

NO OTHER WAY.

By SIR WALTER BESANT.

CHAPTER I.

The Lady's Dilemma.

The lady sat at the open window of her lodging in King street, Covent Garden. It was a lodging over a print shop. The sign of which, a Silver Quill, argent in gules, dangled from the front of the house and creaked in the wind. The front room where she sat lived commanded a fine view of the street; the back room, which she slept over, overlooked the churchyard of St. Paul's, where funerals all day long inclined the heart to wholesome meditation. Both in the front and at the back there was apparent to the senses the neighborhood of the market, since the time was late June and the season was warm and fine, one perceived in the mingled waves of fragrance the crushed strawberry of yesterday; the decayed cherry of last week; the trampled peas and broken lettuce leaves; the pungent spring onion; last year's russets, the cabbage stalks which lay in heaps and all the things which are offered for sale in that great market. It is not, taken altogether, an exhilarating fragrance, but the residents of King street are accustomed to it; they have it with them all the year round at every season; they no more complain of it than the people near Billingsgate complain of the smell of fish which hangs forever in the air.

The lady was a widow, quite a young widow; not more than four and twenty; the weeds which spoke of her condition were so modified, so to speak, as to betoken a widowhood of two years, at least; they signified by their shape, by the manner of wearing them, by some feminine cunning which was difficult to explain—yet it was to be discerned by an artificial touch invisible yet perceptible—by the hand which puts the bow and smooths the strings and introduces some small change into the form; a concealment of character, if she noticed the moving panorama as it it was only to ask herself, with a sinking heart, how long it would be before the sight of this free and cheerful life, this contemplation of the world in action which fills the young with longing, inspires manhood and makes old age forget its cares would be finally closed to her by the shutting of a door—in imagination she heard it slam, and the turning of a key in a lock—in her mind she heard its harsh grating. The thought of this possibility transformed the crowd below her; they were no longer common people, pretenders of fashion, demi-ropes; they became glorified; happy beyond all expression; enviable beyond all words. Truth to say the current of life in King street is a turbid stream at best; there are dens and purlieus about Covent Garden of which men do not speak to women; which women, even with other women, profess not to know either by name or by reputation. But to Isabel, this morning, the street became a sparkling brook, bright and transparent, prattling over pebbles, in comparison with the murky stagnation of the prison which awaited her.

For, indeed, the hour had at last arrived; the time certain to those who live beyond their means when the Catchpole threatened and the bailiff murmured and the creditor, a truculent and relentless person, held out his hand and said: "Pay me! I will wait no longer. Pay me! or else—"

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"Oh!" she groaned and in that power, she might write to them, she might call upon them and plead with them. If they would forbear she would, perhaps, at some future time—but she had no security to offer. If they would not forbear, if they would look at her as she stood in a prison, where in a short time the manner, the language, the dress, the thoughts of the polite world drop off from the residents and they all become plumed together in the ruck of physical wants, physical sufferings and the sacrifice of all those scruples which, outside, raise men and women on a higher level.

If bitterness and self-reproach and humiliation are wholesome correctives for the soul, even though they come too late to save from open shame, then, indeed, Isabel Weyland this morning, with her secret remedy against a knot now how many plaguey disorders and diseases of the soul, such as vanity, self-conceit, complacency, pride of family, pride of rank, the self-respect of which is akin to arrogance, and the whole innumerable tribe of cognate ailments.

The street below was crowded with people; all day long and most of the night there is a full and flowing tide of human life flowing up and down the street, which is not, however, one of the most fashionable resorts of London. In the morning, from 8 o'clock till noon, there are the people of the market, the porters who carry baskets on their heads, the barrow filled with fruit and vegetables, which are carried away to be hawked about the streets of the city and suburbs; after noon there are the people who walk on the piazzas, a crowd of well-dressed people, yet not like the beaux of the park; they are country people, the members of Parliament, lawyers, actors of Drury Lane and Covent Garden, poets and wits; in the evening they are the people who frequent the coffee houses, the taverns and the gaming tables; later in the day are the people who take supper after the play and drink in the night houses which are the rival company of the place. No sooner have the rakes gone away to bed than the whole people begin again, so that the whole four and twenty hours there is in King street a continual flocking of people to Covent Garden and a continual noise of footsteps, voices, barrows, drays and carts, with the frequent fights of hackney coachmen, chairmen and the porters of the market.

The beaux walked delicately, their clouded canes hanging from their ruffled wrists; the porters carried baskets of fruit upon their heads, rudely pushing their way within the posts; the street criers, in never-ending

will fall to meet her just liabilities. I could in ordinary circumstances wait your pleasure, but at the present moment my position is serious, and I know not what may happen to me unless this money is paid. I have the honor to remain, madam, your most obedient and humble servant,
"JOSEPH FULTON."

When she had read this letter through for the tenth time she laid it down upon the table, and, with her chin in her hand, she fell into another meditation of a most unpleasant nature.

She was interrupted by the servant of the house, who came to tell her that Mr. Fulton was below and begged the honor of speech with her.

The writer of the letter followed the maid upstairs and entered without further ceremony. He was a man of short stature and of appearance displeasing. Although he was dressed as a citizen of substance and position, his face was marked by intemperance; his short neck lay in folds over his face; his cheeks were red and swollen; his nose was painted; there are all indications of strong drink. Moreover, his voice was thick and his shoulders unsteady as if, which was, indeed, the case, he had recently come from a tavern. It is not uncommon for a respectable citizen to show signs of drink in the evening—perhaps in the afternoon, but it is not (happily) usual for a man of business to betray this indulgence in the morning.

"Madam," he said, "I came to ask if you had received my letter."

"Sir, I have received it. I have read it. Here it is on my table."

"And what, madam, may I ask, is your answer?"

"My answer, Mr. Fulton, I have not yet thought of the answer. The letter only arrived this morning. Perhaps

in a month or two—"

"No, madam, by your leave. Not a month or two—but a day or two."

"I permit me to remind you, Mr. Fulton, that when I ordered those things one of the reasons which persuaded me to take them was your assurance that I should be allowed six months' credit."

"I do not remember any such assurance," he replied boldly.

"Come, Mr. Fulton, I think if you rack your brains a little you will remember that promise of six months' credit, of which only six weeks have expired. My answer, sir, is that I must take that credit. I want that credit, and I must have it."

"Madam, as regards that promise," his voice grew thicker, "I cannot remember it. How, then, can I allow it?"

"Sir," the lady's temper began to rise. "I perceive that you do not intend to remember your promise. I have, therefore, nothing more to say—I have no answer to give. You will do what you please. But I demand that credit."

The man's manner changed. He became suddenly crafty and he tried to be persuasive. He leaned over the table and essayed a smile which became a fixed grin.

"Madam," he said, "I am most unwilling to press you. But my own affairs—"

"Your own affairs, sir?"

"My own affairs, madam," he hesitated and spoke at random. "They are in confusion—I know not what may happen. In fact, I am urgently in want of the money."

"Can a substantial citizen of Ludgate Hill be in urgent want of £5?"

"You mistake, madam," he rose up with dignity. "Every man in business is sometimes pressed. It is not the amount—it is the occasion—"

"I must take the credit you promised. I am sorry for your position."

"As for my position, it is more than assumed. I am a citizen, a freeman of the Drapers' company; my affairs are on a large scale. I am considered as the equal of any merchant," he assured her with swelling words and looks.

"I must take that credit," she persisted. "Madam," his face became purple; "I must have that money. He banged the table with his fist. 'I say that I must have that money.'"

Now here the lady made a great and grievous mistake. For she ought to have referred the question to her attorney; there was nothing unusual in a credit of six months, and which was more important, the debt would have been found on examination to be due to the man's creditors and not to himself. For, instead of being a prosperous tradesman, as he asserted, he was nothing better than a man of straw, who intended to get this money for himself and to defraud his creditors. The man, in a word, might threaten, but he could do nothing. This, however, the lady did not know.

"Go," she said. "You will do what you please."

The man hesitated. The lady pointed to the door. Her face and manner were hard and unbending.

"You will take the consequences," he said.

"Go," she said, "I have come for an explanation and a confession!"

"A confession?" Mrs. Weyland made a show of sitting upright with indignation.

"Madam, I know a few things, but not all. I know that you are ruined; you have lost, I believe, the whole of the fortune that your husband left you—it was £4,000—at the card table; you are in debt to others besides my table; not threateningly, but openly—indeed, I am sure that you know the terrible alternative."

"Mrs. Brymer," Isabel replied with some dignity, "if you know all this, there is no necessity for you to rehearse it; nor is there any necessity for me to confess my affairs to you."

"These are my own affairs. My ladyship owes me the sum of £20, with some small

ings and pence. I can no more afford to lose this money than you can afford to pay it."

"Then, I do not understand—"

"Madam, I will be plain with you. Let me know exactly the state of your affairs and I may be able to help you, but on conditions. Believe me, I know the affairs of many women. You will never repeat your confidence."

"The only help I want is money or time, and that you cannot give me."

"There are other ways beside finding money or time. Let me remind your ladyship that if you do not get help and cannot pay your debts, the end is certain. You can, therefore, do no harm to your affairs by letting me know the truth, and you may find it to your advantage. My reason for offering to help you is nothing in the world but to get payment of my claim."

"Then can you help me to pay your claim?"

"That you shall learn presently. Meantime let me know your position."

There was some comfort in merely talking over the position, even though it was with a threatening creditor. Isabel sighed. "Well, then, ask me any questions you please and I will answer truthfully."

"Your husband died some three years ago. He left you a small fortune?"

"Between £4,000 and £6,000."

"Is any of this money left? I believe there is some left?"

"Very little. To be frank with you, not more than about £150."

"What has become of it? I was right in saying that it has been lost at the hazard table?"

"Some of it. I know not how much. I kept no record. Some at cards, some in dress, some this way and that way—how should I know where it has gone?"

"And you have debts. What is the amount of your debts?"

"I owe Mr. Fulton, draper, of Ludgate Hill, a bill of £155. He said that I might wait for six months, but now he presses. I owe you the sum of £20. There are also a few trifles."

"Oh, Mr. Fulton presses you, does he?"

"He presses me and threatens me. 'Have you anything besides that small sum of money?' 'My dresses and a little jewelry, worth—' 'I know not—'

"Humph! Your husband, however, had an elder brother—Lord Stratherrick."

"But he is quite ruined; he has gambled away everything—his life interest in his estate, his pictures, his library—everything is gone. He now lives in a corner of his empty house. He can do nothing for me, even if he was desirous of helping me. But he is a selfish man, like all gamblers."

"You have friends of your own, however. You are not destitute of friends?"

"Mrs. Brymer, I will be quite frank with you. My father, now old, is wealthy. But he is a nonconformist and he is austere. He has never forgiven me for my marriage. He considered my husband a prodigal, because he was a man of quality—my husband, the most sober and sensible of men!"

"If you can give me time—"

"Mrs. Brymer—everybody knows her shop in Monmouth street—there is a more celebrated dressmaker in the whole of London—smiled quietly. There was no appearance of threatening about the woman, she was not unkindly or disrespectful, but her face expressed her resolution—she was come to get her money."

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My father would not consent to the marriage, so I ran away and was married in May Fair."

"When your father knows your position he will perhaps relent."

"You do not know him. He might relent if my misfortune were due to other causes. But I have wasted £4,000 and more. He is a merchant who looks upon prodigality with horror. I have a brother as well; he is more austere than my father and more unforgiving. He looks to the succession. If he finds out about the debts—and the card table—there will be no longer any hope for me. He will represent the affair to my father that forgiveness will be impossible. If I can conceal the truth perhaps my father may once more regard me as a daughter."

"It is unfortunate. Would they even consent to see you consigned to a debtor's prison?"

"It would be the cause of a final cutting off. My brother would find something in the bible which would sanction hardness of heart. Believe me, Mrs. Brymer, I have no hope at all of any relief from my own people if they learn the truth about my affairs."

"You owe one creditor £25 and another £70; you have in hand about £150 or thereabouts, with a little jewelry. And you have no prospect of assistance from anyone. Truly, madam, the position is most serious."

"It is indeed serious."

"The madam," the dressmaker drew her chair a little nearer and dropped her voice to a whisper, "we must consider my method."

"Do you really mean that you can find a way?"

"There is but one way. And that way will terrify you at first. Do not start, and you would hear no more of him. It is a way that has been adopted by many ladies of fashion, though, for good reasons, they do not boast of it. At first it may seem impossible, but I can show you that it is not only possible, but easy of execution."

"What way is there? In the name of heaven, do not mock me. I am already half distraught with trouble. What way?"

"Madam, it is not known to you perhaps that you can transfer the whole of your debts, by marrying, to your husband."

"But who would marry a creature like myself, who must confess to having lost in three years more than £4,000, besides incurring debts of £250 more?"

"I can find you a husband, madam."

"A man who will consent to marry me? Impossible! And to take over my debts? Impossible, again!"

"Quite possible, on the other hand."

"Is it a man whom I could marry? I mean there are some men to marry whom would be worse than death."

"It will be a man you can marry. Not a man of fashion, perhaps, not one whom you would accept as your lover. But you would leave him at the church door."

"Who, then, could it be?"

"You might marry a sailor, unsuspicious, who would be arrested—I would take care of that—on coming out of the church door. He would stay for the rest of his life, and you would hear no more of him."

"Would you have me look up an innocent young fellow for life? For heaven's sake, do not, even to save myself."

"Many ladies are not so squeamish. However, we might find for you some man already languishing in the King's Bench and without hopes of release. Such an one, for a time, would willingly take over the additional burden of your debts. A few hundreds more would make no difference."

"Could he not make me share his imprisonment with him?"

"But it might be bruited abroad and it is always ill-thought of, nothing but necessity in fact can justify a gentleman in talking such a step."

"What is it?"

"You will not like the thought of it at all. But it is the simplest and generally the easiest plan."

"What do you intend?"

"There are always lying in Newgate men condemned to death—"

"The widow shuddered. 'Oh, not that!' 'You guess what I would say, then. That makes it easier. I could find some one, unmarried, friendless, who would not know who you are, to whom the promise of drink in plenty until the time came would make him quite happy. I would say, 'Marry him.' In two or three weeks he would be dead.' Again the widow shuddered. 'And no one would know and you would be quit free—with all your debts fallen off your back—free to marry again or to live as you please.'

"But, oh, the horrid thought! To marry a man going to be hanged! To be the widow of a man actually hanged at Tyburn!"

"Not, since no one would know anything about it."

"To marry a condemned fellow—a murderer—a burglar—a highwayman. Oh, I could not!"

"You would marry him only in name. You would leave him in his cell after the ceremony. A bottle of rum would console him for the loss of his bride. Indeed, for that matter, he would expect nothing more than the bottle of rum."

Still the lady shook her head.

"Madam," the temptress repeated, "you must harden your heart. I have told you what to do. There is a plain choice before you. I can find you a sailor. Once get that fellow locked up, with debts of hundreds keeping him there, and you are safe. I can find you a prisoner already hopelessly confined. He would be as good as the sailor. Or there is the condemned felon. He is safest. The only condition I make is that you settle, immediately, my bill in full. Does your ladyship agree? If not, there—but I spare you the truth. You know better than myself what will happen."

Mrs. Weyland looked out into the street. Alas! To leave the free air of the town; the dear delights of the play, the garden, the park, the assembly, the card party—how could she live away from them? How could she live in the close air, the dirt, the noise, the conversation of debtors' prison? She looked at the letters on the table and her lips parted in assent; she thought of the poor wretch jingling his chains in the condemned cell whom she was to marry, and her cheek paled; she thought of her austere father and her brother, and of their wrath, and the relentless justice with which they had so readily cut her off—and she was ready to assent.

Mrs. Brymer watched her narrowly. The money due to her was of the greatest importance; she had payments to make and bills to meet, the loss of this money would cause her great embarrassment. But she said no more. She folded her hands in her lap and waited.

Mrs. Weyland held out her hand. "I accept," she murmured.

The other sighed with relief. She had saved her debt.

"You have done well," she said. "Indeed there was nothing else to be done."

"No one is to know," Isabel stipulated with a shrewd smile and eyes full of terror.

"Certainly not. No one will know you may make yourself quite easy," Mrs. Brymer rose. "Madam, time presses; we know not when Mr. Fulton will issue his writ. Perhaps it is already issued."

"Are you going to act at once? It is very sudden."

"You must act at once. I have already, madam, in your interest, been up and doing; I have found a young sailor and have promised him a bribe. But—after all—he might be violent; he might break prison and escape. Once on board again he would laugh at the law. I will pass over the sailor."

"The poor young man will be looking for his promised wife," said the sympathetic widow.

"He will console himself—never fear. Well, I have also found a man in the King's Bench. He has no hope of release and will consent to anything that will give him a small amount to live upon. I have been to Newgate. There is a fellow under sentence who laughed when I proposed such a marriage. For as much rum as he can drink he will do anything. Come, Madam, we will go first to the King's Bench."

She rose. "I forgot to say that my conditions in return for this service are simply that you pay me my claim in full. That is all. Do you promise?"

"Yes—yes—I promise. O, anything—anything to relieve me of this anxiety."

(To be Continued.)



"SHE TOOK UP ONE OF THE LETTERS AND READ IT AGAIN, ALTHOUGH SHE KNEW IT BY HEART."

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