



HE "Terrace," consisting of eight gaunt houses, faced the sea, while the back rooms commanded a view of the ancient little town some half-mile distant. The beach, a waste of shingle, was desolate and bare except for a ruined bathing-machine and a few pieces of linen drying in the winter sunshine. In the offing tiny steamers left a trail of smoke, while sailing craft, their canvas glistening in the sun, slowly melted from the sight. On all these things the "Terrace" turned a stolid eye, and, counting up its gains of the previous season, wondered whether it could hold on to the next. It was a discontented "Terrace," and had become prematurely soured by a Board which refused them a pier, a band-stand, and illuminated gardens.

From the front windows of the third story of No. 1 Mrs. Cox, gazing out to sea, sighed softly. The season had been a bad one, and Mr. Cox had been even more troublesome than usual owing to tightness in the money market and the avowed preference of local publicans for cash transactions to assets in chalk and slate. In Mr. Cox's memory there had never been such a drought, and his crop of patience was nearly exhausted.

He had in his earlier days attempted to do a little work, but his health had suffered so much that his wife had become alarmed for his safety. Work invariably brought on a cough, and as he came from a family whose lungs had formed the staple conversation of their lives, he had been compelled to abandon it, and at last it came to be understood that if he would only consent to amuse himself, and not get into trouble, nothing more would be expected of him. It was not much of a life for a man of spirit, and at times it became so unbearable that Mr. Cox would disappear for days together in search of work, returning unsuccessful after many days with nerves shattered in the pursuit.

Mrs. Cox's meditations were disturbed by a knock at the front door, and, the servants having been discharged for the season, she hurried downstairs to open it not without a hope of belated lodgers: invalids in search of an east wind. A stout, middle-aged woman in widow's weeds stood on the doorstep.

"Glad to see you, my dear," said the visitor, kissing her loudly.

Mrs. Cox gave her a subdued caress in return, not from any lack of feeling, but because she did everything in a quiet and spiritless fashion.



"I've got my Uncle Joseph from London staying with us," continued the visitor, following her into the hall, "so I just got into the train and brought him down for a blow at the sea."

A question on Mrs. Cox's lips died away as a very small man who had been hidden by his niece came into sight.

"My Uncle Joseph," said Mrs. Berry; "Mr. Joseph Piper," she added.

Mr. Piper shook hands, and after a performance on the door-mat, protracted by reason of a festoon of hemp, followed his hostess into the faded drawing-room.

"And Mr. Cox?" inquired Mrs. Berry, in a cold voice.

Mrs. Cox shook her head. "He's been away this last three days," she said, flushing slightly.

"Looking for work?" suggested the visitor.

Mrs. Cox nodded, and placing the tips of her fingers together, fidgeted gently.

"Well, I hope he finds it," said Mrs. Berry, with more venom than the remark seemed to require. "Why, where's your marble clock?"

Mrs. Cox coughed. "It's being mended," she said, confusedly.

Mrs. Berry eyed her anxiously. "Don't mind him, my dear," she said, with a jerk of her head in the direction of Mr. Piper, "he's nobody. Wouldn't you like to go out on the beach a little while, uncle?"

"No," said Mr. Piper.

"I suppose Mr. Cox took the clock for company," remarked Mrs. Berry, after a hostile stare at her relative.

Mrs. Cox sighed and shook her head. It was no use pretending with Mrs. Berry.

"He'll pawn the clock and anything else he can lay his hands on, and when he's drunk it up come home to be made a fuss of," continued Mrs. Berry, heatedly; "that's you men."

Her glance was so fiery that Mr. Joseph Piper was unable to allow the remark to pass unchallenged.

"I never pawned a clock," he said, stroking his little grey head.

"That's a lot to boast of, isn't it?" demanded his niece; "if I hadn't got anything better than that to boast of I wouldn't boast at all."

Mr. Piper said that he was not boasting.

"It'll go on like this, my dear, till you're ruined," said the sympathetic Mrs. Berry, turning to her friend again; "what'll you do then?"

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Cox. "I've had a bad season, too, and I'm so anxious about him in spite of it all. I can't sleep at nights for fearing that he's in some trouble. I'm sure I laid awake half last night crying."

Mrs. Berry sniffed loudly, and, Mr. Piper making a remark in a low voice, turned on him with ferocity.

"What did you say?" she demanded.



"WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO GO OUT ON THE BEACH A LITTLE WHILE, UNCLE?"

"I said it does her credit," said Mr. Piper, firmly.

"I might have known it was nonsense," retorted his niece, hotly. "Can't you get him to take the pledge, Mary?"

"I couldn't insult him like that," said Mrs. Cox, with a shiver; "you don't know his

pride. He never admits that he drinks ; he says that he only takes a little for his indigestion. He'd never forgive me. When he pawns the things he pretends that somebody has stolen them, and the way he goes on at me for my carelessness is alarming. He gets worked up to such a pitch that sometimes I almost think he believes it himself."

"Rubbish," said Mrs. Berry, tartly, "you're too easy with him."

Mrs. Cox sighed, and, leaving the room, returned with a bottle of wine which was port to the look and red-currant to the taste, and a seed cake of formidable appearance. The visitors attacked these refreshments mildly, Mr. Piper sipping his wine with an obtrusive carefulness which his niece rightly regarded as a reflection upon her friend's hospitality.

"What Mr. Cox wants is a shock," she said ; "you've dropped some crumbs on the carpet, uncle."

Mr. Piper apologized and said he had got his eye on them, and would pick them up when he had finished and pick up his niece's at the same time to prevent her stooping. Mrs. Berry, in an aside to Mrs. Cox, said that her Uncle Joseph's tongue had got itself disliked on both sides of the family.

"And I'd give him one," said Mrs. Berry, returning again to the subject of Mr. Cox and shocks. "He has a gentleman's life of it here, and he would look rather silly if you were sold up and he had to do something for his living."

"It's putting the things away that is so bad," said Mrs. Cox, shaking her head ; "that clock won't last him out, I know ; he'll come back and take some of the other things. Every spring I have to go through his pockets for the tickets and get the things out again, and I mustn't say a word for fear of hurting his feelings. If I do he goes off again."

"If I were you," said Mrs. Berry, emphatically, "I'd get behind with the rent or something and have the brokers in. He'd look rather astonished if he came home and saw a broker's man sitting in a chair——"

"He'd look more astonished if he saw him sitting in a flower-pot," suggested the caustic Mr. Piper.

"I couldn't do that," said Mrs. Cox. "I couldn't stand the disgrace, even though I knew I could pay him out. As it is, Cox is always setting his family above mine."

Mrs. Berry, without ceasing to stare Mr. Piper out of countenance, shook her head, and, folding her arms, again stated her opinion that Mr. Cox wanted a shock, and expressed

a great yearning to be the humble means of giving him one.

"If you can't have the brokers in, get somebody to pretend to be one," she said, sharply ; "that would prevent him pawning any more things at any rate. Why, wouldn't he do?" she added, nodding at her uncle.

Anxiety on Mrs. Cox's face was exaggerated on that of Mr. Piper.

"Let uncle pretend to be a broker's man in for the rent," continued the excitable lady, rapidly. "When Mr. Cox turns up after his spree, tell him what his doings have brought you to, and say you'll have to go to the work-house."

"I look like a broker's man, don't I?" said Mr. Piper, in a voice more than tinged with sarcasm.

"Yes," said his niece, "that's what put it into my head."

"It's very kind of you, dear, and very kind of Mr. Piper," said Mrs. Cox, "but I couldn't think of it, I really couldn't."

"Uncle would be delighted," said Mrs. Berry, with a wilful blinking of plain facts. "He's got nothing better to do ; it's a nice house and good food, and he could sit at the open window and sniff at the sea all day long."

Mr. Piper sniffed even as she spoke, but not at the sea.

"And I'll come for him the day after tomorrow," said Mrs. Berry.

It was the old story of the stronger will : Mrs. Cox after a feeble stand gave way altogether, and Mr. Piper's objections were demolished before he had given them full utterance. Mrs. Berry went off alone after dinner, secretly glad to have got rid of Mr. Piper, who was making a self-invited stay at her house of indefinite duration ; and Mr. Piper, in his new rôle of broker's man, essayed the part with as much help as a clay pipe and a pint of beer could afford him.

That day and the following he spent amid the faded grandeurs of the drawing-room, gazing longingly at the wide expanse of beach and the tumbling sea beyond. The house was almost uncannily quiet, an occasional tinkle of metal or crash of china from the basement giving the only indication of the industrious Mrs. Cox ; but on the day after the quiet of the house was broken by the return of its master, whose annoyance, when he found the drawing-room clock stolen and a man in possession, was alarming in its vehemence. He lectured his wife severely on her mismanagement, and after some hesitation announced his intention of going



through her books. Mrs. Cox gave them to him, and, armed with pen and ink and four square inches of pink blotting-paper, he performed feats of balancing which made him a very Blondin of finance.

"I shall have to get something to do," he said, gloomily, laying down his pen.

"Yes, dear," said his wife.

Mr. Cox leaned back in his chair and, wiping his pen on the blotting-paper, gazed in a speculative fashion round the room. "Have you got any money?" he inquired.

For reply his wife rummaged in her pocket, and after a lengthy search produced a bunch of keys, a thimble, a needle-case, two pocket-handkerchiefs, and a halfpenny. She put this last on the table, and Mr. Cox, whose temper had been mounting steadily, threw it to the other end of the room.

"I can't help it," said Mrs. Cox, wiping her eyes. "I'm sure I've done all I could to keep a home together. I can't even raise money on anything."

Mr. Cox, who had been glancing round the room again, looked up sharply.

"Why not?" he inquired.

"The broker's man," said Mrs. Cox, nervously; "he's made an inventory of everything and he holds us responsible."

Mr. Cox leaned back in his chair. "This is a pretty state of things," he blurted, wildly. "Here have I been walking my legs off looking for work, any work so long as it's honest labour, and I come back to find a broker's man sitting in my own house and drinking up my beer."

He rose and walked up and down the room, and Mrs. Cox, whose nerves were hardly equal to the occasion, slipped on her bonnet and announced her intention of trying to obtain a few necessaries on credit. Her husband waited in indignant silence

until he heard the front-door close behind her, and then stole softly upstairs to have a look at the fell destroyer of his domestic happiness.

Mr. Piper, who was already very tired of his imprisonment, looked up curiously as he heard the door pushed open, and discovered an elderly gentleman with an appearance of great stateliness staring at him. In the ordinary way he was one of the meekest of men, but the insolence of this stare was outrageous. Mr. Piper, opening his mild blue eyes wide, stared back. Whereupon Mr. Cox, fumbling in his vest-pocket, found a pair of folders, and putting them astride his nose, gazed at the pseudo-broker's man with crushing effect.

"What do you want here?" he asked, at length. "Are you the father of one of the

servants?"

"I'm the father of all the servants in the house," said Mr. Piper, sweetly.

"Don't answer me, sir," said Mr. Cox, with much pomposity; "you're an eyesore to an honest man, a vulture, a harpy."

Mr. Piper pondered.

"How do you know what's an eyesore to an honest man?" he asked, at length.

Mr. Cox smiled scornfully.

"Where is your warrant or order, or what-

ever you call it?" he demanded.

"I've shown it to Mrs. Cox," said Mr. Piper.

"Show it to me," said the other.

"I've complied with the law by showing it once," said Mr. Piper, bluffing, "and I'm not going to show it again."

Mr. Cox stared at him disdainfully, beginning at his little sleek grey head and travelling slowly downwards to his untidy boots and then back again. He repeated this several times, until Mr. Piper, unable to bear it patiently, began to eye him in the same fashion.



"YOU'RE AN EYESORE TO AN HONEST MAN!"

"What are you looking at, vulture?" demanded the incensed Mr. Cox.

"Three spots o' grease on a dirty weskit," replied Mr. Piper, readily, "a pair o' bow legs in a pair of somebody else's trousers, and a shabby coat wore under the right arm, with carrying off," he paused a moment as though to make sure, "with carrying off of a drawing-room clock."

He regretted this retort almost before he had finished it, and rose to his feet with a faint cry of alarm as the heated Mr. Cox first locked the door and put the key in his pocket, and then threw up the window.

"Vulture!" he cried, in a terrible voice.

"Yes, sir," said the trembling Mr. Piper.

Mr. Cox waved his hand towards the window.

"Fly," he said, briefly.

Mr. Piper tried to form his white lips into a smile, and his knees trembled beneath him.

"Did you hear what I said?" demanded Mr. Cox. "What are you waiting for? If you don't fly out of the window I'll throw you out."

"Don't touch me," screamed Mr. Piper, retreating behind a table, "it's all a mistake. All a joke. I'm not a broker's man. Ha! ha!"

"Eh?" said the other; "not a broker's man? What are you, then?"

In eager, trembling tones Mr. Piper told him, and, gathering confidence as he proceeded, related the conversation which had led up to his imposture. Mr. Cox listened in a dazed fashion, and as he concluded threw himself into a chair, and gave way to a terrible outburst of grief.

"The way I've worked for that woman," he said, brokenly, "to think it should come to this! The deceit of the thing; the wickedness of it. My heart is broken; I shall never be the same man again—never!"

Mr. Piper made a sympathetic noise.

"It's been very unpleasant for me," he said, "but my niece is so masterful."

"I don't blame you," said Mr. Cox, kindly; "shake hands."

They shook hands solemnly, and Mr. Piper, muttering something about a draught, closed the window.

"You might have been killed in trying to jump out of that window," said Mr. Cox; "fancy the feelings of those two deceitful women, then."

"Fancy *my* feelings!" said Mr. Piper, with a shudder. "Playing with fire, that's what I call it. My niece is coming this afternoon; it would serve her right if you gave her a

fright by telling her you *had* killed me. Perhaps it would be a lesson to her not to be so officious."

"It would serve 'em both right," agreed Mr. Cox; "only Mrs. Berry might send for the police."

"I never thought of that," said Mr. Piper, fondling his chin.

"I might frighten my wife," mused the amiable Mr. Cox; "it would be a lesson to her not to be deceitful again. And, by Jove, I'll get some money from her to escape with; I know she's got some, and if she hasn't she will have in a day or two. There's a little pub at Newstead, eight miles from here, where we could be as happy as fighting-cocks with a fiver or two. And while we're there enjoying ourselves my wife'll be half out of her mind trying to account for your disappearance to Mrs. Berry."

"It sounds all right," said Mr. Piper, cautiously, "but she won't believe you. You don't look wild enough to have killed anybody."

"I'll look wild enough when the time comes," said the other, nodding. "You get on to the White Horse at Newstead and wait for me. I'll let you out at the back way. Come along."

"But you said it was eight miles," said Mr. Piper.

"Eight miles easy walking," rejoined Mr. Cox. "Or there's a train at three o'clock. There's a sign-post at the corner there, and if you don't hurry I shall be able to catch you up. Good-bye."

He patted the hesitating Mr. Piper on the back, and letting him out through the garden, indicated the road. Then he returned to the drawing-room, and carefully rumpling his hair, tore his collar from the stud, overturned a couple of chairs and a small table, and sat down to wait as patiently as he could for the return of his wife.

He waited about twenty minutes, and then he heard a key turn in the door below and his wife's footsteps slowly mounting the stairs. By the time she reached the drawing-room his tableau was complete, and she fell back with a faint shriek at the frenzied figure which met her eyes.

"Hush," said the tragedian, putting his finger to his lips.

"Henry, what is it?" cried Mrs. Cox. "What *is* the matter?"

"The broker's man," said her husband, in a thrilling whisper. "We had words—he struck me. In a fit of fury I—I—choked him."



"Much?" inquired the bewildered woman.

"*Much?*" repeated Mr. Cox, frantically. "I've killed him and hidden the body. Now I must escape and fly the country."

The bewilderment on Mrs. Cox's face increased; she was trying to reconcile her husband's statement with a vision of a trim little figure which she had seen ten minutes before with its head tilted backwards studying the sign-post, and which she was now quite certain was Mr. Piper.

"Are you sure he's dead?" she inquired.

"Dead as a door-nail," replied Mr. Cox, promptly. "I'd no idea he was such a delicate little man. What am I to do? Every moment adds to my danger. I must fly. How much money have you got?"

The question explained everything. Mrs. Cox closed her lips with a snap and shook her head.

"Don't play the fool," said her husband, wildly; "my neck's in danger."

"I haven't got anything," asseverated Mrs. Cox; "it's no good looking like that, Henry. I can't make money."

Mr. Cox's reply was interrupted by a loud knocking at the hall-door, which he was pleased to associate with the police. It gave him a fine opportunity for melodrama, in the midst of which his wife, rightly guessing that Mrs. Berry had returned according to arrangement, went to the door to admit her. The visitor was only busy two minutes on the door-mat, but in that time Mrs. Cox was able in low whispers to apprise her of the state of affairs.

"That's my uncle all over," said Mrs. Berry, fiercely; "that's just the mean trick I should have expected of him. You leave 'em to me, my dear."

She followed her friend into the drawing-room, and having shaken hands with Mr. Cox, drew her handkerchief from her pocket and applied it to her eyes.

"She's told me all about it," she said, nodding at Mrs. Cox, "and it's worse than you think, much worse. It isn't a broker's man—it's my poor uncle, Joseph Piper."

"Your *uncle!*" repeated Mr. Cox, reeling back; "the broker's man your *uncle?*"

Mrs. Berry sniffed. "It was a little joke on our part," she admitted, sinking into a



"STUDYING THE SIGN-POST."

chair and holding her handkerchief to her face. "Poor uncle; but I daresay he's happier where he is."

Mr. Cox wiped his brow, and then, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, stared at her in well-simulated amazement.

"See what your joking has led to," he said, at last. "I have got to be a wanderer over the face of the earth, all on account of your jokes."

"It was an accident," murmured Mrs. Berry, "and nobody knows he was here, and I'm sure, poor dear, he hadn't got much to live for."

"It's very kind of you to look at it in that way, Susan, I'm sure," said Mrs. Cox.

"I was never one to make mischief," said Mrs. Berry. "It's no good crying over spilt milk. If uncle's killed he's killed, and there's an end of it. But I don't think it's quite safe for Mr. Cox to stay here."

"Just what I say," said that gentleman, eagerly; "but I've got no money."

"You get away," said Mrs. Berry, with a warning glance at her friend, and nodding to emphasize her words; "leave us some address to write to, and we must try and scrape twenty or thirty pounds to send you."

"Thirty?" said Mr. Cox, hardly able to believe his ears.

Mrs. Berry nodded. "You'll have to make that do to go on with," she said, pondering. "And as soon as you get it you had better get as far away as possible before poor uncle is discovered. Where are we to send the money?"

Mr. Cox affected to consider.

"The White Horse, Newstead," he said, at length, in a whisper; "better write it down."

Mrs. Berry obeyed; and, this business being completed, Mr. Cox, after trying in vain to obtain a shilling or two cash in hand, bade them a pathetic farewell and went off down the path, for some reason best known to himself, on tiptoe.

For the first two days Messrs. Cox and Piper waited with exemplary patience for the remittance, the demands of the landlord, a man of coarse fibre, being met in the meantime by the latter gentleman from his own slender resources. They were both reasonable men, and knew from experience the difficulty of raising money at short notice; but on the fourth day, their funds being nearly exhausted, an urgent telegram was dispatched to Mrs. Cox.

Mr. Cox was alone when the reply came, and Mr. Piper, returning to the inn-parlour, was amazed and distressed at his friend's appearance. Twice he had to address him before he seemed to be aware of his presence, and then Mr. Cox, breathing hard and staring at him strangely, handed him the message.

"Eh?" said Mr. Piper, in amaze, as he read slowly: "*No—need—send—money—Uncle—Joseph—has—come—back.—BERRY.*" "What does it mean? Is she mad?"

Mr. Cox shook his head, and, taking the paper from him, held it at arm's length and regarded it at an angle.

"How can you be there when you're supposed to be dead?" he said at length.

"How can I be there when I'm here?" rejoined Mr. Piper, no less reasonably.

Both gentlemen lapsed into a wondering silence, devoted to the attempted solution of

their own riddles. Finally Mr. Cox, seized with a bright idea that the telegram had got altered in transmission, went off to the post-office and dispatched another, which went straight to the heart of things:—

"*Don't—understand—is—Uncle—Joseph—alive?*"

A reply was brought to the inn-parlour an hour later on. Mr. Cox opened it, gave one glance at it, and then with a suffocating cry handed it to the other. Mr. Piper took it gingerly, and his eyebrows almost disappeared as he read:—

"*Yes—smoking—in—drawing-room.*"

His first strong impression was that it was a case for the Psychical Research Society, but this romantic view faded in favour of a simple solution, propounded by Mr. Cox with much crispness, that Mrs. Berry was leaving the realms of fact for those of romance. His actual words were shorter, but the meaning is the same.

"I'll go home and ask to see you," he said, fiercely; "that'll bring things to a head, I should think."

"And she'll say I've gone back to London, perhaps," said Mr. Piper, gifted with sudden clearness of vision. "You can't show her up unless you take me with you, and that'll show us up. That's her artfulness; that's Susan all over."

"She's a wicked, untruthful woman," gasped Mr. Cox.

"I never did like Susan," said Mr. Piper, with acerbity, "never."

Mr. Cox said he could easily understand it, and then, as a forlorn hope, sat down and wrote a long letter to his wife, in which, after dwelling at great length on the lamentable circumstances surrounding the sudden demise of Mr. Piper, he bade her thank Mrs. Berry for her well-meant efforts to ease his mind, and asked for the immediate dispatch of the money promised.

A reply came the following evening from Mrs. Berry herself. It was a long letter, and not only long, but badly written and crossed. It began with the weather, asked after Mr. Cox's health, and referred to the writer's; described with much minuteness a strange headache which had attacked Mrs. Cox, together with a long list of the remedies prescribed and the effects of each, and wound up in an out-of-the-way corner, in a vein of cheery optimism which reduced both readers to the verge of madness.

"Dear Uncle Joseph has quite recovered, and, in spite of a little nervousness—he was always rather timid—at meeting you again,

has consented to go to the White Horse to satisfy you that he is alive. I daresay he will be with you as soon as this letter—perhaps help you to read it.”

Mr. Cox laid the letter down with extreme care, and, coughing gently, glanced in a sheepish fashion at the goggle-eyed Mr. Piper.

For some time neither of them spoke. Mr. Cox was the first to break the silence and—when he had finished—Mr. Piper said “Hush.”

“Besides, it does no good,” he added.

“It does *me* good,” said Mr. Cox, recommencing.

Mr. Piper held up his hand with a startled

“’Bout—’bout five minutes,” he stammered.

“We were so glad dear uncle wasn’t hurt much,” continued Mrs. Berry, smiling, and shaking her head at Mr. Cox; “but the idea of your burying him in the geranium-bed; we haven’t got him clean yet.”

Mr. Piper, giving utterance to uncouth noises, quitted the room hastily, but Mr. Cox sat still and stared at her dumbly.

“Weren’t you surprised to see him?” inquired his tormentor.

“Not after your letter,” said Mr. Cox, finding his voice at last, and speaking with an attempt at chilly dignity. “Nothing could surprise me much after that.”



“MRS. BERRY ENTERED THE ROOM.”

gesture for silence. The words died away on his friend’s lips as a familiar voice was heard in the passage, and the next moment Mrs. Berry entered the room and stood regarding them.

“I ran down by the same train to make sure you came, uncle,” she remarked. “How long have you been here?”

Mr. Piper moistened his lips and gazed wildly at Mr. Cox for guidance.

Mrs. Berry smiled again.

“Ah, I’ve got another little surprise for you,” she said, briskly. “Mrs. Cox was so upset at the idea of being alone while you were a wanderer over the face of the earth, that she and I have gone into partnership. We have had a proper deed drawn up, so that now there are two of us to look after things. Eh? What did you say?”

“I was thinking,” said Mr. Cox.