WEDLOCK

Two bricklayers are building a yellow brick wall to the rear of one of a terrace of new jerry-built houses in a genteel suburb. At their back is the remains of a grand old garden. Only the

unexpired lease saves it from the clutch of the speculator. An apple-tree is in full blossom, and a fine elm is lying on the grass, sawn down, as it stood on the boundary of a 'desirable lot'; many fair shrubs crop up in unexpected places, a daphne-mezereum struggles to redden its berries amid a heap of refuse thrown out by the caretakers; a granite urn, portions of a deftly carven shield, a mailed hand and a knight's casque, relics of some fine old house demolished to accommodate the ever-increasing number of the genteel, lie in the trampled grass. The road in front is scarcely begun, and the smart butchers' carts sink into the soft mud and red brick-dust, broken glass, and shavings; yet many of the houses are occupied, and the unconquerable London soot has already made some of the cheap 'art' curtains look dingy. A brass plate of the 'Prudential Assurance Company' adorns the gate of Myrtle House; 'Collegiate School for Young Ladies' that of Evergreen Villa. Victoria, Albert, and Alexandra figure in ornamental letters over the stained-glass latticed square of three pretentious houses, facing Gladstone, Cleopatra, and Lobelia. The people move into 26 to the ring of carpenters' hammers in 27, and 'go carts,' perambulators, and half-bred fox terriers impede the movements of the men taking in the kitchen boiler to 28.

One of the men, a short, wiry-looking man of fifty, with grizzled sandy hair and a four days growth of foxy beard on his sharp chin, is whistling 'Barbara Allen' softly as he pats down a brick and scrapes the mortar neatly off the joinings. The other, tall and swarthy, a big man with a loose mouth and handsome wicked eyes and a musical voice, is looking down the laneway leading to a side street.

' 'Ere she comes, the lydy wot owns this 'ere desirable abode. I want 'er to lend me a jug. Wo-o-a hup, missis! Blind me tight if she ain't as boozed as they makes 'em! Look at 'er, Seltzer; ain't she a beauty, ain't she a sample of a decent bloke's wife! She's a fair sickener, she is. Hy, 'old 'ard! She dunno where she are!' with a grin.

But the woman, reeling and stumbling up the lane, neither hears nor sees; she is beyond that. She feels her way to the backyard door of the next house, and, rocking on her feet, tries to

find the pocket of her gown. She is much under thirty, with a finely-developed figure. Her gown is torn from the gathers at the back and trails down, showing her striped petticoat; her jacket is of good material, trimmed with silk, but is dusty and lime-marked. Her face is flushed and dirty; and her light golden-brown fringe stands out straight over her white forehead; her bonnet is awry on the back of her head; her watch dangles from the end of a heavy gold chain, and the buttons of her jersey bodice gape open where the guard is passed through; she has a basket on her left arm. She clutches the wall and fumbles stupidly for the key, mumbling unintelligibly, and trying with all her might to keep her eyes open. The tall man watches her with ill-concealed disgust, and tosses a pretty coarse jest to her. The sandy man lays down his trowel and wipes his hands on his apron, and goes to her.

'Lookin' for yer key, missis? Let me 'elp yer; two 'eads is better nor one enny day!'

'Ca'an fin' it. M'm a bad wom—a bad wom—um,' she says, shaking her head solemnly at him, with heavy lids and distended pupils.

Meanwhile he has searched her pocket and opened the basket—nothing in it except a Family Novelette and a few gooseberries in a paper bag. He shakes his head, saying to himself: 'Dropped her marketing. It aint here, missis; sure you took it with ye?'

She nods stupidly and solemnly three times.

'Got the larchkey o' the fron' door?' queries the other.

She frowns, tries to pull up her skirt to get at her petticoat pocket, and lurches over.

'Old 'ard, missis, 'old 'ard. Throw them long legs o' yourn acrost the wall, maite, an' see if ye carn't let 'er in!' says the little man, catching her deftly. The other agrees, and the key grates in the lock inside and he opens the door.

'She took the key an' lorst it, that's wot she did. She's a nice ole cup o' tea; she's a 'ot member for a mile, she iz, an' no mistaike!' and he takes up his trowel and a brick, singing with a sweet tenor.

The little man helps her into the house through the hall into

the parlour. He unties her bonnet-strings, pulls off her jacket, and puts her into an arm-chair.

'Ye jist 'ave a sleep, an' ye'll be all right!'

She clutches at his hand in a foolish sort of way, and her eyes fill with tears.

' 'Ands orf, missis, 'ands orf, ye jist go to sleep!'

He halts in the kitchen and looks about him. It is very well furnished; the table is littered with unwashed breakfast things on trays—handsome china, plate, and table-napkins, all in confusion. He shakes his head, puts some coal in the range, closes the door carefully, and goes back to his work.

'Well, did ye put beauty to bed?' laughs the big man. 'I'd rather Jones owned 'er nor me. 'E picked a nice mother fur iz kids, 'e did! Yes, them three little nippers wot come out a wile ago is iz.'

' 'E must be pretty tidy orf,' says the little man; 'it looks very nice in there, an' seemin'ly the 'ole 'ouse is fitted up alike—pianner an' chiffoneers.'

'Oh, Jones is all right. 'E's a cute chap iz Jones. 'E's got a 'ell of a temper, that's all. 'E's bin barman at the Buckin'am for close twenty year; makes a book an' keeps iz eyes peeled. Bless ye, I know Jones since I woz a lad; iz first wife woz a sort o' cousin o' my missis—clever woman too. 'E took this 'un 'cos 'e thort e'd maike a bit out o' gentlemen lorgers, she bein' a prize cook an' 'e 'avin' the 'ouse out of a buildin' society, an' be a mother to the kids as well. She'll keep no lorgers she won't, an' she's a fair beauty for the kids. If she woz mine'—tapping a brick—I'd bash 'er 'ed in!'

'Maybe ye wouldn't!' says the little man; 'thet iz if ye understood. Wot if it ain't 'er fault?'

'Ain't 'er fault! Ooze iz it then?'

'That I ain't prepared to say, not knowin' circumstances; but it might be as it runs in 'er family.'

'Well, I'm blowed, I often 'eerd' (with a grin, showing all his white teeth) 'o' wooden legs runnin' that way, but I never 'eerd tell o' gin!'

'Ye ain't a readin' man, I take it,' says the little man, with a touch of superiority, 'I thought that way onst meself. My ole

woman drinks.' (He says it as if stating a casual fact that calls for no comment.) 'It woz then I came acrorst a book on " 'ereditty," wot comes down from parents to children, ye know, an' I set to findin' all about 'er family. I took a 'eap o' trouble about it, I did, I wanted to do fair by 'er. An' then sez I to meself: "Sam, she carn't 'elp it no more nor the colour of 'er 'air, an' that woz like a pine shavin' in sunshine. 'Er gran'father 'e drunk 'isself dead, an' then iz wife she reared my girl's mother for service—she woz cook at an 'otel in Aylesbury. Well, she married the boots; they 'ad a tidy bit saved, an' they took a country public with land an' orchard an' such like an' they did well for a long time. Then 'e took to liquor. I never could find out iz family 'istory; maybe as 'ow 'e couldn't 'elp it neither. 'E woz a Weller, an' she jined 'im arter a bit, which considerin' 'er father woz to be expected. My ole woman often told me 'ow she an' 'er brother used to 'ide out many a night in the orchard. Well they bust up an' 'e got notice to quit, an' wot does 'e do but goes an' 'angs 'isself to a willer next the well, an' she goes out to git a pail o' water an' finds 'im. That set 'er orf wuss nor ever, an' then she went orf sudden like with a parrylittic stroke. Some laidies took the children an' put 'em to school.' (He works steadily as he speaks.) 'Well, one bank 'olliday twenty-eight year come Whitsun' same date izzackly, I went down with a mate o' mine to an uncle of 'iz in Aylesbury; 'e 'ad a duck farm, an' I seed 'er. She woz as pretty as paint, an' there woz as much difference atween 'er an' city girls as new milk an' chalk an' water. I woz doin' well, times woz better; I 'ave three trades, when one iz slack I works at another. I got work down there an' we kep' company, an' got our 'ome together, an' woz married, an' woz az 'appy az might be for six year. Then our eldest little lad 'e set 'isself afire one day she woz out, an' they took 'im to the infirmary, but 'e died in a 'our, a' wen we went to fetch 'im 'ome 'e woz rolled in wite bandages most like one o' them mummies in the British Museum. It went to my girl's 'eart like, for she couldn't seem to recognise 'im nohow. An' 'twoz arter that I begin to notice she took a drop. At fust I woz real mad, I gave 'er a black eye onst; but then I came acrorst that book—I woz allus a man for readin'—an' I found out about 'er folk,

an' I see az 'ow she couldn't 'elp it. It got worser an' worser an' arter two years we come up to town; I couldn't stand the shame of it. Then I went down to my ole mother; she woz livin' with a widowed sister in Kent, an' I up an' told 'er: I sez, "Mother, ye got to take the kids. I ain't goin' to 'ave no more with the curse on 'em, an I ain't goin' to 'ave 'em spoiled," an' I took 'em down an' sent 'er money regular, bad times same az good. She went on dreadful at first; I gave 'er a fair chance, I took 'er down to see 'em, and sez I: "Knock off the drink, ole girl, an' ye 'az 'em back!" She tried it; I really believe she did, but bless ye she couldn't, it woz in 'er blood same az the colourin' of 'er skin. I gave up 'ome then, wen she gets right mad she'd pawn everything in the show; I allus put my own things in a Monday morning an' takes 'em out a Saturday night, it keeps 'em safe. The landlady looks arter 'er own, an' so she ain't got much to dispose on. I carn't abide liquor meself, though I don't 'old with preachin' about it; an' that's wy they call me Seltzer Sam, and wy I gets my dinner in a cookshop.'

The little man is laying his bricks carefully one on top of the other.

'You spoke sort o' sharp to your missis today, coz she woz a bit laite, an' I thort as 'ow ye woz uncommon lucky to 'ave 'er come nice and tidy with it—it's been twenty years since I woz brought me dinner in a basin.'

There's a silence. The big man looks thoughtful, then he says suddenly:

'Well I couldn't do it, I couldn't do it, that's all I sez. Wy don't ye put 'er away someweres?'

'I did, but lor, it woz no matter o' good. I allus fancied she'd set 'erself o' fire or fall in the street or somethink an' get took to the station on a stretcher with the boys a' callin' "meat" arter 'er, an' I couldn't sleep for thinkin' of it, so I fetched 'er back. We woz very 'appy for six year, an' thet's more nor some folk az in all their lives, an' '—with a quaint embarrassment—'she were the only woman as ever I keered for, right from the fust minute I seed 'er 'oldin' a big bunch o' poppies an' that grass they call "wag wantons" down there, in 'er 'and, as pretty as a picture—an' I *didn't marry 'er cos she could cook*, that's no

wearin' reason to marry a woman for, leastwise not for me. An' I wouldn't 'ave the children—I call 'em children, though, lor bless yer, they're grown up and doin' well—I wouldn't 'ave 'em think I'd turned their mother out o' doors—no'—with an emphatic dab of mortar—'no, 'er fate's my fate, an' I ain't the kind o' chap to turn the ole woman out for what she can by no manner o' means 'elp!' and he puts another brick neatly on the top of the last and scrapes the oozing mortar.

The big man rubs the back of his hand across his eyes, and says with a gulp:

'Shake 'ands, mate, damme if I know wot to call yer, a bloomin' archangel or a blasted softy.'

The woman lay as he left her, with her feet thrust out in her half-buttoned boots, and her hands hanging straight down. The sun crept round the room, and at length a clock chimed four strokes up on the drawing-room floor. A woman sitting writing at a table between the window looks up with a sigh of relief, and moistens her lips; they are dry. A pile of closely written manuscript lies on the floor beside her; she drops each sheet as she finishes it.

She is writing for money, writing because she must, because it is the tool given to her wherewith to carve her way; she is nervous, overwrought, every one of her fingers seems as if it had a burning nerve-knot in its tip; she has thrust her slippers aside, for her feet twitch; she is writing feverishly now, for she has been undergoing the agony of a barren period for some weeks, her brain has seemed arid as a sand plain, not a flower of fancy has sprung up in it; she has felt in her despair as if she were hollowed out, honeycombed by her emotions, and she has cried over her mental sterility. Her measure of success has come to her, her public waits, what if she have nothing to give them? The thought has worn her, whispered to her in dreams at night, taken the savour out of her food by day. But this morning a little idea came and grew, grew so blessedly, and she has been working since early day. Her landlady has forgotten her luncheon; she never noticed the omission, but now she feels her frail body give way under the strain; she will finish this chapter and have

some tea. She has heard steps below. She writes until the half-hour strikes, then drops the last sheet of paper with a sobbing sigh of relief. She pulls the bell sharply and sits waiting patiently. No one answers it. She rings again; there is a crash downstairs as of china falling with a heavy body, and a smothered groan. She trembles, listens, and then goes down.

The woman is lying in the doorway of the sitting-room, a small table with broken glass and wax flowers on the floor near her. She hides her face as she hears the light step.

'Did you hurt yourself? Can I help you?'

She drags her up, supports her into the bedroom and on to the unmade bed, and goes out into the kitchen. A look of weary disgust crosses her face as she sees the litter on the table. There is a knock at the back door, she opens it; three children peer cautiously in, keen-eyed London children with precocious knowledge of the darker sides of life. They enter holding one another's hands. The eldest signs to the others to sit down, steals up the passage, peers through the slit of the door, and returns with a satisfied look and nods to the others.

'Your mother is not well, I am afraid,' the woman says timidly, she is nervous with children. The three pairs of eyes examine her slowly to see if she is honest.

'Our mother is in heaven!' says the boy as if repeating a formula. 'That's our stepmother, and she's boozed!'

'Johnny!' calls the woman from the inner room. The boy's face hardens into a sullen scowl, and she notices that he raises his hand involuntarily as if to ward off a blow, and that the smaller ones change colour and creep closer to one another. He goes to her—there is a murmur of voices.

'She sez I'm to get your tea!' he remarks as he comes out, and stirs up the dying fire. 'Ain't you 'ad nothin' since mornin'?'

She evades the question by asking: 'Have you children had anything?'

'We had some bread with us.' He opens a purse.

'There's nothin' in it, an' father gave' er 'arf a sovereign this mornin'!'

'I will give you some money if you come upstairs, and then you can get my tea.'

The boy is deft-handed, prematurely cute, with a trick of peering under his lashes. It annoys her, and she is relieved when she has had her tea and got rid of him. She is restless, upset, she feels this means moving again. What a weary round a working woman's life is! She is so utterly alone. The silence oppresses her, the house seems filled with whispers; she cannot shake off this odd feeling, she felt it the first time she entered it; the rooms were pretty, and she took them, but this idea is always with her.

She puts on her hat and goes out, down the half-finished road and into a lighted thoroughfare. Costers' carts are drawn up alongside the pavement; husbands and wives with the inevitable perambulator are pricing commodities; girls are walking arm in arm, tossing back a look or a jest to the youths as they pass. The accents of the passers-by, the vociferous call of the vendors, the jostling of the people jar on her; she turns back with tears in her eyes. Her loneliness strikes doubly home to her, and she resolves to join a woman's club; anything to escape it. She pauses near the door to get her latchkey, and notices the boy at the side entrance. He draws back into the shade as he sees her. She stands at her window and looks out into the murky summer night; a man comes whistling down the street; the boy runs to meet him, she sees him bend his head to catch the words better and then they turn back. She lights the gas and tries to read, she dreads the scenes she feels will follow, and she trembles when the door slams below and steps echo down the passage.

There is the low growl of the man's voice and the answers of the woman's, then both rise discordantly—a stifled scream and a heavy fall, footsteps down the passage, the bang of a door, and both voices raised in altercation, with the boy's voice striking shrilly in between—a blow, a crash of china and glass, then stillness. She is breathless with excitement; the quiet is broken by a sound of scuffling in the passage; he is going to put her out. Drag, and shove, and the scraping of feet, and the sullen 'you dare, you dare' of the woman, in reply to his muttered threats. She goes to the top of the stairs and cries:

'Don't hurt her, wait until morning to reason with her, don't hurt her!'

'Reason with 'er, miss! There ain't no way of reasoning with the likes of 'er, chuck 'er out is the only way. Would ye, would ye? Ye drunken beast?——'

The woman and the man sway together in the passage and her bodice is torn open at the breast and her hair is loose, and she loses her footing and falls as he drags her towards the door. She clutches at the chairs and brass umbrella-stand and drags them down; and the woman, watching, rushes upstairs and buries her face in the sofa cushions. Then the door bangs to and the woman outside rings and knocks and screams; windows open and heads peer out; then the boy lets her in and there seems to be a truce.

A charwoman brings her breakfast next morning, and it is tea-time before she sees her. She has on a clean pink cotton gown and her hair is nicely done and her skin looks very pink and white; but her eyes are swollen, and there is a bruise on one temple and a bad scratch on her cheek. She hangs her head sullenly and loiters with the tea-things; then she goes over to her and stands with her eyes on the ground and her hair glittering like golden down on the nape of her thick neck in the light from the window at her back.

'I am sorry for yesterday, miss, it was bad of me, but you won't go away? I won't do it again. Take it off the rent, only forgive me, won't you, miss?'

She is flushing painfully; her face is working, perhaps it seems worse because it is a heavily moulded face and it does not easily express emotions. It has the attractive freshness of youth and vivid colouring.

'We won't say anything more about it. I am so sorry; I am not used to scenes and it made me quite ill; I was frightened, I thought you would be hurt.'

The woman's face changes and as she raises her heavy white lids her eyes seem to look crosswise with a curious gleam in them and her voice is hoarse.

'That little beast told him, the little sneak! But I'll pay him for it, I'll pay him!'

An uneasy dislike stirs in the woman; she says very quietly.

'But you can't expect a man to come home and find you so and then be pleased.'

'No, but he shouldn't——' she checks herself and passes her hand across her forehead. The other woman observes her closely as she does most things—as material. It is not that her sympathies are less keen since she took to writing, but that the habit of analysis is always uppermost. She sees a voluptuously made woman, with a massive milk-white throat rising out of the neck of her pink gown; her jaw is square and prominent, her nose short and straight, her brows traced distinctly; she is attractive and repellent in a singular way.

'You don't know what works in me, miss——' She says no more, but it is evident that something is troubling her and that she is putting restraint on herself. Late in the evening, when the children are in bed, she hears her go up to their room; there is a sound of quick blows and a frightened whimper; and the next morning she is roused from her sleep by a child's scream and the woman's voice uttering low threats:

'Will you be quiet?' (whimper) 'will you be quiet? I'll teach you to make a row' (more stifled, frightened cries), and she feels in some subtle way that the woman is smothering the child in the bed-clothes. It worries her, and she never looks up at her when she brings in her breakfast. The latter feels it and watches her furtively. At lunch time it strikes her that she has been drinking again; she musters heart of grace and says to her:

'You promised to be good, Mrs. Jones. It seems to me to be such a pity that you should drink; why do you? You are very young!'

Her voice is naturally tender, and her words have an unexpected effect; the woman covers her face with her hands and rocks her shoulders. Suddenly she cries:

'I don't know; I get thinkin'; I 'ave 'ad a trouble. I never knew a woman drink for the love of it like men, there's most always a cause. Don't think I be a bad woman, miss, I ain't really, only I 'ave a trouble.' She talks hurriedly as if she can't help herself, as if the very telling is a necessity. 'I 'ad a little girl' (dropping her voice) 'before I was married—she's turned three, she's such a dear little thing, you never seen such 'air, miss, it's like floss silk an' 'er eyes are china blue, an' 'er lashes are that long'—measuring a good inch on her finger—'an' 'er skin is milk-white. I keep wantin' 'er all the time——' The tears fill her eyes and

splash out. 'I was cook in a big business house, an' 'e was the 'ead of it—I was cruel fond of 'im. Then when my time came I went 'ome to my step-sister an' she nursed me. I paid 'er, an' then when I went out to service again she took 'er. I used to see 'er onst or twice a week. But she was fonder of 'er nor me, an' I couldn't bear it, it made me mad, I was jealous of everyone as touches 'er. Then Jones, 'e woz always after me, 'e knew about it, an' 'e promised me that I could 'ave 'er if I married 'im. I didn't want to marry, I only wanted 'er, an' I couldn't 'ave' er with me, an' 'e promised'—with resentful emphasis—' 'e swore as 'ow I could 'ave 'er. I took 'im on that an' 'e kep' puttin' me off, an' when I went to see 'er, 'e quarrelled, an' once when she was ill 'e wouldn't let me send 'er any money though 'e 'ad wot I saved when I married 'im—it just made me 'ate 'im—I see 'er so seldom, an' she calls *'er* mammy, it most kills me—I feel my 'ead burstin'—an' 'e laughed when I told 'im I wouldn't 'ave married 'im only for 'er sake!'

'Poor thing, it is hard, he ought to have kept his promise to you when he made it. Haven't you told him you wouldn't drink if you had her with you?'

'Where's the good? 'E says 'e never meant to keep it; as a man ain't such a fool as to keep a promise 'e makes a woman just to get 'er. 'E knows it sets me off, but 'e's that jealous that 'e can't abear 'er name. 'E says I would neglect 'is children, an' 'e called 'er names an' says 'e won't 'ave no bastard round with 'is children. That made me 'ate 'em first, nasty yellow things——'

'Yes, but the poor children are not to blame for it?'

'No, but they remind me of 'er, an' I 'ate the very sight of 'em.' There is such concentrated hatred in her voice that the woman shrinks. 'I ain't 'ad any money to send 'er this long time, but my sister's 'usband is as fond of 'er as 'is own; they 'ave seven of their own. I 'ate to see things in the shop windows, I used to keep 'er so pretty. I got a letter a while ago sayin' she wasn't very well, an' that set me off. You've spoken kind to me since you've been here, that's w'y I tell you, you won't think worse of me now than I deserve.'

She clears away the things sullenly, with her jaw set, and

the strange oblique light flickering in her eyes. It oppresses the other woman; she feels as if she is facing one of the lurid tragedies that outsiders are powerless to prevent. This woman with her fierce devotion to the child of the man who betrayed her; her marriage, into which she has been cheated by a promise never meant to be kept: and the step-children fanning her fierce dislike by the very childish attributes that waken love in other circumstances. She stays a week longer, but every whimper of the children, every fresh outburst wears upon her, and she leaves, not without speaking with all the earnestness and sympathy of her nature to the woman of whose fate she has an oppressive, inexplicable presentiment.

The tears in her eyes at leaving have touched the girl, for she is little more, and she has promised to try and be better, as she childishly puts it. Things have gone pleasantly for some days, and she has been patient with the children. One of them has been ill and she has nursed it, and today she has made them an apple-cake and sent them to the park, and she is singing to herself over her work; she is cleaning out her bedroom. It is Derby Day. He has the day off, and has gone to the races. He gave her five shillings before he started in the morning, telling her she might send it to the 'young 'un.'

It touched her, and she brushed his coat and kissed him of her own accord. She has felt kindly to him all the morning for it. She notices a button dangling off his working coat and takes it out to the kitchen to sew it on; he seldom brings it home. There is nothing in the pockets except a slip of 'events' cut out of some sporting paper; but the lining of the breast-pocket is torn, and as she examines it, the rustle of paper catches her ear. She smiles; what if it is a 'fiver'? She knows all about his betting. She slips two fingers down between the lining and works it up—a telegram. She still smiles, for she thinks she will find a clue to some of his winnings. She opens it, and reads, and her face changes; the blood rushes to it, until a triangular vein stands out on her forehead like a purple whipcord. Her throat looks as if it would burst; a pulse beats in her neck; her upper lip is completely sucked in by the set line of her under one, and her eyes positively squint. A fly that keeps buzzing on the pane rouses her to such

a pitch that she seizes a boot off the table and sends it crashing through the pane of glass into the yard, liberating the fly at the same time. Then she tries to reread it, but there is a red blaze before her eyes. She goes out, up the lane, towards the unfinished houses, to where the bricklayers are at work, and hands it to the little man, saying hoarsely:

'Read it, I'm dazed, I can't see it rightly.'

The big man stops whistling and looks curiously at her. She is perfectly sober; the flush has ceded to a lead-white pallor, and her face twitches convulsively. She stands absolutely still, with her hands hanging heavily down, though she is devoured with impatience. The little man wipes his hands, and takes out his spectacles, and reads slowly:

'Susie dying, come at once, no hope. Expecting you since Saturday, wrote twice.'

A minute's silence—then a hoarse scream that seems to come from the depths of her chest; it frightens both men, so that the big man drops a brick, and a carpenter in the house comes to the window and looks out.

'Since Saturday!' she cries, 'today is Wednesday. When was it sent, tell me!' she shakes the little man in her excitement, and he scans the form slowly, with the deliberation of his class:

'Stratford, 7.45.'

'But the date! the date, man!'

'The 20th.'

'Today,' with a groan, 'is the 22nd. So it come Monday, and today is Wednesday, an' they wrote twice. It must 'ave come when I fetched 'is beer, an' 'e kept it. But the letters?—that little cub, that sneak of 'ell! Aah, wait!' She calls down curses with such ferocity of expression that the men shiver; then crushing the fateful paper inside the bosom of her gown, she rushes back, and in a few minutes they see her come out, tying on her bonnet as she runs.

'Well, this 'ere's a rum go, eh?' says the big man, regaining his colour, 'an' ooze Susie?'

The little man says nothing, only balances a brick in the palm of his hand before he fits it into its place, but his lips move silently.

In the parlour of one of a row of stiff two-storied houses, with narrow hall-doors in a poor street in Stratford, a little coffin painted white is laid on the table that is covered with a new white sheet.

There are plenty of flowers, from the white wreath sent by the grocer's wife, with a card bearing 'From a Sympathiser' in big silver letters, to the penny bunch of cornflowers of a playmate.

Susie has her tiny hands folded, and the little waxen face looks grey and pinched amongst the elaborately pinked-out glazed calico frills of her coffin lining. There is the unavoidable air of festivity that every holiday, even a sad one, imparts to a working-man's home. The children have their hair crimped and their Sunday clothes on, for they are going to the burial-ground in a grand coach with black horses and long tails, and they sit on the stairs and talk it over in whispers.

The men have come in at dinner-hour silently and stolidly, and looked at her, and gone out to the 'Dog and Jug' for a glass of beer to wash down whatever of sadness the sight of dead Susie may have roused in them.

Every woman in the row has had a cup of tea, and told of her own sorrows; related the death of every relative she has ever possessed, to the third and fourth degree, with the minuteness of irrelevant detail peculiar to her class. Every incident of Susie's death-struggle has been described with such morbid or picturesque addition as frequent rehearsals, or the fancy of the narrator, may suggest. Every corner of the house is crammed with people, for the funeral is to leave at three o'clock.

'Looks like satin it do, it's as pretty as ever I see!' pointing to the pinking, says one woman.

'Yes, Mr. Triggs thought a 'eap o' Susie, an' 'e took extry pains. 'E's a beautiful undertaker, an' 'e's goin' to send the 'earse with the wite plumes! Don't she just look a little hangel?'

So they stream in and out, and in the kitchen a circle of matrons hold a Vehmgericht over the mother.

'She's an unfeelin' brute, even if she iz yer arf sister, Mrs. Waters,' says a fat matron, 'to let that pretty, hinnocent hangel die without sein' 'er, not to speak o' burying'. I 'ave no patience with sich ways!'

The roll of wheels and the jingle of tyres cuts short her speech, and the knocker bangs dully. Heads crane out in every direction, and one of the children opens the door, and the woman steps in.

In her pink gown! when everyone knows that not to pawn your bed or the washings-tubs, or anything available, to get a black skirt or crape bonnet, or at least a straw with bugles, is the greatest breach of propriety known to the poor, the greatest sticklers for mourning etiquette outside a German court. The half-sister is a quiet woman with smoothly-parted hair and tender eyes, and a strong likeness to her about the underhung chin. She goes forward and leads her to the room; the women fall back and talk in whispers.

'W'y didn't you send?' she asks fiercely, turning from the coffin.

'We wrote Friday, an' then, when you didn't come, we wrote Sunday. Jim couldn't go, an' I never left 'er a minute, an' Tiny an' little Jim 'ad the measles, an' Katie 'ad to mind 'em; but a mate o' Jim's went to the 'Buckin'am' on Monday mornin' an' told 'im, an' then we sent a tellygram, an, we couldn't do more, not if she were our own.'

There is a settled resignation in her voice; she has repeated it so often.

''E kep' the letters an' 'e never told me, an' I only found the tellygram this mornin' by accidin'. When's she to be buried?'

'At three o'clock,'—with a puzzled look at the set face.

'Leave me along of 'er then; go on!'—roughly.

The woman goes out, closes the door, and listens. Not a sound comes from the room, not one, not a sob nor cry. The women listen in silence when she tells them; they are used to the fierce passions of humanity, and jealousy is common amongst their men. After a while one of the children says, with an awe-struck face, 'Ma, she's singin'.' They go to the door and listen; she is crooning a nonsense song she used to sing to her when she was quite a baby, and the listening women pale, but fear to go in. For a long hour they hear her talking and singing to it; then the man comes to screw down the lid, and they find her on the

sofa with the dead child on her lap, its feet, in their white cotton socks, sticking out like the legs of a great wax doll.

She lets them take it from her without a word, and watches them place it amongst the white frills, and lets them lead her out of the room. She sits bolt upright in the kitchen, with the same odd smile upon her lips and her hands hanging straight down. They go without her. When they return she is still sitting with her hands hanging, as if she has never stirred.

'Mother, w'y did they plant Susie in the ground? Mother, carn't you answer; will she grow?' queries one of the children, and something in the question rouses her. She starts up with a cry and a wild glare, and stares about as if in search of something—stands trembling in every limb, with the ugly flush on her face and the purple triangle on her forehead, and the pulse beating in her throat. The children cower away from her, and the sister watches her with frightened, pitying eyes.

'Sit down, Susan, there's a dear, sit down an' 'ave some tea!'

'No, I've got to go—I've got to go—I've got t——' she mutters, swaying unsteadily on her feet. The words come thickly, and the end of the sentence is lost.

'She'd be better if she could cry, poor thing!' says the fat matron.

'Give 'er somethink belonged to the young 'un!' says a little woman with a black eye. The sister goes to a drawer in the dresser and turns over some odds and ends and finds a necklet of blue beads with a brass clasp, and hands it to her. She takes it with a hoarse cry as of an animal in dire pain, and rocks and moans and kisses it, but no tears come; and then, before they can realise it, she is out through the passage and the door slams. When they get to it and look out, she is hurrying wildly down the street, with her pink gown fluttering, and the roses nodding in her bonnet, through a drizzle of soft rain.

Six o'clock rings; the rain still falls steadily, and, through its dull beat, the splash of big drops on to the new boards in a roofless house, and the blows of a hammer, strike sharply.

'Comin' mate?' queries the big man. 'No? Well, so long!' He shoulders his straw kit and turns up the collar of his coat

and goes off whistling. The little man puts his tools away, fastens a sack about his shoulders and creeps into a square of bricks—they had thrown some loose planks across the top earlier in the day as a sort of protection against the rain; he lights his pipe and sits patiently waiting for her return. He is hungry, and his wizened face looks pinched in the light of the match as he strikes it, but he waits patiently.

The shadows have closed in when she gets back, for she has walked all the way from Liverpool Street, unheeding the steady rain that has come with the south-west wind. The people maddened her. She felt inclined to strike them. A fierce anger surged up in her against each girl who laughed, each man who talked of the winner. She felt inclined to spit at them, make faces, or call them names. Her dress is bedrabbled, the dye of the roses has soaked through the gold of her fringe and runs down her forehead as if she has a bleeding wound there. The gas is lit in the kitchen, and her tea is laid and the kettle in singing on the stove; a yellow envelope is lying on the top of the cup; she opens it and turns up the gas and reads it:

'Been in luck today, going home with Johnson, back early tomorrow evening.'

She puts it down with a peculiar smile. She has the string of beads in her hand; she keeps turning them round her finger; then she steals to the foot of the stairs and listens.

The little man has watched her go in, and stands in the laneway looking up at the house. A light appears in the top back window, but it must come from the stairs, it is too faint to be in the room itself. He bends his head as if to listen, but the steady fall of the rain and the drip of the roof on to some loose sheets of zinc dominate everything. He walk away a bit and watches a shadow cross the blinds; his step crunches on the loose bricks and stones; a woman rushes down the flagged path of the next house and opens the door.

'Is that Mr. Sims?'

'No, ma'am, I'm one of the workmen.'

She has left her kitchen door open, and as the light streams out he can see she is a thin woman with an anxious look.

'I thought it was Mr. Sims, the watchman. My baby is

threatened with convulsions. I wanted him to run for the doctor at the end of the terrace; I daren't leave him, and my sister's lame. Will you go? It isn't far!'

She is listening, and though he hears nothing, she darts off calling, 'There he's off, do go, do go. Say Mrs. Rogers's baby, Hawthorn House, No. 23.'

He stands a moment irresolute; the shadow moves across the blind, and a second smaller shadow seems to wave across it; or was it only the rising wind flicking the blind? and is it fancy, or did not a stifled cry reach him; and was it from that room it came or from Mrs. Rogers's baby? The little man is shaking with anxiety; he feels as if some malignant fate in the shape of Mrs. Rogers's baby is playing tricks with him, to bring about a catastrophe he has stayed to avert. He is torn both ways; he can offer no excuse for not going; he dare not explain the secret dread that has kept him here supperless in the rain watching the house where the three motherless children sleep. He turns and runs stumbling over the rubbish into the side street and arrives breathless at the corner house where the red lamp burns at the gate—rings—what a time they keep him—it seems ages, and visions keep tumbling kaleidoscopically through his brain; the very red of the light adds colour to the horrid tragedy he sees enacted in excited fury.

'The doctor is out; won't be back for some time; there's a Dr. Phillips round the corner,' explains the smart maid—the door slams to.

'Yes, Dr. Phillips is in; you must wait a minute,' ushering him into a waiting-room. He sits on the edge of the chair with his wet hat in his hand. Two other people are waiting: a girl with a swelled face, and a sickly-looking man.

A door opens, someone beckons, the man goes in. He looks at the clock—five minutes pass, seven, ten—each seems an hour—fifteen—and the woman's face as she went in, and the frightened children (his mate questioned them at tea-time), and the shadow on the blind of the room they slept in! Why should Mrs. Rogers's baby go and get convulsions just this particular night? seems as though it were to be—seventeen; no, he won't wait any longer. The strange, inexplicable fear clutching the little man's

soul gives him courage, though the well-furnished house awes him; he slips out into the hall, opens the door, and rings the bell. The same girl answers it.

'Well I never! W'y, I just let you in. Can't you wait yer turn—the *ideal*'

A pale young man with spectacles coming down the stairs asks:

'What is it you want, my man?' The girl tosses her head and goes downstairs.

'I can't wait, sir; Mrs. Rogers's baby, 'Awthorn 'Ouse, No. 23 Pelham Road, round the corner, got the convulsions. She wants the doctor as soon as 'e can.'

'All right, I'll be round in a second.'

The little man hurries back, trying to add up the time he has been away—twenty-five minutes, it must be twenty-five, perhaps twenty-seven. The yard door of Mrs. Rogers's house is open, and a girl peers out as he runs up the lane.

'The doctor woz out; Dr. Phillips is comin' at onst!' His eyes rest on the window of the next house as he speaks. It is dark up there and silent. He pays no heed to the thanks of the girl, and he hears the tap of her crutch up the flagged path with a gasp of relief.

What has happened whilst he has been away on his errand of mercy? Has anything happened? After all, why should this ghastly idea of a tragedy possess him? He climbs on to a heap of loose bricks and peers over the wall—darkness and silence. He goes down the lane and round to the front of the house. A dim light shines through the stained glass over the door showing up the name 'Ladas,' that is all, yet the little man shivers. The rain has soaked through his coat and is trickling down his neck; he scratches his head in perplexity, muttering to himself, 'I'm afear'd, an' I dunno wot I'm afear'd on. I meant to wotch; maybe arsk 'er for a light. It ain't my fault if Mrs. Rogers's baby came atween—but twarn't no wearin' reason to marry for,' and he goes down the road and faces home. The rain ceases, and a tearful moon appears, and the water drips off the roof with a clucking sound. Upstairs in a back room in the silent house a pale strip of moonlight flickers over a dark streak on

the floor, that trickles slowly from the pool at the bedside out under the door, making a second ghastly pool on the top step of the stairs—a thick sorghum red, blackening as it thickens, with a sickly serous border. Downstairs the woman sits in a chair with her arms hanging down. Her hands are crimson as if she has dipped them in dye. A string of blue beads lies on her lap, and she is fast asleep; and she smiles as she sleeps, for Susie is playing in a meadow, a great meadow crimson with poppies, and her blue eyes smile with glee, and her golden curls are poppy-crowned, and her little white feet twinkle as they dance, and her pinked-out grave frock flutters, and her tiny waxen hands scatter poppies, blood-red poppies, in handfuls over three open graves.