayres]