happy pair—so the society papers called them—departed by train for Te Aroha, there to spend their honeymoon.

Mrs Henston behaved extremely well to her not too devoted spouse. 'Gerald,' she said, after they had been a week in Te Aroha, 'I'm afraid this is rather dull for you.'

The young man looked at his middle-aged wife. It seemed downright impudence to address her as Henrietta, which was her baptismal name; he could not bring himself to call her 'Mrs Henston,' and he scarcely liked to propose calling her 'mater' and passing her off as his mother. Besides, good as she had been in paying his debts and in the daily supply of pocket-money she gave him, there had been no settlement on him. She had only executed a will in his favour leaving him everything she possessed. But as Gerald bitterly reflected, there are such things as later wills. He had fully intended to insist on a fair annual sum being settled on himself during her lifetime, but after she had paid all he owed, and bought his trousseau, and given him a handsome present besides, he felt it was impossible to ask for more. He had little of Oliver Twist in his nature, he said.

Mrs Henston's remark about Te Aroha being rather dull caused Gerald to put down the much-perused paper he held in his hand and say, eagerly: 'Well, yes, it is atrociously dull.' Then he saw by the look on his wife's face that she had not quite intended him to agree with her. He made an attempt to modify his words: 'At least, you know—I mean—well, of course your being here prevents it being quite too unbearable.'

Mrs Henston smiled grimly.

Gerald had not even yet been able to understand why she had proposed to marry him and make impecunious him comfortable for life. She had assured him that she could not live long. The doctor whom he consulted, informed him that her heart was seriously affected, that it might, indeed, cause her death at any moment. Also that other causes would prevent her from ever reaching anything like old age. She had been engaged to Gerald's father, who had jilted her, and she had vowed she would marry the son.

And she did.

There was silence in the room whilst these different reflections passed through the minds of Mr and Mrs Henston. The lady resumed her knitting—crimson silk socks for her 'boy' as she styled Gerald privately—whilst the young husband strolled to the window and gazed at the scene which he was so intensely weary of.

'It is time for my bath,' Mrs Henston said at last. 'Please ring the bell for my maid.'

Left alone, Gerald wondered whether since his wife realised his dulness she would make an effort to relieve it. He was agreeably surprised at the proposition she laid before him that afternoon.

'You know that pretty house of mine near the Albert Park?' she suddenly asked, as they took their usual monotonous drive.

'Yes,' he answered, hoping, as the best life then attainable, that Mrs Henston was going to suggest an immediate return to town.

'I wish you to go and keep house there for the present. The baths are affording me at least a temporary benefit, and I mean to go on with them. But as I do not wish your last thoughts of me to be those of utter weariness and loathing, I propose a separation until Christmas. What do you say?'

Gerald had the grace to turn his face away from his companion. He might hide the look of delight which he knew had suddenly leaped into his countenance, but, try as he might he could not quite conceal the pleasure in his voice as he said: 'That would be splendid! But,' his politeness returning, 'will you not come too?'

'Not yet. But if you wish it, I will join you on Christmas Eve. Shall I?'

There was a certain hopeful wistfulness in the middle-aged lady's voice which touched this unromantic husband.

'Most certainly,' he managed to say with a laudable attempt at heartiness.

Christmas Day with the Cowens, and a merry Christmas Eve spent in decorations had for a brief moment flitted like a Will-o'-the wisp before him.

'I shall allow you ten pounds a month for your personal expenses. The housekeeper, Mrs Mole, will procure everything you like to order for the house. You can get what horses or carriages you require at your favourite livery stable; they shall cost you nothing.'

Her voice was stern and practical. Gerald felt as though he was being treated as a naughty boy on probation. But he meekly acquiesced in all she said.

'I can't give very handsome Christmas presents on ten pounds a month,' he thought. 'I wonder if the old daisy had reckoned on that?'

But the 'old daisy' seemed to think she had been remarkably generous.

Once more Gerald Henston trod the pavements of Auckland a free man. There was now no street in which he was ashamed to show his face, no shops which he dared not enter; but he had to stand a large amount of chaff.

'Hullo, Henston! Run away already? I thought the old lady had tied you with a golden thread to her apron.'

'Where's your mother—your wife I should say? Did she trust you down here alone?'

But though some of these remarks galled, they did not affect him as did the sight of Katie's wan face. Poor girl! she had tried hard to hide her bitter disappointment from the social circle in which she moved. But though she had often told herself that it was quite impossible Gerald Henston could ever marry her, and had selected various wives for him, she had never imagined his wedding with Miss Coldicutt could have affected her so seriously.

Gerald found that his allowance went a very little way towards the liberal purchase of opera tickets for himself and the Cowens, gloves for the girls, cigars for his male friends, and various et ceteras for himself.

A week before Christmas he received a melancholy letter from his wife, in which she informed him that the state of her health quite precluded her return to Auckland for Christmas Day. She might return at the New Year, but she could not even be sure of that. She hoped 'dear Gerald' would not find the festive season too depressing in his lonely state.

'She's joking fun at me!' said Gerald. 'Coming down for the New Year, is she? By George, but I'll have some fun first.'

He resolved to give a large party on Christmas Eve, and spend the following day with the Cowens. Katie refused to attend his 'At Home,' as he called it, telling him he ought only to give a bachelor entertainment under the circumstances. He, after a little discussion, agreed with her, and invited a dozen of his particular friends for the 24th.

That afternoon a cab drove slowly past Mrs Henston's house, stopping a little beyond it. The housekeeper, who seemed to be on the watch for someone, appeared at the front door, and made a sign to a head which cautiously protruded from the cab. Two females, closely veiled, alighted, and made their way rapidly into the house, and straight upstairs to Mrs Henston's private apartments. These had been kept locked though Mrs Mole had aired them regularly.

'Shall I bring you a cup of tea, ma'am?' the housekeeper inquired, as one of the veiled figures, having removed her disguise, revealed the features of Mrs Henston, looking remarkably well too.

'Yes, at once, please. 'Where is Mr Henston?'

'He went out directly after lunch, saying he should not be back until half-past five. The dinner is at seven, ma'am.'

'Ah!' The exclamation was almost one of pain.

Could it be that this middle-aged woman was actually in love with her handsome young husband? Stranger pranks than this have been played by erratic Cupid.

Gerald, meantime, was talking to Katie Cowen. They were decorating, but not flirting, for was he not a married man? So Katie chattered away unrestrainedly, and the hands of the young people met in the most innocent way round sprays of lycopodium, fern fronds, and flower-stems. It is so much easier to have the materials for making a wreath put into your outstretched fingers than to have to grope for them amongst a mass of discarded branches; and Gerald was an ideal helper in this respect.

By half-past five the church was completed, all except the fun of clearing up. Gerald invited a gay young matron, two or three other friends, and Katie to drop in for a cup of tea, an invitation willingly accepted.

From her window, which faced the street, the owner of the house saw the merry party approach, enter, and heard them take possession of the drawing-room in laughing, happy ignorance of the keen dark eyes, the critical ears, which watched and listened.

As Gerald remarked to Katie when she admired the pretty drawing-room, filled by his wife's things, this was surely a case in which the marriage service should have been reversed, and Mrs Henston have used the words, 'With all my worldly goods I thee endow,' for Miss Coldicutt's lawyer had looked well to *her* settlements.

Mrs Mole had paid a hasty visit to her mistress's room, with the result that the best old china had been taken from its hiding-place, and with a beautiful silver tea-service had been carried into the drawing-room. The cake, in its quaint old basket, was excellent, the strawberries and cream unimpeachable, and the gay young voices and rippling laughter floated upstairs and smote the sore heart of the listener. But Mrs Henston made no sign.

The guests of the afternoon had gone, and Gerald passed his wife's door humming a tune as he prepared for his evening visitors. These were decidedly louder than the earlier ones, and as Gerald's manly voice and hearty guffaw reached his wife's ears, she thought of the letter received two days ago, in which he said that his Christmas would indeed be lonely and miserable without her. He had felt bound to 'say something civil of that sort,' it might bring down a handsome cheque for a Christmas present. He little thought it would bring her. For though Mrs Mole had written that Mr Henston was going to have one or two gentlemen to dinner, the housekeeper had only been told of the number invited two days before the 24th, and had felt constrained to utter a protest against the short time allowed her for preparation.

Mrs Henston was dressing for the evening, and as Mrs Mole came up to announce that coffee had just been served, and that Mr Henston had remarked they would have some music in the drawing-room presently, the lady was clasping her diamond bracelets on her still plump arms. She was dressed in rich black lace, with no relief but her splendid jewels, and she looked remarkably well. Her entrance into the drawing-room during the singing of the cheerful melody, 'Drink, puppy, drink,' created a kind of panic. Gerald felt that had he known how to do it effectively, now was the proper time to faint, but he rose to the occasion.

'What a delightful surprise!' he exclaimed, as he advanced to meet his wife, with outstretched hands. 'Why didn't you send me word, and I would have asked some ladies to meet you? Let me introduce you to my friends. Some of them I fancy you know already.'

And so the great *coup* fell flat, and a very pleasant evening was spent, Mrs Henston delighting the guests with some charming airs on the harp, accompanied by one of the musical men on the piano.

There was a pretty and pathetic scene between the married pair when they were at length left alone in the drawing-room. Gerald felt that his wife would not be the wet blanket and drawback to his enjoyment he had feared, and Henrietta began to believe that she might almost win her husband's love.

Gerald woke in the night with a dim consciousness that he was being suffocated. Springing out of bed, he became aware that his room, which faced the back-garden, was full of smoke. He flung on some clothes, and, opening the window, thrust his head out. The smoke did not come from that part of the house. He opened his door. A dense, stifling cloud of smoke nearly choked him. He rushed along the passage, shouting, 'Fire! Fire!'

Mrs Henston's maid opened her door. She had flung a shawl over her, and stood too frightened to move, merely crying, 'save me, save me.'

'Where is your mistress?' Gerald was already hammering at his wife's door, while the other frightened domestics, rushed downstairs calling loudly for help.

'Henrietta, open your door! quick, quick, the house is on fire!' Then Gerald flung his whole weight against the door. It would not yield. Once more. Surely the lock was an exceptionally good one! volumes of smoke now filled the house, and the crackling sound which denotes a rapidly spreading fire warned him to make his escape as soon as possible. Another tremendous blow and the lock yields, but the sudden outburst of smoke and the intense heat sent Gerald reeling back. Only for an instant, however. If his wife were in that atmosphere she must be dead or dying. He was about to plunge in when the housekeeper caught hold of his arm.

'Here,' she said, thrusting a wet towel into his hand, 'put that over your head. The bed is in this corner, to your left! Heaven help you, sir!'

Gerald struggled to the corner indicated, passed his hand along the bed till it reached a face. Hastily dragging down the clothes, he grasped Mrs Henston in his arms and made for the door. A burst of flame lit up the room, and he saw to his dismay that the light silk and lace curtains shrouding the entrance were blazing. The fire had evidently come through from the boudoir between his room and his wife's. Gerald retreated to the bed, and wrapping one of the thick blankets round his wife, again made for the door. He was an athletic young fellow, and the necessities of the moment gave him unwonted strength. Through the flames he rushed, the wet towel still round his head, though it no longer protected his face. At the threshold he tripped over the blanket and fell.

Mrs Mole had perforce retreated, but her voice could still be heard, 'This way, Mr Henston, this way.'

Staggering to his feet, blinded with smoke, smarting from the pain of various burns on his hands and face, Gerald picked up his unconscious burden, and followed Mrs Mole's voice. The front staircase was close at hand. Gerald felt he could not walk down it, but groping for the first step, sat down and tried to slide to the bottom. But before he could make the necessary movement he lost consciousness and fell with his burden.

* * * * * * * *

It was two months after that fatal Christmas Eve before Gerald was able to realize what had happened. Mrs Mole was sitting by his bedside, and as he opened his eyes and turned them with a wistful appeal for information towards her, she said: 'Ah! that's right, Mr Henston. You know me at last.'

Gerald raised his hand to his head. 'What's the matter?' he asked.

'You have been ill, but you are better now. Don't talk, sir, but go to sleep again.'

Gerald, feeling curiously weak and submissive, obeyed. But the next day he would not be put off, and Mrs Mole reluctantly told him the truth. His wife was dead, and he had nearly lost his life in a brave attempt to save her. The origin of the fire was a mystery. Mrs Henston's maid supposed that her mistress had been unable to sleep, and had lighted her little spirit lamp in the boudoir to make herself a cup of coffee—a thing she was very fond of doing. Probably she had gone back to her bedroom whilst the water boiled, and had fallen asleep. But this was mere conjecture. She seldom disturbed her maid at night.

Gerald did not go to Te Aroha for change of air. Instead he took a trip to England. He was a rich man now, and could do as he pleased. After two years' wandering he found himself once more in New Zealand, and again took possession of the restored house near the Albert Park. A large part of the building had been saved, as being of brick, it had resisted the fire-fiend longer than a wooden one would have done. The outbreak had been very speedily discovered and quickly checked by an efficient water supply.

It was Christmas Eve again, and Gerald was once more helping Katie to tie greens on to a rope for the purpose of convincing Christians that it was really high art thus to disguise the pillars in their church. Gerald persuaded Katie that the shortest way home lay through the Domain. No one had ever hinted such a thing before, but Katie did not seem to think of the common sense and geographical aspect of the proposed route. Under a puriri tree Katie promised to be Gerald's second wife, and up to the present time she does not seem at all inclined to regret her promise, for whatever love was lacking in the young man's treatment of his first wife was amply made up in the affection lavished on his second.

But Gerald is not ungrateful. Henrietta Henston's grave is always well kept, and gay with hot-house flowers.

MISS AUSTEN.

ONE of the faults of our own age is its encouragement of literary mediocrity, and persons fit only to be called penny-a-liners submit with complacency to fulsome praise of their 'works' trumpeted abroad by unwise personal friends. Of quite another stamp was Jane Austen, the novelist, whom Tennyson pronounced 'next to Shakespeare' in her power of copying human nature, and whom George Eliot called 'the greatest artist that has ever written.'

During her lifetime, so modest and unassuming was this gentle woman, that few of her readers knew even her name, and none of them, to speak broadly, knew more than that. She had the greatest dislike for playing the *rôle* of literary lion, and once, when her fame was fully established, wrote that she was 'frightened' because a strange lady wished to be introduced to her.

'If I am a wild beast, I cannot help it,' she declared. 'It is not my fault.'

Although her works have always been the delight of the cultured few, the author's retiring personality had its effect in shutting itself away from the knowledge of men, and it was fully sixty years after her death that the first memoir of her was published.

More than twenty years ago a gentleman visiting Winchester Cathedral asked a verger to show him Jane Austen's tomb. The man readily guided him to the slab of black marble, and the visitor stood for some time studying the inscription with keen interest. As he turned away, his guide said, in an apologetic tone:

'Pray, sir, can you tell me whether there was anything particular about that lady? So many people want to know where she was buried.'

Yet the fame of her genius is every year increasing, and her readers may be numbered by the hundred, instead of the score, as was formerly the case. She chose to be 'first woman, then artist,' and time has accorded her an enviable renown in both characters.