

growing moral discontent, Bertha began to ask herself whether acquiescence in this sordid tyranny was not a culpable weakness, and one day early in the year—a wretched day of east wind—when she saw Martha perched on an outer window sill, cleaning panes, she found courage to utter resolute disapproval.

"I don't understand you, Bertha," replied Mrs Cross, the muscles of her face quivering as they did when she felt her dignity outraged. "What do we engage a servant for? Are the windows to get so dirty we can't see through them?"

"They were cleaned not many days ago," said her daughter, "and I think we could manage to see till the weather's less terrible."

"My dear, if we managed so as to give the servant no trouble at all, the house would soon be in a pretty state. Be so good as not to interfere. It's really an extraordinary thing that, as soon as I find a girl who almost suits me, you begin to try to spoil her. One would think you took a pleasure in making my life miserable."

Overwhelmed with floods of reproach, Bertha had either to combat or retreat. Again her nerves failed her, and she left the room.

At dinner that day there was a roast leg of mutton, and, as her habit was, Mrs Cross carved the portion which Martha was to take away for herself. One very small and thin slice, together with one unwholesome little potato, represented the servant's meal. As soon as the door had closed, Bertha spoke in an ominously quiet voice:

"Mother, this won't do. I am very sorry to annoy you, but if you call that a dinner for a girl who works hard ten or twelve hours a day, I don't. How she supports life, I can't understand. You have only to look into her face to see she's starving. I can bear the sight of it no longer."

This time she held firm. The conflict lasted for half an hour, during which Mrs Cross twice threatened to faint. Neither of them ate anything, and in the end Bertha saw herself, if not defeated, at all events no better off than at the beginning, for her mother clung fiercely to authority, and would obviously live in perpetual strife rather than yield an inch. For the next two days, domestic life was very unpleasant indeed; mother and daughter exchanged few words; meanwhile Martha was tasked, if possible, more vigorously than ever, and fed mysteriously, meals no longer doled out to her under Bertha's eyes. The third morning brought another crisis.

"I have a letter from Emily," said Bertha at breakfast, naming a friend of hers who lived in the far north of London. "I'm going to see her to-day."

"Very well," answered Mrs Cross, between rigid lips.

"She says that, in the house where she lives, there's a bed-sitting-room to let. I think, mother, it might be better for me to take it."

"You will do just as you please, Bertha."

"I will have dinner to-day with Emily, and be back about tea-time."

"I have no doubt," replied Mrs Cross, "that Martha will be so obliging as to have tea ready for you. If she doesn't feel strong enough, of course, I will see to it myself."

CHAPTER XLII.

On the evening before, Martha had received her month's wages, and had been promised the usual afternoon of liberty to-day; but, as soon as Bertha had left the house, Mrs Cross summoned the domestic, and informed her bluntly that the holiday must be postponed.

"I'm very sorry, mum," replied Martha, with an odd, half-frightened look in her watery eyes. "I'd promised to go and see my brother as has just lost his wife; but of course, if it isn't convenient, mum—"

"It really is not, Martha. Miss Bertha will be out all day, and I don't like being left alone. You shall go to-morrow instead."

Half an hour later, Mrs Cross went out shopping, and was away till noon. On returning, she found the house full of the odour of something burnt.

"What's this smell, Martha?" she asked at the kitchen door, "what is burning?"

"Oh, it's only a dish cloth as was drying and caught fire, mum," answered the servant.

"Only! What do you mean?" cried the mistress, angrily. "Do you wish to burn the house down?"

Martha stood with her arms akimbo, on her thin, dough-pale face the most insolent of grins, her teeth gleaming, and her eyes wide.

"What do you mean?" cried Mrs Cross. "Show me the burnt cloth at once."

"There you are, mum!"

And Martha, with a kick, pointed to something on the floor. Amazed and wrathful, Mrs Cross saw a long roller-towel half a yard of it burnt to tinder, nor could any satisfactory explanation of the accident be drawn from Martha, who laughed, sobbed, and sniggered by turns as if she was demented.

"Of course you will pay for it exclaimed Mrs Cross for the twentieth time. "Go on with your work at once, and don't let me have any more of this extraordinary behaviour. I can't think what has come to you."

But Martha seemed incapable of resuming her ordinary calm. Whilst serving the one o'clock dinner—which was very badly cooked—she wept and sighed, and when her mistress had risen from the table, she stood for a long time staring vacantly before she could bestir herself to clear away. About three o'clock, having several times vainly rung the sitting-room bell, Mrs Cross went to the kitchen. The door was shut, and on trying to open it, she found it locked. She called "Martha," again and again, and had no reply, until, all of a sudden, a shrill voice cried from within—"Go away! go away!" Beside herself with wrath and amazement, the mistress demanded admission; for answer, there came a violent thumping on the door at the other side, and again the voice screamed—"Go away! Go away!"

"What's the matter with you Martha?" asked Mrs Cross, beginning to feel alarmed.

"Go away!" replied the voice fiercely.

"Either you open the door this moment, or I call a policeman!"

This threat had an immediate effect, though not quite of the kind that Mrs Cross hoped. The key turned with a snap, the door was flung open, and there stood Martha, in a Corybantic attitude, brandishing a dinner-plate in one hand, a poker in the other; her hair was dishevelled, her face red, and fury blazed in her eyes.

"You won't go away!" she screamed.

"There, then—there goes one of your plates!"

She dashed it to the floor.

"You won't go away?—There goes one of your dishes!—and there goes a basin!—And there goes a tea-cup!"

One after another, the things she named perished upon the floor. Mrs Cross stood paralysed, horror-stricken.

"You think you'll make me pay for them?" cried Martha frantically. "Not me—not me! It's you as owns me money—money for all the work I've done as wasn't in my wages, and for the food as I haven't had, when I'd ought to. What do you call that?" She pointed to a plate of something on the kitchen table. "Is that a dinner for a human being, or is it a dinner for a beetle? D'you think I'd eat it, and me with money in my pocket to buy better? You want to make a walkin' skeleton of me, do you?—but I'll have it out of you, I will—There goes another dish! And there goes a sugar-basin! And here goes your tea-pot!"

With a shriek of dismay, Mrs Cross sprang forward. She was too late to save the cherished object, and her aggressive movement excited Martha to yet more alarming behaviour.

"You'd hit me, would you? Two can play at that game—you old skindint, you! Come another step nearer, and I'll bring this poker on your head! You thought you'd got somebody you could do as you liked with, didn't you? You thought because I was willing, and tried to do my best, as I could be put upon to any extent, did you? It's about time you learnt your mistake, you old cheese-parer! You and me has an account to settle. Let me get at you—let me get at you—"

She brandished the poker so menacingly that Mrs Cross turned and fled. Martha pursued, yelling abuse and threats. The mistress vainly tried to shut the sitting-room door against her; it broke the furious maid, and for a moment so handled her weapon that Mrs Cross with difficulty escaped a dangerous blow. Round and round the table they went, until the cloth having been dragged off, Martha's feet caught in it, and she fell heavily to the floor. To escape from the room, the terrified lady,

must have stepped over her. For a moment, there was silence. Then Martha made an attempt to rise, fell again, again struggled to her knees, and finally collapsed, lying quite still and mute.

Trembling, panting, Mrs Cross moved cautiously nearer, until she could see the girl's face. Martha was asleep, unmistakably asleep; she had even begun to snore. Avoiding her contact with as much disgust as fear, Mrs Cross got out of the room, and opened the front door of the house. This way and that she looked along the street, searching for a policeman, but none was in sight. At this moment approached a familiar figure, Mr Jollyman's errand boy, basket on arm; he had parcels to deliver here.

"Are you going back to the shop at once?" asked Mrs Cross, after hurriedly setting down her groceries in the passage.

"Straight back, mum."

"Then run as quickly as ever you can, and tell Mr Jollyman that I wish to see him immediately—immediately. Run! Don't lose a moment."

Afraid to shut herself in with the sleeping fury, Mrs Cross remained standing near the front door, which every now and then she opened to look for a policeman. The day was cold; she shivered, she felt weak, wretched, ready to sob in her squalid distress. Some twenty minutes passed, then, just as she opened the door to look about again, a rapid step sounded on the pavement, and there appeared her grocer.

"Oh, Mr Jollyman!" she exclaimed. "What I have just gone through! That girl has gone raving mad—she has broken almost everything in the house, and tried to kill me with the poker. Oh, I'm so glad you've come! Of course, there's never a policeman when they're wanted. Do please come in."

Warburton did not at once understand who was meant by "that girl," but when Mrs Cross threw open the sitting-room door, and exhibited her domestic prostrate in disgraceful slumber, the facts of the situation broke upon him. This was the girl so strongly recommended by Mrs Hopper.

"But I thought she had been doing very well—"

"So she had, so she had, Mr Jollyman—except for a few little things—though there was always something strange about her. It's only to-day that she broke out. She is mad, I assure you, raving mad!"

Another explanation suggested itself to Warburton.

"Don't you notice a suspicious odour?" he asked significantly.

"You think it's that!" said Mrs Cross, in a horrified whisper. "Oh, I dare say, you're right. I'm too agitated to notice anything. Oh, Mr Jollyman! Do, do help me to get the creature out of the house. How shameful that people gave her a good character. But everybody deceives me—everybody treats me cruelly, heartlessly. Don't leave me alone with that creature, Mr Jollyman! Oh, if you knew what I have been through with servants! But never anything so bad as this—never! Oh, I feel quite ill—I must sit down—"

Fearful that his situation might become more embarrassing than it was, Warburton supported Mrs Cross into the dining-room, and by dint of loud cheerful talk in part composed her. She consented to sit with the door locked, whilst her rescuer hurried in search of a policeman. Before long, a constable's tread sounded in the hall; Mrs Cross told her story, exhibited the ruins of her crockery, on the kitchen floor, and demanded instant expulsion of the dangerous rebel. Between them, Warburton and the man in authority shook Martha into consciousness, made her pack her box, put her into a cab, and sent her off to the house where she had lived when out of service; she all the time weeping copiously and protesting that there was no one in the world so dear to her as her outraged mistress. About an hour was thus consumed. When at length the policeman had withdrawn, and sudden quiet reigned in the house, Mrs Cross seemed again on the point of fainting.

"How can I ever thank you, Mr Jollyman!" she exclaimed, half hysterically, as she let herself sink into the armchair. "Without you, what would have become of me! Oh, I feel



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