

"Please attend to it all for me, and do just as you think best. I do not understand things in the least," said Janet, impulsively.

William Smith smiled, a wonderful, kindly smile that lit the dull little room with friendliness, and made his somewhat ovine face fairly handsome.

"We shall be delighted to do that, madam, of course, if you so instruct us—and honoured. But would you not rather have outside advice? We already represent several of the other heirs."

"I usually know whom to trust," said the woman, shyly but firmly, "and I should not know whom else to get."

"Mr Armstrong would doubtless advise you as to another firm. I noticed that it was at his country home that I addressed you."

"You know Mr Armstrong—Mr Nevill Armstrong?"

"I was his fag at St. Paul's. He has been a man of success, and my lines of life have stayed in humble places. But we were great friends thirty years ago, and even now we lunch together sometimes. I do not know his family. I live very quietly, of course, at Highbury, with an invalid sister."

"That settles it," said Janet, firmly. "You are to take charge of my little matter, if you kindly will."

Smith bowed. "Our firm will be pleased and honoured," with old-fashioned and elaborate courtesy. "And I shall be delighted to give your instructions my best attention, madam—my very best attention."

Janet thanked him and went away. On her return she did not mention her inheritance to anyone. She was too shy. And she feared that her employers might feel, as she did, the grotesqueness of so rich a woman working.

The lawyer's clerk kept his word well. He secured all he honestly could to Miss Ridley. And in a few weeks Janet found herself the actual possessor of twenty-four hundred and seventy-six pounds eleven shillings and fourpence, and an old-fashioned but exquisite set of pearls that had belonged to the dead man's mother.

Before her fortune was finally collected and adjusted, it had been necessary for Janet to make several journeys to London. She surprised herself even more than she did Mrs Armstrong by the ease and intrepidity with which she asked for a day's freedom. But William Smith was less delicate than lawyers are apt to be, and now there was no further need of Miss Ridley in Essex Street.

Beyond the three-guinea hat, she had as yet bought nothing for herself. But with tact as infinite as it was needless she had found out what Tompkins must need and had supplied it, even making some trifles with her own hands, marking and arranging with lingering, beneficent fingers.

Tompkins, dumb with gratitude and surprise, took the governess's bounty and departed with scarcely a word. But Miss Ridley hardly noticed it. Her pleasure had been in the doing, and her life had long accustomed her to a paucity of thanks.

But she soon felt as occupationless as Othello (it was probably her sole point of resemblance to the Moor), and began fidgeting for some other self-indulgence.

She sat by the open window one warm evening, listening to a nightingale that often sang on such nights in the old beech tree. Her ready tears welled gently as the liquid loveliness of the song and the queenly perfume from the bloom-heavy rose-trees swept her senses, as skilful fingers sweep a harp.

She shook herself impatiently, for she had little patience with her own sentimentalities. Tomorrow she would settle down to a course of stiff, solid reading, and lead once more a sensible life.

"You are a moon-struck old maid!" she told herself, disgustedly.

Then she slipped again to musing. She wondered if Tompkins were reasonably happy. "At all events," she thought, softly, "she had a nice outfit. Oh! how I wonder how it feels to have a trousseau!"

It was at that precise moment that the impish inspiration seized her. And, as ill luck, or good, would have it, it was at that precise moment that Mrs Armstrong opened the door and came in.

If Janet had taken a moment to think she would never have done it. But the schoolroom lights were not lit, and, before she thought, the words were out, her bridges burnt.

"Mrs Armstrong," she said to that astonished lady, "I believe it isn't legal to give notice after noon, but, as you're here, perhaps you'll let me tell you now that I must leave you" (her voice broke

a little) "when—when you can conveniently let me go. I don't want to put you out. I don't want to hurry you, either. And I shall feel leaving my girls very much indeed. But the fact is—I am going to be married."

"Well, I never!" The words were not as congratulatory or as delectable as each woman could have wished, nor was the gasp with which Mrs Armstrong sank into the chair from which Janet had just risen. And the speaker, who was a kind woman, realised it in a moment, and made all possible amends. She drew the governess out to an adjacent chair and flooded her with questions and confusion.

Janet answered as little and as vaguely as she could. But Mrs Armstrong would not be denied, and in fifteen minutes Janet, who, since her confirmation, had never told even a white fib, had told thirty-one black lies; and, pushed to the wall, had, in her panic, seized upon the first masculine cognomen that her attendant sub-consciousness handed up, and announced that she was about to become Mrs William Smith.

It was not until the next day that she realised that she had given the name of an actual man, and of a man whom she actually knew. Her remorse and confusion were abject. She thought of telling Mrs Armstrong everything, but she simply could not screw her courage to that sticking-point.

Everyone was very kind. Everyone was interested. Mrs Armstrong arbitrarily cut the children's lessons down to a fragment and pressed day after day of leisure for the nuptial shopping upon the bride-elect.

It was a wonderful trousseau. Three hundred pounds she spent on it, and another hundred went for the diamond ring she now wore; for Janet was marrying well—an old acquaintance who had made money in Queensland, or inherited it from there. She spoke with embarrassed

here once, on a walking tour, with my father, many, many years ago, and I thought I'd like to recall old days if I could. I am all alone now. My sister died two weeks before I left England."

Janet tried to say something, but her voice would not come.

He went on quickly: "You are here more pleasantly. I am very glad. Armstrong mentioned one day that the lady who had educated his daughters had just married, and to a gentleman of my full name. I thought it a pleasant coincidence; but, of course, I did not mention that I had had the pleasure of meeting Miss Ridley—as I remembered how particularly you wished that the Armstrongs should not know of your inheritance."

"Still the woman was dumb—and he saw that she was cruelly embarrassed.

Mystified, and a little embarrassed now himself, he continued his monologue. "I trust you will permit me to know my lucky namesake, and have the pleasure of congratulating him in person."

Janet shrank against a motherly oleander tree, then burst into tears.

Mr Smith felt greatly relieved. He could not, in the least, imagine what this woman's trouble was, but he was cordially glad to see her "cry it out."

His eyes fell upon her hands. Both were bare and ringless. He pursed his lips, as if to whistle, but emitted no sound—a well-established trick of his cloth. So—the man had jilted her at the last, or the lovers had quarrelled. But, no, Armstrong had distinctly spoken of the marriage as having taken place.

Janet had buried her face against the old oleander's trunk—but her sobs were ceasing.

She turned a stifled face to him, as delectable as it was pitiful. "Plucky, after all," was his mental comment. "That mouse of a woman is going to do or say something heroic now. You never know

ests—all other ties. But that's idle thinking. It's too late now."

Janet went on quickly, afraid to lose her courage.

"I was tired of being called an old maid—of being called one, not in the least of being one. I'd been one so long," she added, with unconscious pathos, "that I was so used to it, that I couldn't possibly have liked anything else—endured anything else."

"I wonder," he said, musingly. He had guessed her secret now—in part.

"I told Mrs Armstrong that I was going to be married—just to see her astonishment—yes, and the servants!" She was determined to tell the stark, abject truth now. She would make her humiliation complete. That much medicine she could give her soul. She went on, rapidly, relentlessly. And William Smith listened to her with a willing heart and eyes on the far horizon.

"I think, perhaps, I had a brain-storm, or some queer, old maid's dementia. I took four hundred and fifty pounds of the money, you remember?"

Smith nodded kindly. "I bought a trousseau. I spent three hundred pounds on clothes."

"No!" gasped Smith. To him this sum—in relation to apparel—seemed Homeric.

"Three hundred pounds. And I spent another hundred for an engagement-ring."

The man's thin lips twitched, but his eyes were misted.

"And I took fifty for my wedding trip. I had to pay all the expenses, you see, because there was no husband—not the sign of one. No one ever wanted to marry me." She had forgotten the two pale suits of her youth, honestly forgotten. "And there was no one I ever wanted to marry. I was lying from beginning to end."

"I don't see the harm," he said, gently. "Neither did I—then. But afterwards I did. They began giving me wedding presents."

The lawyer laughed.

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "Don't you see the horror of it? I am a thief—a common thief. I tried to confess—again and again. But I couldn't. So I went on with it to the end. And I must have nearly a hundred pounds' worth of stolen goods. I can't eat, I can't sleep. If only I could get clear of that!"

"We'll find a way," he said, gravely. "That has been the hardest thing to bear—that and the utter loneliness. But it isn't half as hard to speak of as something else is. I mean the name."

"My dear lady," he said, imperatively, "the name is very honoured. I wish I had a more individual claim on it, that I might the more feel that something of mine had been of service to you."

"How good you are!" Janet said, brokenly. "Of course, I did not think of the name being your name."

"Of course not. I quite understand." "Mrs Armstrong cornered me. She would know his name, then and there. And I couldn't think. I had to say something—and I said the first thing I thought of. I said—"

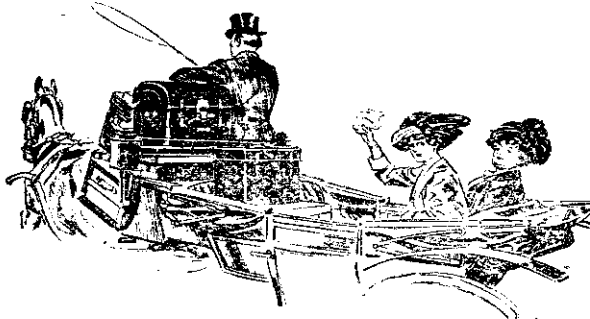
"William Smith," he finished for her, softly, and with a whimsical smile. He would have laughed, but he was too kind.

"I wish I could tell you how ashamed I am."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of—nothing," he said, roughly. "Put that out of your head. And you are not going to hide and shrink. We are not going to have it. Hear my plan. I still have three weeks of my holiday left. I shall spend them here. And we will put our heads together. Two heads are better than one, you know, especially when one of them is a lawyer's head. We'll find a way to put all right, never fear."

"How good you are! But do you think I'll allow it?"

"You will have to. Do you imagine that you are the only lonely person in the world? I want to stay here and help you. I have no place else to go. My sister's death has left me desolate and friendless. I can't go back to Essex Street before my leave is up. I should be ashamed to. Yes," he said, in emphatic answer to her swift look; "we are in the same boat. I understand it all, because I've felt it all. Do you think it's only a woman's soul that cries out for home and family, and is ashamed, as well as sorrowful, for having neither? You trusted me now, for these few weeks. Trust me now, for these few weeks. We will take our hard-earned holiday—and enjoy it. And find a much better way out of your perfectly harmless little device than exit. Trust me." He held out his hand, and she laid hers in it.



"The next morning Janet drove to the station, pink-cheeked, bright-eyed, triumphant."

vagueness. She might have married him fifteen years ago, if she had cared to. And Mrs Armstrong wondered much, and did the handsome thing in solid silver forks, each engraved with a striking "J. S." Wedding presents began pouring in upon her. That was her major trouble. She could not refuse them, and so she resolved to return their full value sooner or later, even if it had beggared her. In truth everyone had liked the gentle creature, and everyone was genuinely glad that the autumnal love-story, of which she said so little, looked so glowing.

The night before she left the Limes Mrs Armstrong herself helped with the packing, and every maid in the house made some excuse to proffer assistance. The next morning Janet drove to the station, pink-cheeked, bright-eyed, triumphant. She had six boxes and a luxurious impedimenta of bags and rags. Mrs Armstrong stood on the station platform until the train pulled Londonward. And Janet was left alone with her lie, her trousseau, her dismay, and her unplanned future.

Six weeks later—it was mid-November—the head clerk of Messrs. Grant and Slaughter, dressed in deep black, was strolling aimlessly beside the sea in a tiny Mediterranean town.

"What on earth!" he said, with sudden animation and active amazement, and quickened his pace. "I thought I could not be mistaken," he said, tritely, to the woman he overtook, a trim, solid-moving figure in unmistakable Scotch tweed. "How do you do, Mrs Smith?"

Janet wheeled round in panic.

"Oh!" was all she said.

"Yes," he admitted, "it is the last place on earth to meet London friends in. I have just come from Rome, where I was sent to see an important client. My errand finished, I had a month's holiday granted me. I came here because I was

that type—never."

"Yes," said Janet, abruptly, in answer to his offer of help, "you can be of service. You can listen to me." The lawyer bowed his head. To listen was a large part of his craft, and a part in which he had had life-long training. "And when you have heard, you will have no further wish to serve me."

"I think you are mistaken," he said, gravely. "But let us sit down."

He meant to hear it all, if he heard any. And he thrust her gently down on to a natural seat on the oleander's twisted roots, and sat down himself.

"Now," he said.

And she began, eagerly: "When I begged you to be very careful not to mention my money to the Armstrongs—to Mr Armstrong—I had no object but the one I gave you. I felt that I must go on teaching, and there was nothing else I could do. And I felt that I'd be more comfortable teaching if I went on just as I was, and said nothing about the slight change in my circumstances. I think I was ashamed to own to Mrs Armstrong that I hadn't a friend or a relative on earth near whom I cared to live, to whom I could look for some companionship, if I were to give up my occupation as a governess."

"I know," said the man, slowly. "I was thinking, as I walked along here, just before I saw you, that I was the loneliest creature on earth. I loved my sister very tenderly. I gave up all other ties or friendships to be the more with her. She was like you," he said, impulsively; "you reminded me of her the first day you came to Essex Street. She lacked your fine health of course, but you were very like in several ways—very like. I miss her terribly—terribly. But I wonder, if I could have known how horribly lonely I'd have been after she went, if I should have had the courage to abstain from all other inter-