

An Alarming Sacrifice.

S1902A

BY GEO. MANVILLE FENN.



WALK through St. Paul's Churchyard any sunny morning and most probably you will meet a knot of magnificent men. They will be either fair or dark, giants of grand physique, between thirty and forty, beards Aaronesque, clear-skinned, decidedly handsome, but of the barber's dummy waxen type, oiled, cleaned up, scented, dressed in the newest City tailor style, smiling with smug self-satisfaction as, with heads thrown back and portly presence, they swing along the wide pavement; in short, suggestive of the show-pen and ready for the judge.

What are they? Admirers of the lady butterflies attracted by the shops that border that windy place—contented Adonises of a vast modern type? Oh, dear, no! Drapers' town travellers of the great wholesale houses: the noble-looking beings who often become the set smiling shop-walkers of pushing establishments.

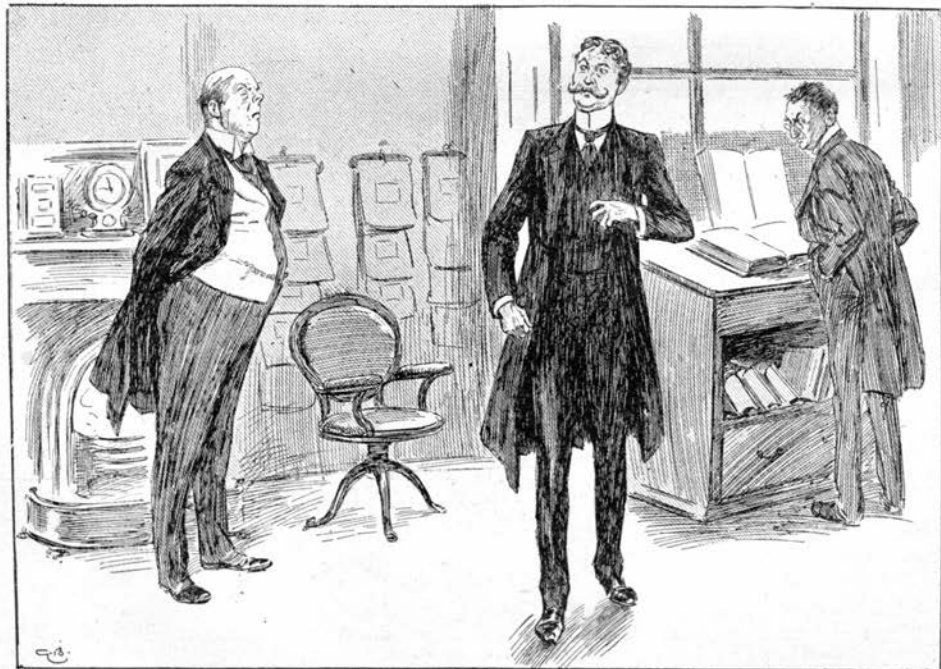
James Champion Fishburn was one of these gentlemen, but proving, in spite of his noble presence, a failure with his employers—in other words, not bringing in sufficiently extensive "lines" in his order-book—there was a quarrel, and the wholesale company discharged him. As J. C. F. put it, he resigned,

decided to turn shop-walker at once, dropped the "James" at the beginning of his name, and, leaving the Champion, balanced it at the other end with an addition, took four small shops in the middle of a North London row, and turned them into one by knocking out doorways right and left. Then with the prophetic intention of adding the rest of the row from time to time till he had secured the whole block, he started in business for himself under the title of "Champion Fishburn and Company," in very large gilt letters.

Unfortunately, he had no capital, but he had plenty of enterprise, and he was known to the minor, pushing wholesale houses who were hungry to get rid of cheap, flashy stock.

Champion Fishburn's appearance, smile, the bend of his huge loins, and the soft, insinuating rub of his smooth white hands were sufficient guarantee for the wholesale forcers of unnecessaries upon the feminine market, and they agreed among themselves that the site chosen was right and that he would do and develop a fair business; so they supplied the capital—in goods—and filled his four-in-hand shop most generously, only taking bills at one, two, three, four, or more months as security.

Champion Fishburn and Company began business, after the dissemination of a large



"THE WHOLESALE COMPANY DISCHARGED HIM."

supply of bills, with a shop-walker—C. F. himself—who was the admiration of the neighbourhood and a perfect Rimmel to his own premises as he paced, highly scented, from shop to shop and generally presided over the staff, three young ladies or priestesses of his gaily-decked altar.

Business came as a matter of course, for the goods ticketed in the windows were mostly attractive bargain baits, and a fairly brisk trade was carried on; but where there is no substantial capital and catch custom is secured by selling articles with the finest margin of profit, and often with none at all, it becomes—especially as drapery and haberdashery goods deteriorate rapidly from constant exhibition—exceedingly difficult to meet bills every month, and ruinous when the same have to be renewed.

It was so with the new establishment. Champion Fishburn and Company had puffing new lines of goods in the windows, stacks of empty paper boxes in the shops by way of stock, and, worst of all, fresh lines in the proprietor's forehead as he paced the establishment and kept up a smile which grew more forced and ghastly every day.

"The governor's being hit," said Miss Smith, the senior young lady. "You girls can do as you like; I mean to be on the look-out."

"It's going to be 'an alarming crash,' and no mistake," said the proprietor to himself, as with aching and swollen legs he had gone into the counting-house one afternoon to rest them upon a chair. "I can't keep it up. Wish I was back in Doctors' Commons again. Hanged if I know what to do. Might have an annual sale—at the end of the first six months! Halloo! What the deuce is the matter now? Quarrel among the girls? Row to give them an excuse to go, perhaps. Well, Miss Smith," he said, severely, as that young lady entered, "what is it?"

"Will you please come into number two, sir? We've caught one of those kleptomaniacs."

Champion Fishburn's heavy legs came down on the tapestry carpet and he rose, "swelling wisely" as he put on his most noble aspect and followed his assistant, though no guidance was needed, hysterical sobs, cries, and even shrieks telling where the trouble had arisen.

"Shut those doors!" cried the chief, in a voice that would have been invaluable to a general, and his staff rushed to obey the command, leaving him alone with a fine-looking, showily-dressed lady sitting stiffly

back on one of those particularly uncomfortable, attenuated drapers' shop chairs, wringing her gloves—on her hands—swaying herself about, and threatening to fall heavily upon the floor.

"Oh! oh! oh! oh! oh!" she cried, in a regular gamut, beginning at C below the stave and soaring up a long way towards the second octave above. "It is an insult! Horrible! I am a lady. How dare they? Oh! oh! oh! oh!"

The last "Oh's!" began above the stave and came down as if to meet the three young ladies, who, after closing and bolting the swing doors, had hurried back. "How dare they? I'll have redress."

"Miss Smith," said the proprietor, haughtily, "will you have the goodness to explain the meaning of this?"

"Yes, sir. I was serving her, sir, with lace-bordered handkerchiefs, and she said they weren't good enough and asked for gloves, and while I was getting them she slipped I don't know how many handkerchiefs in her muff."

"Oh, you wicked woman! A trick! A trap! I'll have in the police. I am a lady. I couldn't have done such a thing."

"I'm sure she did, sir," said Miss Smith, "and—there, sir, look at that!"

Miss Smith's clever, sharp fingers had made a snatch at a white corner visible inside the lady's sealskin muff, and the act drew out not only one new folded pocket-handkerchief but a portion of two more.

"Oh, disgraceful! My own handkerchief. How dare you?"

"But there are two more, madam," said Fishburn, severely, "and I perceive that the first bears our gummed-on ticket."

"Yes, sir," said the second young lady, "and these others have it, too."

"Oh!" shrieked the lady. "Then it is a trick—a trap. You wicked creatures, you must have thrust them there."

"Please, sir, I ain't sure," said the third assistant, who was very young, slow, and stupid, and drawled in her utterance, "but I was watching her, and I think she took one of the rolls of satin ribbon marked 'Slightly Soiled' out of the basket and put it under her mantle."

"What?" shrieked the lady. "How dare you?"

The plump young assistant did not say how she dared, but she showed the way, for she turned back the left fold of the wearer's stiff silk mantle and plunged in a hand, to withdraw two rolls of wide satin ribbon, one

of which fell with a rap on the floor, unrolling as it went.

"She's got a great big pocket in there, sir," said the girl, showing her teeth.

"Hah!" said the proprietor, in his sternest way. "How fortunate that the establishment is not crowded with customers! Young ladies, bring this person to my private room. I will have her searched. Miss Smith, summon the porter to fetch the police."

"No, no, no! Oh, pray don't! Pray don't!"

"Into my room, madam," cried the proprietor, so grandly that the culprit allowed herself to be taken into custody by two of the assistants, and a procession was formed, the majestic shop-walker leading the way and the plump young lady coming last, bearing the annexed goods and enjoying what she afterwards called "the fun"—it being an agreeable change from dressing the shop-window and folding and unfolding stock.

The loud, hysterical cries had sunk into pitiful sobs and protests as the lady was taken into the principal's room, that gentleman giving his chief assistant an order or two and then discreetly withdrawing till he was summoned by Miss Smith, who said nothing till he was face to face with the moaning and sobbing woman, holding now a handsome gold-mounted scent-bottle to her nostrils.

"She had this card of silk lace, sir, in her great inside pocket and that half-dozen pairs of gloves, sir."

"Purchases—purchases, my good woman," sobbed the culprit.

"They weren't wrapped up, sir."

"No; I threw away the paper when I opened them in my carriage," sobbed the culprit, feebly.

"Is your carriage waiting outside, madam?"

"No, no, no! I dismissed my coachman, as I had an engagement in town."

"Not our marks, Miss Smith?" said the draper, as he turned over the choice goods.

"Oh, dear, no, sir," was the assistant's reply, and then to herself: "The

idea! We haven't got anything so good on the premises."

"H'm! I see: a regular experienced shop-lifter."

"Oh, no, no, no, no!"

"There is no doubt about it, madam," said the draper, running his eyes over his customer's expensive apparel, and wondering how it had been obtained. "Well, I am very sorry. I dislike the publicity of these matters, but it is a case for the police."

"No, no! I beg! I pray! Mister—I don't know your name," cried the lady, frantically; "let me explain. I will pay anything. The exposure would kill me. Pray, pray send these young ladies away, and I can explain so that you will be ready to pity me."

"You confess, then, madam, that you did steal these goods?"

"Yes—yes—yes!" came, in company with a burst of sobs. "But the *exposé*; pray send these young ladies away and let me explain."

"Do you wish us to go, sir?" said Miss Smith, shortly.

The proprietor shrugged his shoulders and pursed up his lips.

"Well—er—yes," he said, grandly; "perhaps it would be as well. I will hear what this person has to say."

The three assistants retired unwillingly, to form a cluster in the shop and



"HAVE PITY ON ME."

begin discussing the matter in whispers, while as soon as the door was closed upon them the prisoner started from her seat, caught one of Fishburn's hands in hers, dropped upon her knees, and flung back her head.

"Oh, no, no!" she sobbed, passionately. "Have pity on me. I am a lady, and you—great, noble-looking man—you cannot trample a weak, helpless creature in the mire."

"I am very sorry, madam," he said, unyieldingly, "but I must have in the police. I cannot—I dare not, in the interests of trade, overlook such an offence."

"Oh, no, no, no! Mercy, mercy! I am afflicted with that horrible mania. When I have a fit I know not what I am doing. It is not a case for police, but for some great physician."

"If it is, madam, I will be as merciful as in the interests of justice I can be. What is your name?"

"My name?" cried the lady, releasing the hand to which she had clung and fumbling with the handsome crocodile-skin handbag depending from her wrist till she had extracted a gold case, out of which she, with trembling fingers, withdrew a card.

"Mrs. Concannon, 14, Replica Road, Bayswater," read the draper. "And this, of course, madam, is your husband's address?"

"My husband?" cried the lady, wonderingly. "I have no husband, sir. He died ten years ago, and it was his loss that unhinged my reason. I'm afraid that I have often been guilty of taking things since then," she added, plaintively.

"This is very, very sad, madam."

"Dreadful, sir," said the culprit, piteously; "but it is my misfortune, not my fault. I am not in want of money. It is a terrible temptation that comes over me sometimes. Is it likely that I, with a clear income of two thousand a year from dividends of Consols, should want to stoop to petty theft?"

"Well—er—no, madam, it does seem unaccountable," said Fishburn, who had somehow felt a thrill of excitement run through his nerves at the sound of two thousand a year.

"It is horrible, sir, I repeat," sobbed the woman, passionately. "Mine is a case for pity, not for punishment. Pity me, then, sir," she cried, clinging to his hands again, "and let me pay for what I took."

"Impossible, ma'am," said Fishburn, firmly, and somehow he began to hold the pair of plump, soft, clinging hands rather more tightly. "But have you no friends whom I could consult with?"

"I? Friends? Oh, no; I am a wretched lonely woman. Think, too, of the disgrace."

Just then Champion Fishburn could not think of the disgrace, but only of the widow, certainly not forty, lady-like, pleasant-featured, and with two thousand a year in her own right.

Two thousand a year! What could not a man in such a business as his do with two thousand a year? In the first place he could be independent of his backers, add three or four more shops to the present, and afford a couple of male assistants. With two thousand a year he could soon be worth a hundred thousand pounds.

He was a business man, full of energy, and he had the suppliant at his feet and fully in his power. What should he do? Had not Nature endowed him with a handsome, a noble presence, which he knew must be impressing the trembling, appealing woman at his feet? She was growing more and more attractive—in fine, getting handsome by degrees, while her fortune grew beautiful in a bound.

"The ball is at my feet and I will kick it," he said to himself, making use of a most unfortunate metaphor. "Ruin is on one side, for I can never keep those bills afloat; on the other—well—not youth and beauty, but comfortable, mature age and wealth. Rise, madam," he cried, loftily, "and take this chair. I feel ashamed and grieved to see so beautiful a lady humbled and abased at my feet."

"Oh, sir!" she murmured, softly, as she yielded to the pressure of his hands and took the chair he led her to. "Then you will take pity on my weakness and forgive me?"

As she spoke she made good use of her rather fine eyes, and unconsciously changed the draper's determination.

"No, madam," he said, firmly; "not quite forgive you; but I cannot bring myself to hand over a lady of such charm and position in society to the law she has outraged."

"No, no, no; you will not do that," she murmured, with a passionately appealing look.

"No, madam," he continued, drawing himself up, and certainly looking a splendid specimen of humanity, "but I will take pity on your position."

He took her hand now between both of his. "You have no one to protect you, no one to save you from the consequences of such acts as yours?"

"Oh, sir," she faltered, "what do you mean?"

"To save you, if I can, from perhaps ending your days in gaol."

"Mr.—Mr.—!"

"Fishburn, madam; Champion Fishburn. I am softened, impressed by pity for the position of a lonely, weak, but beautiful woman. Let me be your champion, madam, to the end."

"My—my champion?" she faltered. "I do not understand."

"Let me speak plainly then, madam. Let me be your husband. I am free, young—comparatively—and I will be your protector, and—and—and, under the circumstances, as good a husband as you could get."

"I—I marry again? Oh, what would poor Edward say?"

"I don't know, madam," said Fishburn, sharply; "but seeing the position in which you stand, if late husbands have plenty of common sense I should think he would say you had made a deuced good bargain."

"But I—stoop to marry a tradesman?"

"No, madam; not stoop—look up to a protector—an honest man, madam, and I'm afraid I couldn't as a British tradesman say that I was marrying an honest woman."

"True," replied the lady, sadly; "but remember, it is my misfortune, not my fault."

"I'm afraid, madam, that the law will not believe that tale. The law is very hard sometimes, as hard, I'm told, as plank beds and oakum."

"Oh, Mr. Champion, pray, pray be a gentleman."

"I'll match the article as near as I can, madam."

"But it is so sudden, sir. I never for a moment imagined—"

"No, madam, neither did I.—But two thousand a year!" he thought.—"Now, madam, I'm a man of prompt dealings. Which is it to be: my wife or—you know what?"

"Not the police?"

"Yes, madam, the police."

"Oh, sir," she faltered, "you are cruel."

"Only to be kind, madam. Yes or no?"

There was a

long, deep sigh, a softening of the lady's eyes, and then a brightening, as they slowly took in the proposer's noble proportions.

"You will be kind to me?" she murmured.

"As a man can be."

"And never revert to the—er—slip which brought us together?"

"Never, on my honour as a man. Now, madam, yes or no?"

"Yes," she faltered, softly and slowly, withdrawing her right glove and displaying three or four genuine and handsome rings.

"Heigho!" she sighed, as the contract was sealed by the champion pressing his lips to the soft white hand. "Who could have thought it?"

"Who, indeed?" said Fishburn, gallantly.

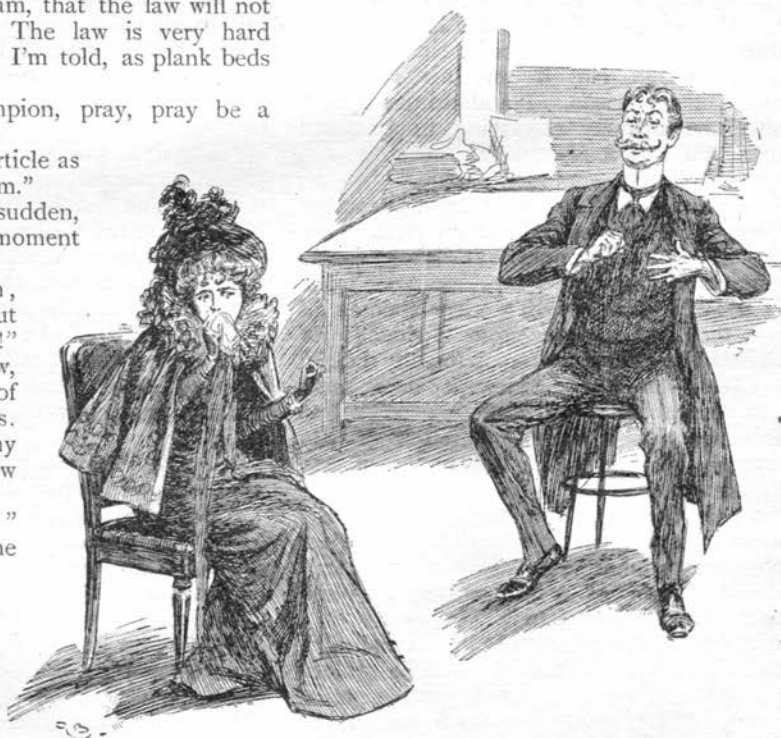
"Ah, who, indeed?" sighed the lady, looking up at the speaker in quite a satisfied way. "It is dreadfully weak of me, but you really are a very fine man."

"I am," he said, coolly. "I have been told so often."

"Ah! By ladies?"

"No, madam; by my masculine friends," he replied, with dignity.

Meanwhile the three assistants had been



"BUT IT IS SO SUDDEN, SIR."

wonderingly waiting, and their surprise was increased by the action of their chief, who came out of his private room at last, hat in hand, paying no heed to them whatever, but ushering the kleptomaniac to the door.

"You will not mind riding in a common hansom cab?" he said, with the recollection of the dismissed carriage flashing before his eyes.

"No, not now, with you," she said, softly.

"Well!" said Miss Smith to her fellows.

"I never did," said the second.

"I say, just look," said the plump youngest, giggling, for Champion Fishburn was handing the lady into the cab and following directly, but finding a want of room for his goodly proportions as he cried aloud:—

"Bayswater!"

A short time after he helped the lady to alight at a small but charmingly-furnished house, and left her an hour later with all the preparations settled and he in the highest of spirits.

"I don't like the look of things at all," Miss Smith had said, earlier in the evening. "I knew we were going wrong, as I said before, but this beats everything, and I shall resign."

"Then so will we," said the other two. "Let's all get somewhere together again, dears."

But Champion Fishburn and Company did not wait for the young ladies to resign, he dismissed them at once upon his return.

Then matters progressed swiftly. The shutters of the four shops remained up, with huge bills displayed outside:—

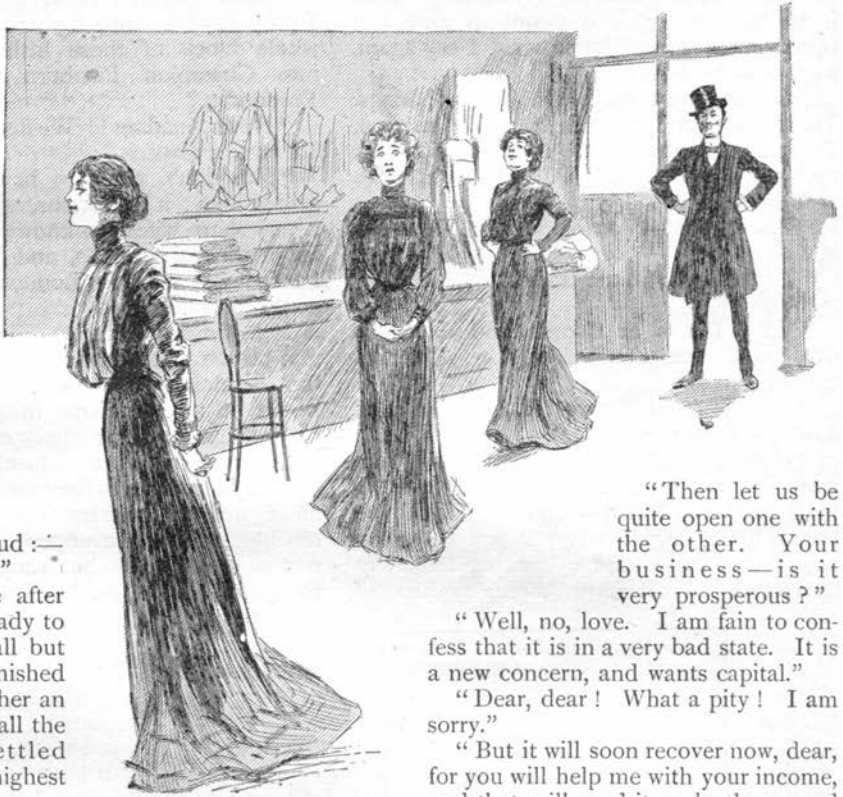
NOTICE.—Closed for Stocktaking.—May 24th. Be ready! Commencement of our Fourteen Days' Surplus Sale.

That bill was stuck on the very day that Champion Fishburn and Company were married by license and went down to the seaside for half a honeymoon.

It was on the morning after their arrival that Mrs. Fishburn beamed upon her lord from her side of the hotel breakfast-table and cooed forth:—

"I want us to be very happy, darling."

"Yes, love; the wish is mutual."



"DISMISSED."

"Then let us be quite open one with the other. Your business—is it very prosperous?"

"Well, no, love. I am fain to confess that it is in a very bad state. It is a new concern, and wants capital."

"Dear, dear! What a pity! I am sorry."

"But it will soon recover now, dear, for you will help me with your income, and that will send it up by leaps and bounds."

"Ah, but then, you see, I have no income."

"What?" he cried, excitedly.

"Not a shilling," she said, coolly. "I have a little jewellery worth, say, a hundred pounds."

"But the house—the furniture?" he cried, aghast.

"Oh, they belong to the landlady, of course. I was only a monthly tenant."

"And the carriage?"

"What carriage?"

"Sold!" cried the champion, with a groan. "Oh, woman! Treacherous, deceitful woman!"

"Hush, dear! The waiter is coming into the room."

"Curse the waiter, madam! Let him take the slightest notice and I'll be hung for murdering him."

"Don't be foolish, lovey. You've married a very nice wife who idolizes you; and as for me, I believe I have got the handsomest husband in London."

"You, then, are not a lady?"

"For shame, sir! Do I look like anything else?"

"Oh, I don't know," he groaned. "What is to be done? You penniless and I a ruined man, almost bankrupt. I say again, what is to be done?"

"Oh, we must make the best of things. You have a good shop in a good situation. Re-open as soon as you get back and work up a good sale trade. I'll help you, dear.—More sugar?"

"Bah! No!—You help me? What can you do?"

"I? Oh, I'm in the trade."

"You?"

"Yes; I was at Cooper and Swinger's five years, and I'm well up in all calico crams."

"In all *what?*" roared the deluded husband, furiously.

"Well, love, tricks of the trade. From what I know of you, Cham—no, lovey, I shall call you Sham—you're a deal too honest to get on. I can put you up to no end of nice little ways of making money in the trade. We'll have monthly sales of

bankrupt stocks. *Awful sacrifices. Alarming crashes. Ruinous purchases. Failures in the City.* I know. Save no end of money in window-dressing by having the panes whitewashed and bill-covered half the time. I'll show you how to do the trick and bring the women crowding in to our sales. But you'll have to get rid of those three girls."

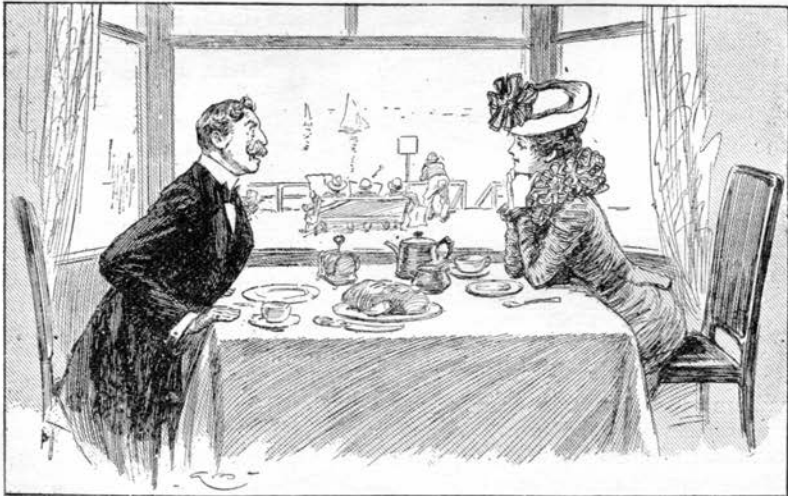
"They're gone," said Fishburn, sulkily.

"That's right. Now, look here, Sham. I prophesy that with my help you'll have the whole block of those little houses turned into Champion Fishburn and Company's Emporium."

"Never, madam! We'll separate at once. I'll have a divorce."

"No, don't, darling; have some of this grilled ham; it's delicious. You've married a very sharp wife who knows the cheap trade far better than you do, and I've married the handsomest man in London. What more could we want?"

Mr. James Champion Fishburn did not say, but he softened down as he saw that in the diamond cut diamond transaction it would be wise to make the best of it; and he did, his wife's prophecy coming true, for by degrees the whole block was absorbed, the people coming in their thousands. These all agreed in conversation that it was a terribly catchy, elevenpence-three-farthing sort of a business—but they went there all the same.



"I'M WELL UP IN ALL CALICO CRAMS."