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## *Christmas 1913*

'You've done a splendid job on that window, lass; I've never seen it look so bonny. The only thing is, it'll attract a squad of bairns until all hours.'

'Well, what's the window for but for the bairns at Christmas, because the grown-ups rarely stop and look at it.'

'Aye, there's that in it. What time is it?'

Arthur Conway took from his pocket a large silver-cased watch, sprang the lid, looked at it, then said, 'You'd better go up and have a bite while things are a bit slack. Now d'you think you'll be all right managing things on your own tonight? I could stay back if you . . .'

'Father, the night you stay back from the club will be the night the shops are on fire, both of them.' She jerked her head towards the far wall.

'Well, tonight's different. That Nan asking off early because she says her mother's bad. She's a sly one that, you know. I'd like to take a bet on it that the mother wears the trousers.'

'Father, you know it isn't often this happens. And her mother isn't well. She's never been really well since the boy was drowned.'

'That's all of six years ago, Aggie; sorrow doesn't last that long.'

'No?' Agnes raised her eyebrows.

'All right, all right; but don't come back with examples. The main thing is I hate to leave you here on your own.'

'I'll hardly be here on my own, Father, with Mr Arthur Peeble managing the *Tobacconist Emporium*.' She gave a derisive laugh as she again inclined her head towards the far wall, then said, 'That fellow's preciseness gets up my nose. The voice he puts on for the customers, you would think he was in daily contact with the Lord Mayor or the Duke. He uses it even when selling a packet of Woodbines.' She now changed her voice, mimicking, 'That will be two pence precisely . . . not, that'll be tuppence, thank you, or ta very much, as Nan would say.'

'Nan's not dealing with men, and gentlemen at that.'

'If she were she'd have more sense and be able to tell the difference between a stuffed dummy and a real man.'

'Can you?' He poked his head towards her, a grin on his face. And she nodded at him, her face unsmiling now, as she answered, 'Yes, I can, a mile off.'

'Aye, well' – he smiled indulgently at her – 'you're a clever lass. Always have been.'

Her face still unsmiling, she said, 'And I can smell soft soap a mile off, Father. And I'm not a

clever lass, I'm what you would call a b . . . fool.'

As she went to pass him he caught her arm and, his voice questioning, he said, 'What . . . what makes you think that, lass?'

'Oh' – she tossed her head – 'a number of things.'

'I thought you liked looking after the shops.' He made a small wagging movement with the flat of his hand.

'I do. I do. But . . . but they don't make up life . . . well, not entirely.'

He took his hand from her arm and, his eyes narrowing, he said, 'Do you want to be married?'

'Oh no!' She tossed her head on the exclamation. 'Do you want me to be married?'

'Well' – he pursed his lips – 'I sometimes think you should be for your own good. And there's two chances, you know, wide open.'

'Oh, Father! Henry Stalwort, forty-five if he's a day; two daughters, one nearly as old as our Jessie. But of course' – she pulled a face at him – 'he's in the wholesale business, isn't he? We might get our tiger nuts cheaper.'

'You're a cheeky monkey. Tiger nuts cheaper, indeed! And you know it is wrong to suggest that I've any motives in that quarter because, between you and me, I can't stand the man. If you want to know something, that's why I let you do the ordering this last year or so. But Pete now, Pete Chambers, he's a canny fellow.'

'Yes, yes, he's a canny fellow. And, as Mother points out, he's got a share in a tramp steamer. But

you've seen the tramp and I've seen the tramp, haven't we, Father? It's a leaky old coal-carrier. Never been further than London in its life. But you know that wouldn't matter to me; if I had any ideas about Pete, he could be the stoker on that tramp. And anyway, Father, I know Pete will not cry when I say no; he'll go to the first pub he comes across and get sozzled, and then he'll start to sing. We've seen Pete's reactions to disappointment. Look what happened last year when the three of them nearly went bankrupt. They came next door and bought the most expensive cigars, not Mexican, nor American, but Havanas. They didn't know the name of any one of them, they just wanted the best.' She started to laugh now. 'And I sold them the best. Remember? You only had that sample of five, Sin Iguales. They were down in the order book at four and eight pence. You were going to sell them at one and tuppence each. Well, I charged them six shillings and out the three of them went puffing their heads off. Then later, Teddy Moules was picked up blind drunk, wasn't he? I don't know how Pete escaped.'

'Nor do I.' He smiled at her, and she smiled gently back at the tall, grey-haired, spare-framed man, whose brown eyes were so like her own, and whose hair at one time had been auburn, too, not a grizzled grey as it was now. She could look back down on her twenty-two years and see a tall handsome man, and she recalled his words a few minutes ago, 'Sorrow doesn't last.' Arthur Conway

had been married before he met her mother. At eighteen he'd married a beautiful young girl of seventeen, who died when he was twenty-five, and he mourned her for ten years. She hadn't known this until one night, three years ago, when he had imbibed too liberally. He had sat in the store-room behind the shop here and told her how someone in the club had sung a song that recalled his Nelly to him. He was thirty-six when he married her mother, and she herself was born three years later. And here he was, a man turned sixty, still upright, but no longer handsome or as jolly as he used to be. She could recall that when she and Jessie were small he used to romp with them, crawl round the floor with them on his back. She was four years older than Jessie but he would treat them both alike. Her mind brought her abruptly back to the present when she thought, that was until two years ago when Jessie left the Dame School. She had thought then he would bring her into the shop, as he had herself, and trained her into the business, not only the confectionery and tobacconists, but the little factory across the yard where they made most of their boiled sweets and toffee. But no, Jessie had to be something else; Jessie had to be sent to the Secretarial School: no getting her hands sticky from the toffee hammer, breaking up the slabs in the long tins; no weighing out a ha'p'orth of hundreds and thousands or a penn'orth of sugar baccy; and as for the weighing out of the real baccy, of hard cut or shag or even serving the best cigars, oh no, oh

no, her father was having Jessie do nothing like that.

It was strange that she was in no way jealous of Jessie being her father's choice for betterment, because Jessie herself hadn't wanted to go to the Secretarial School, nor had her mother wanted her to go. Oh no, her mother's opinion had been, if Jessie didn't want to serve in the shops then she could help with the housework and learn to cook, and so save Maggie Rice's half week's wage of six and threepence, for Maggie was on what her mother called half-days, which started at eight and finished at one.

Agnes often thought about the disparity in wages: while she was getting fifteen shillings a week, Arthur Peeble only got a pound, and he had a young family to bring up on that, and Nan Henderson's wage was a niggardly eight and six for a long-day week. And Nan would be twenty next month and due for a rise, and she was hoping her father would stretch a point and make it ten shillings, for no matter what he said, Nan was a good assistant. But of course he was right about the trouser bit because Nan had a gay disposition and a very pretty face; what he wouldn't admit to was that she brought in a lot of custom at the week-end, especially when there was a boat in and some of the sailors would make their way up from the quayside and spend freely on chocolate or toffee for their girls. Of course, these would be the ones who didn't make straight for the pubs.

She was now going through the door into the storeroom behind the shop when her father said, 'Mind, close up at nine sharp, Aggie. It's no use hanging on; anybody who's going to spend will have spent afore then.' She gave no reply but went on through the storeroom, whose walls were lined with shelves, some holding bottles of sweets, others boxes of all sizes, then through another door and into a corridor, from which, six feet to the right of her, a door led into the storeroom of the tobacco-nist shop. This door was always kept closed so that the strong odours of tobacco, cigarettes, cigars, and leather goods should not permeate into the sweet shop. Ten feet in the other direction a staircase rose directly up by the side of the end wall and she made for this. A short flight up was a landing and the stairs turned in on themselves to another short flight, which brought her to another corridor similar to the one downstairs but more than twice its length.

The upstairs house ran above the two shops to form spacious living quarters, which were surprisingly well-furnished and comfortable. Agnes's mother, Alice Conway, had two assets: she was an excellent cook and she was a homemaker, at least where material things were concerned. Unfortunately the homemaking did not include harmony, for she was given to moods.

Strangely, her mother's moods, Agnes had noticed for some long time now, were more evident in the evening. During the day her mother seemed

happy at times, baking, trying out fresh recipes, or changing yet again the curtains, or crocheting new chair-backs. Very often, in the middle of the evening, she would be overcome by lassitude and retire to bed, often before the shops downstairs were closed. Of course, she had a very comfortable bedroom. It was situated at the far end of the house, above the sweets storeroom. Besides a double bed, it contained a resting couch, a large easy chair, and a mahogany bedroom suite, consisting of a wardrobe, dressing table, and a wash-hand stand. Next to this bedroom was a smaller one, but it was never used. In it was a single bed and also the cradle in which she and Jessie had lain many years ago. Across the corridor from the single bedroom was the modern innovation of an indoor closet. No longer did they have to go down the backstairs during the night, and into the yard and across it to where the three outdoor lavatories stood. The nearest one had been for the use of the Conways' house, the second one was for the use of Tommy Grant and his family. Tommy had managed the little sweet factory for many years and had lived above it and brought up his family there. And he was adamantly against anything changing the pattern of his life, for, as he said, he was having no netty inside, it wasn't decent; and just think about the effect on the sweets and the ingredients that went into their making.

The third lavatory was for the use of the narrow, single-storey house that formed the end of the

three-walled courtyard. This was a furnished house that was let periodically to travellers or First Mates or Captains or anyone who preferred a stay in a house rather than an inn or hotel. A number of sea-faring men had stayed here with their wives over the years.

The House, as it was simply called, was a profitable little concern and it had been part of Agnes's work since she had left school, six years ago, to see to the laundry, and with Maggie's help, to its cleaning.

On the whole, Agnes enjoyed looking after the little house. Although it stood cheek by jowl with the factory, it was a place apart, a business apart, and an interest apart. She had come to look forward to the intervals between tenants, for at such times she would sit at the bedroom window that overlooked the street, which sloped swiftly to the main thoroughfare; and guided by the landmarks of St Dominic's church and, beyond that, St Ann's, she could look over the chimney pots and catch a glimpse of the river gleaming between the busy traffic on it.

This was the only time she allowed herself away from the business of the shop or the house above it. Here, she would think and ask herself, again and again, what lay in the future for her? She was twenty-two years old. All the friends she had made at school were now married. Would she ever be married? She doubted it. Certainly not to a man like Pete or to Henry. Oh, never to one like Henry

Stalwort. She'd have to be very hard-up before she would take a man like him. Well, what would be her end? Would she be like the Misses Cardings, the three spinster ladies who kept the hat shop beyond the tobacconist's? Or Christine Hardy, who worked in her father's fancy bakery at the bottom of the street. Christine was in her thirties and she laughed a lot. To Agnes's mind she laughed too much. Was it because of Emmanuel Steele, who had his shoemaking shop between the Misses Cardings and the bakery and who was well into his forties, but apparently had no use for women, inasmuch as he did his own housework in the rooms above the shop, and ate most of his meals out. The gossip in the road was that Christine had chased him until he had chased her and in terms that weren't complimentary.

Theirs was a short street going uphill, four shops on the right-hand side and the blank back walls of a warehouse opposite. This led into another thoroughfare, the far side of which was bordered by a high brick wall in which two iron gates were let, seemingly at the top of Spring Street, and giving entrance to a drive leading to a substantial red-brick house.

Her father was apt to say, when her mother would mention the big house and its occupants, 'Who bothers with such folk? Stick to your own class and the community in which you were brought up.' And what better community could you get than in Spring Street, he would ask, for hadn't it a shop

that supplied food, and two others that fitted you out from top to bottom? And then there were his own two shops that brought a little solace to the lives of both rich and poor. When she had once laughingly asked, 'Who supplies the meat, Father, and the clothes that go between the hats and the shoes?' he had come back with his usual answer to her, 'You're too sharp by half; you'll cut yourself one of these days.' Anyway, everybody in the street made enough money to go outside it and buy the meat and their necessary clothing. Hadn't he clothed them well and fed them well over the years?

Yes, she supposed he had. But sitting up in the bedroom looking down towards the river, she was asking herself more often of late whether meat and clothing were all there was to life. Had one to work for that alone? Surely there was something more to it. But what more? What did she want?

She was baffled when she couldn't give herself, or wouldn't give herself, a satisfactory answer. The nearest she would get was that she wanted time, time to herself to think, to read, to find out how other people lived; how they managed to live, how they managed to face up to the tragedies; their scraping for a living; and how they managed to cope with love. Yes, 'love', that word was often in her mind. Her reading of the passions of men and women in the past so often revealed that ecstatic love ended in tragedy. It seemed to her that if love was to be great it had to be paid for with a terrible price. Perhaps she read the wrong books. Perhaps

she should read the magazines, *Woman's World*, *Woman's Weekly* and the *Woman's Journal*, like her mother did. Then she would be comforted by the thought that, once married, lovers lived happily ever after. But from when she had been sixteen and had left the Dame School and stepped right into the home life above the shop, it had been borne into her that marriage was a humdrum affair: two people lived together, apparently happy, yet went their own ways, as shown by her parents; they didn't think alike, yet they didn't argue; they never laughed at the same things, nor did local or national events affect them in the same way. She often wondered what happened in bed at night. Were they loving and tender with each other? She had even tried to visualise what happened. But her mind presented her with two stiff figures lying side by side, not even holding hands, perhaps not even saying a polite goodnight.

'What are you standing out there for?'

Agnes started and went towards her mother, who was looking at her from the kitchen doorway.

'I . . . I was just thinking.'

'Thinking? You are doing that too often of late. It's a wonder you can attend to the business downstairs. What were you thinking with your mouth half open?'

Alice Conway almost jumped back into her kitchen as her daughter swung round now and yelled at her, 'It may surprise you to know that I was thinking about you and Father and this house,

and the business downstairs. And life, and asking myself if it was all worthwhile.'

She watched her mother smooth her hair back from her brow, draw in a long breath, then say, 'Well, well! This is a tantrum isn't it. What's brought this on?'

'It isn't a tantrum, Mother. And nothing's brought it on, as you say. I've been in this frame of mind for a long time, but no one seems to notice.'

'Well, then—' Alice walked across the kitchen to the open fireplace and, bending towards the oven at the side of it, she opened the door and took out a casserole dish and placed it on the table before she went on, 'If that's how you're feeling I think it's about time you got yourself married.'

'Yes, I thought that's what you would say, Mother. And I suppose you would recommend Mr Stalwort?'

'You could look further and fare worse.'

'Well, I'll do that, but it couldn't be much worse than him.'

'You don't know what you're talking about, girl. What do you expect? You're twenty-two and . . .'

'Go on, say it, Mother, go on! I'm not pretty; and I haven't the advantages of Jessie.'

'You said it. You said it yourself. So you can't pick and choose. I'm not saying you're plain, but your disadvantage is your attitude towards men.' She now swung round from the table and, thrusting her head out towards her daughter, she almost hissed, 'What do you expect? You've got to take

what you can in this world and make the best of it. Henry Stalwort is a rich man; he's got ten times more than your father. He doesn't only own the warehouse but has property dotted all over the city. Those two girls will soon be off his hands. Men of his age can be manipulated by anyone with a ha'p'orth of brains. If you had a ha'p'orth of brains you would have been married by now and living in Jesmond, the best end. What are you waiting for? Do you know yourself?'

Agnes stared at her mother. All her own passion had died out of her: she felt deflated; she had the desire to laugh, and she almost did as she said, 'Yes, I know what I want at this moment and that's something to eat and then to get downstairs again, because, you know, it's Father's night for the club.'

Alice had picked up a spoon ready to ladle out the stew on to a plate, but she paused and looked at her daughter hard as she said, 'You don't know what it's all about, do you? God help you when you do.' She finished her ladling and pushed the plate of mutton stew and dumplings towards Agnes; then, the ladle held above the casserole dish, she was about to dip it in again when Agnes said in an offhand manner, 'What a pity you aren't a widow, Mother, you could have had dear Henry yourself.'

The ladle hit the stew with such force that the liquid splashed onto the white tablecloth, and, almost stuttering now, Alice cried, 'What a thing

to say! What a thing to say!’ Then she did an unheard-of thing, she threw the ladle itself onto the white cloth and stalked from the room, leaving Agnes looking towards the door that had banged closed and thinking, Goodness me! Goodness me! It must have struck home in some way. But which way?

She looked down at the steaming plate. She had no appetite for it, but she must eat; if she were any thinner she would disappear. How was it she hadn’t a bust? nor hips like other girls, or women, of twenty-two? Look at Jessie, only eighteen, and she was all bust and hips.

As if her thinking had conjured up her sister, the door opened again and Jessie came in, saying in a low voice, ‘Mother’s in a pet. What’s happened?’

‘Oh, we were just talking.’

‘Just talking? Arguing more like it, or rowing. She’s in the sitting-room, the crocheting needles flying. She’s always like that when she’s in a bad temper. It’s odd, isn’t it? Oh, dear me!’ – she was looking at the casserole dish – ‘stewed mutton and dumplings. Three hot meals a day. I’m putting on weight.’

‘How’s things at the school?’

‘Oh, don’t ask me.’ Jessie shook her head. ‘I’ll never make a secretary, Aggie; I’ve got nothing up top.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘I’m not. I just can’t grasp these things. Have you ever tried to do shorthand? And think of a life

ahead sitting at a machine tapping out: "Dear Sir, At your request I am forwarding twenty barrels of salted herring to your wife's boudoir. Would you please return the casks after they have been washed."'

Agnes put down her knife and fork and turned her head away from the table as she began to laugh; Jessie was spluttering, too, as she said, 'You've got no idea about some of the letters the girls make up, real naughty ones. If Father were to hear them he'd whip me out of that place much quicker than he pushed me in, I can tell you. Oh—' Her laughter faded and she sighed before she went on, 'I'd give anything to leave there. And I mean to leave, Aggie, and soon.'

'Well, what will you do? Come down to the shop?'

'No. No, I won't; I'll get married.'

Again Agnes put down her knife and fork: 'Jessie, now listen,' she said. 'Listen to me. Are you still seeing that Robbie Felton?' And when Jessie didn't answer, she went on, her words tumbling over each other now, 'You're mad. You mustn't. Father would never have it; he'd go berserk. You know what the Feltons are; they're the roughest family on the quay. One's just come out of prison. Their women are the same.'

'Robbie's not like that. And they're not all bad. They're all right; they're nice when you talk to them.'

'Have you been seeing them, I mean the family?'

'No, no; I only met . . . well, Robbie was with two of his brothers and they spoke to me and they were nice. They talk broad but they were nice. And they were respectably put on, not scruffy or anything.'

'Don't be silly, Jessie. Of course they're respectably put on. They make money in all ways. You haven't been seeing him regular?'

'Yes. Yes, I have, whenever I can. And don't look at me like that, Aggie. I . . . well, I like him. I more than like him, I love him. And he loves me. I know he does. *He does. He does.*'

'Oh my God!' Agnes covered her eyes for a moment, then said flatly, 'Has he told you so?'

'Well, no, not really. But I know he does. And he waits for me.'

'*He waits for you?* When? When can he wait for you? Father nearly always meets you at school.'

'He . . . he waits about when we have our dinner break. Oh, Aggie, he's . . . he's different. If you would only meet him and . . . and he could talk to you. He's not really rough. What I mean is . . . well, he's strong, and he can be funny.'

'*Funny?* Girl, how can you sit there and talk about one of the Feltons being funny! They're roisterers. They're always in fights; you can hardly lift a paper up before you see their name: illicit dog fights, fisticuff battles, stealing, and pitch and toss. Oh, Jessie, of all the people you could have taken a fancy to in this world you've got to go and pick

one of the Feltons. I'm telling you, Father will do murder. He won't have it.'

Jessie rose from the table now, but she didn't move away from it, she leant her hands on the edge of it and, bending towards Agnes and in a mere whisper now, she said, 'Father's got to understand that I have a life of my own; I'm not a china doll to be babied.'

Staring into the pretty face for a moment, Agnes nodded, saying, 'That'll come as a great surprise to him. And I wouldn't like to be present when you express your views, if ever you do.'

Jessie drew herself up straight. And when she said, 'I might need to, and then I'd just walk out,' Agnes was round the table as if she had been shot there and, holding her sister by the shoulders, she cried at her, 'Don't do that, Jessie! Never! do you hear me? because you'll break him. He'd trace you to wherever you were and there'd be hell to pay. You don't seem to know Father and what lies behind his jolly façade. I'm with him more than anybody and I don't really know him, except that you're the only one he really cares for.'

'What about you? He depends upon you. You practically run the business downstairs. How can you say I'm the only one he cares for?'

Agnes turned away from her sister and there was a sad note in her voice as she said, 'He cares for me merely because I'm useful to him, that's all. And I don't know how he feels about Mother, either.' Then quickly turning back to her, she said, 'But I

do know how he feels about you. So, I beg of you, Jessie, don't do anything rash. You know, you're so pretty you could have anyone, but you've got to go and pick one of the Feltons. All I can say is, I pray this is a spasm, one you'll grow out of. Anyway—' She looked down on her partly eaten meal and her nose wrinkled before she went on, 'I've got to go downstairs again, and you'd better clear away here when you've finished, then go in to Mother and see if you can soothe her ruffled feathers. And that's another one, you know: she would die of shame if she knew that you were even looking at a Felton, never mind expressing affection for one. Oh my!' She now flapped her hand as if shooin' something away, then went out of the kitchen and onto the landing, and here, as she had before, she stopped, but only long enough to raise her eyes to the whitewashed ceiling as her mind said, Dear God, don't let anything come of this.

Her father had gone to his club. Her mother had stopped crocheting, so Jessie said, and was in the sitting-room going through a catalogue of curtain material for yet another change at the windows and had decided firmly against anything resembling Nottingham Lace; her mind was now set on drapes with pelmets, so Jessie had whispered to her in the back shop a short while ago.

The shop bell had tinkled frequently for the past hour, most of the customers having been the ha'penny and penny ones, some of whom were now

standing outside at the shop window oohing and aahing at the Christmas goodies displayed there, all entwined with coloured streamers and illuminated by the two gas lamps attached to the side wall of the shop and plopping inside their pretty pink glass globes, while casting a rosy light overall, even over the small faces pressed against the window.

The shop bell rang; then the door closed with a clatter on two customers, one all of six, the other in the region of four years old.

‘Oh, hello Bobbie. Hello, Mary Ann. What is it tonight? Tiger nuts?’

‘Naw, we’ve both got pennies.’

‘You have? Your mother gave you them?’ There was a note of surprise in her voice.

‘Naw! the lodger . . . we got a lodger.’

‘Oh.’ Agnes was nodding her head now, and as she did so she was thinking, I only hope your father doesn’t find him there when he comes back from one of his trips. Your mother never seems to learn, poor soul.

She walked behind the main counter to the flap that could be lifted to give access to the shop itself and, leaning on her forearms, looked down on to her weekly customers and asked, ‘Well then, what is it to be?’

‘Divvent know yet.’

‘You want to look round?’

‘Aye. Coconut ice slabs are tuppence, aren’t they?’

‘Yes, and I don’t think you would enjoy spending

all your money on a coconut ice slice. But there are the coconut chips. You could have a pennorth of those.'

He blinked up at her from his grimy face, and said flatly, 'Ha'p'orth.'

Agnes raised her eyebrows and said, 'Very well then, a ha'p'orth it is.'

She moved back along the counter and, picking up a box of the sugared candy, she was about to scoop some into the scales when the shop bell rang again. The sight of the two customers that entered this time stayed her hand holding the small brass scoop that was about to transfer a minute amount of coconut chips to the scale. From the dress of both the man and the woman she realised immediately that they were not only strangers, but class. And if she hadn't been able to judge this from their dress, she would have from their voices as, one following the other, they said, 'Good evening.'

'Good evening.' Her hand tipped the scoop and the chips slid into the scale and when the dial registered much more than half an ounce she didn't remove any but, taking a paper bag, she blew into it, then, tipping up the scale, she disposed of the coconut chips before saying, 'I'll be with you in a moment.'

'There's no hurry.' It was the man who spoke.

'She wants shoelate taffy.'

'Oh, well now.' She glanced from her regular customers to the two new ones who seemed to be interested in the proceedings, and she said, 'Well,

now, she won't get much chocolate toffee for a ha'penny. She's always liked tiger nuts.'

'You want tiger nuts?'

When the small head nodded acceptance Agnes, now looking at the boy, said, 'A ha'p'orth or a pennorth?'

'Ha'p'orth.'

This word was said in such a way, and accompanied by a look, that told the woman behind the counter that she didn't know her business, because they'd never had a pennorth of tiger nuts.

Hurriedly now Agnes weighed out the tiger nuts; then, glancing at the newcomers again, she smiled and said, 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. Oh, don't be.' It was the young woman speaking now. Her voice had a lilt to it as if she were on the verge of laughter.

Agnes turned her attention to the young customers again, saying, 'Well, that's a penny gone. What would you like next? You can have two gob stoppers for a ha'penny. You often have those. And she likes hearts and crosses, or there's everlasting stripes,' and she spread her hand wide. The boy, however, took no notice of her but raised his eyes to the bottles on the shelves and said, 'Acid drops.'

Agnes did not make the mistake now of asking her customer how much he intended to spend on the acid drops; she reached up and took down the jar and, tilting it, tipped some acid drops into the scale; then, putting the glass lid back onto the jar, she returned the whole to the shelf before once

again blowing into a small paper bag and depositing the sweets inside. Now, once more looking at the small boy, she said briskly, 'Come, make up your mind quick, Bobbie; I know you've bought a shipping order tonight but there's this lady and gentleman waiting to be served.'

'Cindy taffy.'

He would choose cinder toffee, she thought. She moved along the counter to where, beneath it, on a narrow table, there stood a number of trays and, taking up the brass hammer, she broke the edge of the toffee and put four pieces into a newspaper cone that she had taken from a number stacked up by the side of the tray. She also added the crumbs of the toffee; then rubbed her hands on a small damp towel lying on the table by the toffee trays.

When she placed the paper cone by the side of the three bags she was confronted by a pair of unsmiling eyes and a voice that held condemnation: 'Ye've nivvor weighed it.'

She now leant across the counter and, poking her face down to the child's, she said, 'No, I didn't, Bobbie, because if I had you wouldn't have got half as much as is in that bag. Now, take that lot and go, get yourselves away.'

She gathered up the bags and pushed them towards the child; and when he reluctantly handed her the two pennies she said, 'Thank you very much. I'll see you next week, I hope.'

It was the gentleman who seemed to spring to

the door and open it to let the two heavily laden customers out. And then laughing, he looked at her and said, 'That was as good as a play.'

'More like pantomime, sir; and it's enacted every week, mostly on a Friday night when they get their pay-pennies. What can I do for you?'

It was the young lady who now spoke: 'You won't remember, of course, I scarcely do, but years ago my grandfather brought me to this shop, and it was at Christmas time too. He was really going to buy cigars at the shop next door, but I saw the sugar mice in the window and he couldn't get me away until he came in and bought some. I remember he bought a dozen. And I remember, too, those I hadn't eaten by the time I got home we hung on the tree. And there was a sugar and chocolate cat; and that's still there; of course, it won't be the same one.' She laughed now. 'There were all kinds of animals; there was a dog too.'

'Oh yes, the dog.' Agnes smiled broadly. 'The mould got broken and we never replaced it. Nobody seemed to want sugar or chocolate dogs, and the cat isn't so very popular either. It's the mice everyone seems to go for, I mean the children.'

'Well, I have three children of my own now and I thought it would be nice to surprise them with the sugar mice on the tree, and also the chocolate cat.'

'How many would you like?'

Agnes watched the young, plump, matronly lady look at the young man, whom she imagined to be the same age as his wife. And when he said, 'I would

say a couple of dozen, because that little tribe just don't eat, they gobble. And who's to prevent the grown-ups enjoying a sugar mouse now and again. But will that spoil your window?'

'Oh, no, no; we have plenty in stock. But not so many cats. How many cats would you like?'

It was the young woman who answered, 'Six, say?' She glanced at the man, and he said, 'Yes; yes, six.'

'Will you excuse me a moment?' Agnes hurried into the back shop, turned up the gas jet, quickly transferred two dozen sugar mice to one fancy box and six chocolate cats to another; and when she returned with them into the shop they both exclaimed, and it was the young woman who said, 'What pretty boxes! Oh! they are nice. Aren't they, Charles?'

'Yes, they are.' He smiled at Agnes; 'Do you think we could have some toffee?'

'With pleasure. What would you like? There is walnut, and treacle, and chocolate topped, and of course, cinder.' At this they all laughed. Then the young woman said, 'I know what your choice will be, Charles, the walnut.'

'Yes; yes, I'd like the walnut,' he said. 'And I can tell you what your choice will be, too; it'll be the chocolate.' Again they were laughing.

'How much would you like? We put them up in quarter pounds or in half pound boxes.'

'Oh, we'll have a half pound of each.'

'Oh, that won't go very far, not when Reg and

Henry get their fingers into them. Better make it a pound each.'

'Yes, yes. I'd forgotten about those two.'

They were looking into each other's face and laughing as if, Agnes thought, they were alone. They looked happy. She wondered who Reg and Henry were, their children?

They seemed to have brought another world into the shop. She had noted the young woman's attire. She was wearing a fur hood and a Melton cloth coat with a huge fur collar. She had fur-backed gloves and high brown-polished boots, not shoes but boots, and from what she could see of them they looked serviceable, as if they really were worn for walking.

The boxes filled with toffee and tied up with red string, Agnes checked up the account, saying aloud, 'Two dozen mice, sir, at a penny each, two shillings. Six cats at threepence each, one and six. One pound of walnut toffee, eightpence, and one pound of chocolate toffee, a shilling.' She looked up, adding now, 'The chocolate is always dearer. You understand? That will be five shillings and twopence.'

The young man put two half crowns and two pennies on the counter, saying as he did so, 'We'll take more than the sweets away with us tonight. It's been a pleasure visiting your shop. And I wouldn't have missed your last customers for anything. He certainly got his money's worth, that young man. He seemed to know what he wanted. He'll make his way in the world all right.'

'I hope so,' said Agnes, without expressing the large doubt in her mind, knowing the kind of family from which young Bobbie Wilmore came. But his was one of the many families in the streets that ran off the main road at the bottom of the hill and from whom this shop and the tobacconist's derived most of their regular custom.

'Good night, and a happy Christmas when it comes.'

'And the same to you.' She nodded from one to the other; then watched the young man open the door and stand aside to allow his wife to pass before him. On the point of following her and still holding the door open, he again nodded towards her and smiled; and she smiled back at him.

What a nice couple. It was as if they were indeed from another world: a happy world, a free and easy world. The way they talked to each other just went to emphasise this. And they had three children. She couldn't have been much older than herself, about twenty-five or so. And how old would he be? About the same age, perhaps a little older. And they were both so good-looking, he in particular. His wife was inclined to plumpness but it was a pretty plumpness, a happy plumpness. There was that word again. She seemed to cling to it. Is that what she wanted? That kind of happiness? But where would she find it? Well, there was one thing certain, she wouldn't find it in Spring Street.

Her father had once said when discussing classes, if they were all naked you could tell the county man

from the commoner because of his commanding tone or his easy insolence. Well, there had been neither the commanding tone nor the easy insolence from that couple; and yet, in a way she knew her father was right in his summing up of the gentry. Still, she would never see that pair again; her dealings would be with the Bobbie Wilmores, either young, middle-aged, or old, and their wives or their mothers. She'd had a number of the wives in tonight, all choosing bits and pieces out of their Christmas Club money. But their choices remained either in the storeroom or in the window because her father had made it a rule that the window wasn't to be cleared until the day before Christmas Eve.

It was at ten minutes to nine when she decided to close up the shop. Arthur Peeble would put the shutters up next door at exactly nine o'clock. Not a moment before, not a moment after. But there had been no customer in the sweet shop for the last fifteen minutes, and the children had all disappeared from the window. So she went outside and she was in the act of pulling the shutters closed when a voice to her side said, 'What you up to?'

She started as she looked at her father. 'Oh, you did give me a fright. And what's the matter? Why are you home so soon? It isn't even nine yet.'

'No, I know it isn't and you're closing up before nine, aren't you? Here, give it to me.' He pushed the lock through a link of chain, turned the key, then said, 'Get yourself inside; it's enough to freeze

you. We're going to have snow, if you ask me anything.'

Inside the shop, the door bolted, and the blinds drawn, she asked again, 'What's brought you back so soon? You're never home before ten. Have they thrown you out of the club?'

'No, they didn't throw me out, miss; I got fed up with the chatter. Anyway, I thought I could be doing better things here, and I wanted a hot drink and I was feeling a bit peckish. I didn't have much before I went out. What's trade been like?'

'Oh, about the same except for two strangers who happened to pop in, county types.' She wrinkled her nose at him. 'Bought five and tuppence-worth altogether.'

'Did they now? Five and tuppence-worth. A shipping order.'

'Well, it's bigger than anything that's been taken today, or yesterday, at one go.'

'Yes, yes, I was only kidding you. By the way, did you make the order out for me for tomorrow?'

'Yes. There it is.' She pointed along the counter to the till.

He passed her and picked up the sheet of paper.

'Why do we want everlasting stripes again?' he said.

'Well, we are down to one box and they always go very well in the winter; anything with liquorice in, like that.'

'Three dozen candy rock assorted! I hope you sell them. Liquorice allsorts. Well, you've only got

two boxes down here; I would have got another one. Sherbet dips, hearts and crosses, wine gums, jelly babies. Aye. Aye, jelly babies; they go. Hundreds and thousands . . . Oh, marshmallows. Now, they stuck last year, didn't they?

'They went eventually.'

'Candy walking sticks. Ah well, what with the candy rock, I don't think they are good for stocking. Sherbet dips . . . not in the winter, not as many, anyway, as you've got down here, three boxes.'

'Then why didn't you make the list out yourself, if there's so many things wrong in it?'

'Now, now, now. That's no way to talk to your father. What's got into you?'

'It's more like, what's got into you, Father. I've always made the list out and you've never queried it before, well not like that. And as I'm in the shop most of the time and know what goes and what doesn't, I think you should stick by what I say or get somebody else in who'll do it better.'

As she went to flounce past him, he checked her, saying again, 'Here! Here! What's got into you?'

'Nothing's got into me, Father. It's what's got into you. Yes, I repeat, what's got into you. If I was of a probing nature I would say there's something worrying you. And what's brought you home so soon? It's never happened before . . . well, not for a long, long time. But I've been taught to mind my own business, so I won't need an answer to that.'

'That'll be the day when you mind your own business. Anyway, talking about changing tempers,

yours has been in and out with the tide these last few months. We were talking earlier on about you marrying. Well, if you don't want to marry, what do you want to do?' Then suddenly closing his eyes and clenching his fist and bringing it down on the counter, he said, 'Whatever you want to do, for God's sake! Aggie, don't tell me you want to walk out of here, because I can't do without you. I've got so many things on my mind; but when you're here running things, well, I know everything's all right. And this is our livelihood. So never say you want to walk out. Anyway—' He turned towards her again. His hand was open and there was a touch of laughter in his voice as he said, 'What would you do? Where would you go, if you don't intend to go into some other man's house?'

She did not immediately come back with an answer, but looked at him steadily for some seconds before she said, 'That's why you think you've got me here for good, isn't it, Father? But there's plenty of places I could go. Remember, Miss Carter wanted me to go pupil-teaching and then take a teacher's course, well that's one thing I could do; it's not too late, I'm only twenty-two. Or, I could run somebody's business, couldn't I? I've had plenty of experience for that. Oh' — her lips curled — 'you saying you couldn't do without me, Father, doesn't cut any ice. Good night.'

She walked hastily from him and into the store-room, and he followed her, and they were just about to confront each other again when the back

door leading into the yard opened and there, revealed in the gaslight, was Jessie.

Jessie was surprised to see her father, as her father was surprised to see her, and coming from the yard.

‘Where’ve you been?’

She came in and bolted the door, then stood with her back to it, looking from one to the other. Then glancing at Agnes, she said, ‘Aggie asked me to take some towels across to the house for the people coming in tomorrow.’

‘That was a damn silly thing to do at this time of night.’ He was almost bawling at Agnes now. ‘You know what happens in that yard at night when the drunks get going. And they’re not above leaving a couple of drays in there late on till first light, rather than stable them. Anyway, I thought you took it on yourself to see to everything in the house over there? And you, miss, get yourself upstairs and never go out on your own at night again. Do you hear me?’

‘Yes, Father.’ Jessie sidled along by the racks to the door leading to the passage and the stairs. And she had hardly disappeared from view before Arthur Conway turned on Agnes, a growl in his voice now as he said, ‘What’s up with you? You know what happens out there. Supposed courting couples. There’s no gates on our yard, or hadn’t you noticed? It’s open to the scum of the earth. Anything could have happened to her . . .’

*‘Oh, shut up!’*

Before his hand could reach her face she jumped

back, crying, 'You do that, Father, you do that just once and there'll be one less for breakfast tomorrow morning, and I mean that. With all my heart I mean that. Do you hear me? You ever lift your hand to me and that'll be the end.'

As his arm dropped to his side his head also bowed, and with an audible intake of breath he muttered, 'In the name of God! What's come over us?'

She neither gave him an answer nor waited for more reaction, but turned swiftly up the stairs and through the kitchen and along the corridor where, without knocking, she burst into Jessie's room.

Before she could speak, however, Jessie whimpered at her, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Aggie. But . . . but I couldn't think of anything else to say. And who would have thought he would come home so early?'

Agnes moved closer to her sister and cried at her, 'And who would have thought you were outside consorting with one of the Feltons, eh? Just imagine if he knew that.'

'Oh, Aggie, that's why I . . . well, said what I did. I was frightened, petrified.'

'You had a brave face on earlier tonight: you were going to lead your own life, weren't you? Well, lead it and have the courage of your convictions: either come into the open or drop that fellow. And for his safety and yours an' all, I would suggest you do the latter, and quickly.'

'Well, I . . . I can't do that, Aggie. I can't. And

anyway, after all, it was nothing to say, I mean, that I was taking the towels over for you.'

'No, nothing, except that he was going to hit me.'

Jessie stepped backwards, her face stretching, her mouth open, and when she muttered, 'No! Never,' Agnes said, 'But yes. It was only my threat that stopped him because if his hand had touched me I would have walked out of this house that very minute and I wouldn't have had to go far. The Miss Cardings next door, they would have let me stay there until I got myself sorted out. And let me tell you, this isn't the first time I've thought of it, either.' She turned now as though about to carry out her threat and went out, across the corridor and into her own room, and there, fully clothed, she dropped onto the bed and fell sideways across the pillow.

Happiness. Happiness. The picture of the young couple came into her mind again; and on it she thought: there must be a different way of life. There must. I have a mind, why can't I use it to some good in a way that will give me satisfaction if nothing else? Yes, if nothing else.

After a while she sat up and slowly began to undress to her camisole and her waist petticoat; then, turning up the gas that had been on a low jet, she went across the room to the wash-hand stand and poured water from the jug into the basin.

The water was icy cold but she washed her arms up to the oxters, and then her face and her neck down to the top of the bodice; after which she took

off the rest of her underwear and got into a calico nightdress. By the time she got into bed she was shivering.

She hadn't turned the light out, and now, propped up by her pillows, the bedclothes tucked under her chin, she sat staring straight ahead. This had been her room since she was six years old but there was nothing of hers in it. There was her mother's choice of furniture, walnut in this case, consisting of a wardrobe, a marble-top wash-hand stand and a wooden-headed bed. The curtains were her mother's choice, as was the bedcover and the carpet. There was a time when she could remember thinking it was a very nice room and that she was lucky to have a carpet on the floor and not just lino. She couldn't actually now pinpoint the time when she began to dislike the room, the furniture, the colour of the carpet, the curtains . . . the ever-changing curtains.

A moment of panic welled up in her as she cried to herself, I must get away. I must get away or I'll be trapped here for life. I can't bear it. If I was gone, he would have to put Jessie into the shop. Why not? Then what about her mother? Yes, what about her mother; why couldn't she go down and take a turn? Oh, no! that would be beneath her dignity. She had always said she had never been a shop-girl and she wasn't going to start now. No; but she'd let her daughter be a shop-girl.

She turned her head as she heard the kitchen door click. Her father was up and was on his way to bed.

There was no calling, 'Good night, Aggie. Good night, Jessie,' tonight. Would he tell her mother what had happened? She doubted it, for her mother would likely be asleep. She must have gone to bed some time ago, else Jessie wouldn't have been able to sneak out.

She felt sick. She'd have to take a drink of water. Reluctantly she got up and her teeth chattered as she took a dressing gown from a hook behind the bedroom door. Then, putting it on and pulling the collar tight about her throat, she lit the candle that was standing in a holder on her bedside table, and went quietly out and along the corridor to the kitchen, through it and into the scullery, where they had a running tap above a shallow stone sink. After filling a glass with water, she returned to the kitchen and sat down and slowly sipped the water. Yet the more she sipped the more sick she felt; and then she began to have a cramp in her stomach.

She rose from the chair, muttering to herself, 'Oh dear!' because she knew she would have to make her way to the closet at the far end of the house.

She'd hardly reached the closet when she heard her father's voice. It wasn't loud and she couldn't distinguish anything he said, but during the time she was in the closet she could hear it droning on, with breaks here and there when her mother must be speaking.

After a while when the sickness had subsided, she opened the door and was about to creep cautiously away, when she heard her father speak some words

that halted her: 'Who's to blame for the club nights, I ask you?' he was saying. Then her eyes sprang wide with the words: 'And let me tell you something, I'm not spending any more nights on that bloody single mattress in there. And if you want the bed camouflaged in the morning you can get up and make it. And I'm giving you this ultimatum: tomorrow night I come into this bed and if you try to stop me, you'll end up next door for the remainder of your days.'

Now her mother's voice, thin, piercing: 'You try any trick like that on me, Arthur Conway, and you'll be sorry. Those two along the corridor will then know exactly what kind of a father they have, and about the slut you keep on the side under cover of the club nights. Oh, just you try forcing yourself on me again and your world will explode. I know one who wouldn't stand for it; she'd walk out. And then what would you do? Because it's she who runs that business, not you. And she's a fool not to marry Stalwort and leave you on your backside. So, I'm warning you, you come near me and there'll be such an explosion that you won't know where you are. The shock I got when I found you out again will be nothing to their reaction. Oh no; I can promise you that.'

There followed a silence in which Agnes imagined them glaring at each other. Then her father's voice came again, saying, 'You know what you are, Alice? You're a bitch. You're a vain silly bitch. You haven't got one asset; and above all, you're spiteful and greedy. You've blackmailed me into spending

money these past six years. Well, now it's my turn to use threats. That's finished. All right, tell the girls, do your damndest. But you know something? You needn't worry any more, because you arouse nothing in me and haven't done for many a year. I wouldn't want to lay a finger on you. You've got nothing that would even attract a body-starved sailor; even in your young days you were really nothing. And let me tell you something finally, you can't hold a candle to my woman. And the reason why I'm home early tonight is, she's in hospital. But there's one thing I'll hold to, I'll have my own bed tomorrow night and you make your own arrangements for next door. And if you haven't, I'll go to the girls myself; you won't get the opportunity of blowing the gaff, I'll tell them. And I'll tell them why I took a woman, and that she's good to me. By God! she is.'

And then her mother's voice snapped back loudly, 'And to a number of others, because she's a whore! I wish you were dead, Arthur Conway, I do, I wish you were dead. But then you haven't all that long to go, have you? You've had that pain under your ribs for a long time. Well, let me tell you, I'll be here when you do go, and God! I'll make hay with what you've got, every penny of it.'

There followed a silence during which Agnes gripped the stanchion of the door and brought her chin tight into her chest, only to raise it again as she endeavoured to hear what her father was now saying quietly and with a purposeful intent, 'You