

Lucretia

By K. Douglas King

I

IN his life John Burnett suffered no distinction in any circles beyond that immediate one of his acquaintances and friends. He was an insignificant man in appearance, in moral force, in intellect, and in rank—which was that of a navy. Such fame as was his in Eastown-by-Line (the mushroom town wherein he lived, and on whose railroads he worked) came solely through his domestic troubles. Naturally, the source of these troubles was a woman; his wife, Lucretia—Luce, for short.

So far as looks went there could not have been a worse assorted couple than the navy and his wife. Luce was a splendidly formed woman, with straight features, level brows, and a penetrating way of looking out of a pair of very handsome eyes; but with a screw loose somewhere in the complex machinery of her moral being. This was the reason why her mouth, which should have been large and generous, to match her eyes, was curved to a foolish, little droop, at the corners; and why her lips, when they were not giving vent to absurd and impossible aspirations, were pursed up in a thin martyr-shape.

She had a twin sister, who hardly belongs to this story, but
who

who told her once that this martyr-expression completely spoilt her natural good looks. Luce did not discontinue to assume it, even then.

She was a good workwoman, and had been employed as a forewoman in a large dressmaking establishment, before John Burnett (as much to his own as to others' astonishment) carried her off as his wife to Eastown-by-Line. Her married life (including the bearing of Burnett's children, the rearing of them, and looking after her husband and the house) entailed on her sufficient work to keep her mind, as well as body, fully occupied from sunrise to midnight. In the pursuance of her wifely and motherly duties she allowed her mind to run woefully astray. That was the fatal crook in her soul; and, in consequence, her husband's dinners, the home comfort, and the six Burnett children (who were a disgrace to their town, so ill-kept were their persons) suffered severely. If she had been "born a lady" she would have read "advanced" books, and become an "advanced" woman. Also, she would have refused the John Burnetts of her own station who sought her hand in marriage. She would have known she had a higher duty to perform than to marry a mere man, and would have acted, generally, according to her convictions—which were of a subjective nature.

As she had neither the leisure nor the means wherewith to cultivate the abnormal in her soul, she asserted her independent womanhood by an intrigue with another man. This other man lived alone, in a large, ugly ten-roomed villa, part of whose garden wall formed the eastern boundary of the Burnett backyard. The navy lived in the last of a tiny, frail row of four-roomed houses, on the outskirts of central Eastown-by-Line. The name of their street was Aspect Road, most felicitously named since it overlooked a brickfield at its upper end and the gasworks at
the

the lower. The new line in course of construction ran, in an animated streak, between this "view" and Aspect Road, which was separated from the railway by a low, sloping bank. The Burnett children, from behind their front garden hedge, used to throw stones at their father and his mates working on the line, so short was the distance from the houses to the railroad. The eastern part of the town was composed of villas and small shops, and one long, straight avenue, lined with chestnut-trees. There were six of these trees on either side of the street, and they were the only trees in the town, except two others—also chestnuts—in the other man's garden. From west to east, and from the canal on the south to the railroad on the north, the entire town was a ghastly blot on the face of the earth.

Life's ironical ruling ordained that the other man should be the assistant superintending engineer of that part of the line on whose construction Burnett was engaged. His name was Caldwell, and he first saw Luce when she was airing the Burnett linen on her little line that stretched across the whole area of her backyard.

Luce's manner whilst hanging out the clothes, that memorable day, was fraught with a mixture of indolence (which was characteristic) and impatience, born of intense distaste for the work in hand. It received presentment in her languid movements and smouldering eyes. She had been at work since five in the morning, and it was now six in the evening, and she had still five more hours' work before her. Of course the woman was tired in body and sick in soul. It never entered John Burnett's mind (he being a man, and a mediocre one at that) that the commonplace drudgery of existence is sheer bondage to the woman who has sufficient imagination to realise freedom, but not enough to idealise duty; and whose household tasks, commencing at
marriage

marriage and ending with death, imprison her from dawn to dusk within four tiny walls.

Luce was in a tense state, and only a match was needed to set a volcano ablaze. Caldwell watched her as she moved from line to basket and back again, her fine eyes alight with unsatisfied desire ; her thin lips pouting ; a tired flush on her curved cheeks ; her hair falling untidily over her handsome, heavy brow. Watching her, the assistant superintendent coveted her.

It was not Caldwell's habit to lose time in advancing towards the attainment of his desires. Between the first attack and the first conditional surrender, the flame of that desire spread and intensified until it became a passion that penetrated to the deepest recesses of his being. Luce was in the most dangerous state of mind that a woman can possibly be in. She wanted something. She did not know what she wanted. Moreover, she did not care any longer about the opinions of her little world. This recklessness of mood brings shipwreck in its train more surely than the most deliberately planned wrongdoing. The first advances came from Caldwell. Luce responded to them with such doubtful eyes and such a passionately wistful mouth that the assistant superintendent, connoisseur as he was in his way, lost his head. He recovered it almost immediately ; but then the mischief was done.

Burnett had broad, stunted features, a slouching bearing, deeply sunken, almost invisible eyes, a slow-moving intellect, and no social or conversational gifts whatever. Caldwell, on the contrary, was a fluent talker, and as flashy in intellect as in appearance. His prominent lips were shaded by a handsome moustache, and his eyes were bold, blue and bright. Also, he was a fine, tall fellow, and, without conceit, could lay claim to a knowledge of women and their inscrutable ways above that of the average man. This

was

was almost as powerful a factor in his success as Luce's own unfortunate mood. Such love as she had ever felt for John Burnett was already worn thin by interminable toil for him, his house, and his children.

When a woman speaks of her offspring as "his children" one of two things is in process. Either she is meditating a desperate leap into the dark, or she is digesting the discovery of a new, hitherto undreamt-of virtue in her husband. Now Burnett had no special virtues whatever; at least, such as Luce could appreciate. When she began to think of the children as "his children," she was already far on the road that leads to dishonour.

That evening when she hung out her washing, and Caldwell had first seen her, was one far advanced in April. It was now late in May, and Scandal was very loud and busy up Aspect Road. Tremulous-mouthed Lucretia did not care. She was living a double existence, and Burnett and the children had only the hollow crust of her attentions. After the first resistance, Caldwell did not find it difficult to persuade her that Desire was Duty differently spelt, and that her present duty was to minister to his. A strong man, or a very selfish man, might have saved Luce yet. But Burnett was neither strong nor selfish. He loved his wife and was fond of his children; but was as weak in the management of one as of the other.

He submitted to his home discomfort like a lamb, instead of roaring like a lion when half-raw or burnt-up food was set before him. Of course, this complaisance completed the woman's demoralisation; just as much as his easy-going, indulgent ways with his children caused them to develop into veritable demons of juvenile wickedness. When he first heard from the neighbours' idle talk that his wife was going wrong with another man, and that man was his own superintendent, he simply did not believe it,
and

and went his daily ways without care or perturbation. He loved his wife, and he still believed in her honesty, although he was aware, at last, after ten years' vain delusion, that she was no cook.

Scandal, as usual, was premature in its assertions. It spoke as early as April, while May had passed before Lucretia really fell. It was on the third of June that Caldwell had said to her, as she stood by her cottage door, shading her lovely, sad, wild eyes from the setting sun : "Lucy, are you going to be cruel, still ?"

The assistant superintendent had just left the line and was going to his temporary villa home. His way home always took him past Burnett's cottage. For weeks past he had not ceased urging the woman to sin ; and last night she had faltered out to him, when he upbraided her, bitterly, for her cruel coquetry, that "To-morrow—perhaps—she would—do—what—he wished."

Against the sunset, his eyes flashing inquiry, reproach, and expectation upon her, he appeared as the representation of all manly and persuasive power. Luce changed colour, and her eyes dropped. Her eldest little daughter, Molly, standing by her side, glanced at the man with calm, splendid eyes of cold disfavour. She was neither fascinated by his glittering personality nor over-awed by his position.

Caldwell struck his foot, impatiently, on the ground. "Well, Luce ?" he cried, his eyes burning through her lowered eyelids, into her very soul ; his whole attitude a fierce interrogation. "Well, Luce ?"

Mrs. Burnett raised her eyes, quickly. They were unnaturally large and bright, and her face was very pale. She nodded, once or twice, and then turned round, hastily, and went indoors. Caldwell laughed ; a slight flush rose to his cheeks.

His fiery, amorous eyes, travelling back from the sharply closed door, rested, one second, on Molly Burnett, as she continued to lean

lean against the gatepost, apparently unconscious of her surroundings. Molly detested Caldwell. It was this lovely, dirty, picturesque child who used to set her small brothers and sisters, armed with stones and dirt, on the assistant superintendent. Tiny arms and the strict necessity of cloaking their tactics by a stout hedge made the stones of no effect. Molly had the supreme pleasure, once, of seeing a piece of mud, aimed by her with feminine precision, stick to the back of his coat. She tried to bully her little brother, "Jack Spratt" Burnett, into piping rude remarks at him when they used to go down to the line, with the other East-town children, to watch operations there. To these heroic heights, however, Jack Spratt could not ascend. He had the pacific spirit; and when Molly called him a "bloomin' sheep," neither resented the slur on his manhood with retort nor sought to efface it by action.

Molly's large shining eyes were fixed on the crimson cloudland on the northern horizon. She looked inexpressibly lovely. Caldwell shot a keener glance at her.

"Good-night, Molly," he called down, to the slim, motionless, little figure.

Mrs. Burnett's nine-year-old daughter stonily turned her eyes upon the man. There was a magnificent disdain in their pellucid depths. She raised her shoulders ever so slightly; beyond the cold movement and that colder stare she made no response.

"By Jove!" muttered Caldwell, genuine admiration leaping hotly out of his eyes. "What a lovely woman the hussy will be in ten years' time!"

With a gay laugh, he bent forward, of a sudden, and thrust his moustached lips upon Molly's. Although she was taken completely by surprise, her defensive action was swifter than his attack. She ducked, and his mouth barely avoided sharp contact

with the top of the gatepost. The next second Molly had sprung up and struck him a resounding blow on the face.

Man as he was, Caldwell staggered back. Molly's eyes flashed fire from the other side of the gate. Her bosom heaved.

"Well, I'm damned!" gasped Caldwell at last, with a not unkindly laugh. "You—little vixen!"

He did not attempt to repeat the experiment, but applied his handkerchief to his cheek, where a red mark showed. Fortunately for the dignity of the assistant superintendent's reputation, both the thickness of the hedge and the sunset hour, when most of the workmen had gone home, had deprived the scene of spectators.

"Don't you think you can kiss everybody!" cried Molly, in a choked, passionate whisper, over the gate.

Molly had seen the assistant superintendent kiss her mother more than once. This action of his, and her mother's complete acquiescence therein, troubled her—though she could not have told why. It intensified her dislike of Caldwell into a positive loathing. She had told Jack Spratt he was to call the assistant superintendent a "toad" whenever he passed; and used to beat him when he tearfully refused.

Caldwell took off his hat, and made Molly a sweeping bow before he passed on.

"In five years, pretty Molly," he said, blandly, "I'll wager you won't refuse a man's kiss. You'll be as eager for kisses then, my girl, as any of 'em. They all are, you know, pretty Molly! There's not a petticoated creature made that isn't!"

"You're a lie," returned Molly, promptly. "You're a great, fat lie!"

Caldwell laughed again pleasantly, and turned on his heel. He was not angry, now that the first shock of his discomfiture was over; even though his cheek was still smartly stinging. When
he

he had swung his garden gate to behind him, he had forgotten all about his late misadventure. Lucretia's splendid eyes, with their vague longing and alternate melancholy and fire, possessed his vision. The exultation caused by her promise burned up again in his soul. He had made communication both easy and secret between the two households; the last barrier was broken down between them.

II

Burnett's domestic troubles were the common talk of Aspect Road. The matrons loudly expressed their disgust with Luce's share in the scandal. They reserved an opinion on the superintendent's part until the doors were closed. The husbands of most were working under Caldwell and his chief. The men on the line blamed Burnett for being a fool more than they condemned the assistant superintendent, in their hearts, for a knave. Though they gossiped freely among themselves, they forbore to offer any opinion on the case to Burnett himself. The women were not so considerate. Burnett's behaviour in allowing Luce (whose guilt was established beyond a doubt) to continue to live in his house, as if the sanctity of their marriage tie had never been violated, exasperated the women into shrill taunts, which were fearlessly and freely hurled at the unfortunate navy.

Caldwell was not prepared at first that Lucretia should live entirely in his house; and Burnett, when the truth of the matter was at last borne in upon his stubborn, unreceptive brain, received from this fact some sort of faint comfort in the midst of his misery. His love for his wife was of unsuspected magnitude, and of a magnanimity beyond chivalry. It was not only for the sake of the six lovely, dirty little children, who rioted, now without shadow
of

of restraint, about the road, that he was still willing to forgive Luce, and that he hoped against hope to win her back to him.

Luce went about her daily duties with little outward change. Perhaps there was more of dreamy haphazard in her method of work than before Caldwell came to possess her thoughts; but there had been always so much left to Providence in the internal ordering of the Burnett household, that a little additional disorder was hardly noticeable. She grew to look more like a restless, untamed spirit every day. By turns she was passionately attentive to the children and completely neglectful of them. But her manner with them was always kind. Burnett, swayed by the twin spirits of his steadfast hope and his great affection, met her indifference to him with a phlegm that concealed, almost too successfully, the deadly wound her conduct was inflicting.

It was on June the third that Luce gave her fatal promise. The month of roses was drawing to an end before the navy spoke to his wife of what lay up heavily on the hearts of each. Mrs. Burnett was lazily stirring porridge for the children's supper before the kitchen fire. Burnett had come in from work on the line two hours before. Ever since his entrance he had been watching her flitting dreamily to and fro—he moodily sitting in a corner, no word, good or bad, passing between the pair. It had been pay night, and it was one of the assistant superintendent's duties to pay the men their weekly wage. Burnett, whose innate sensitiveness was largely increased by the suspense and anguish of the last month, fancied Caldwell shot a look of triumph on him as he went up to receive his money at the superintendent's hand. As a matter of fact, Caldwell had done nothing of the sort. He hardly knew Burnett by sight, and he certainly did not wish to provoke Lucretia's husband into any manifestation of anger before the other men.

That

That fancied look, rankling in his heart, impelled the navy at last to speak. But what he did and what he said were very different from that which he had intended to do or say.

"Oh, Luce, dear," he began, moving quickly forward and throwing his arms round the woman. "Oh, my dear, dear wife! Do come back to me, an' be as you was before this trouble began!"

Lucretia was thoroughly taken aback by this impetuous appeal, and by the violent exhibition of his feelings. The next minute, however, she rallied her forces, and slipped from his embrace. Turning, she faced him, with heightened colour and sparkling eyes. She held the spoon that she had hastily withdrawn from the saucepan when he had first seized her, and porridge dropped from it unheeded in great splashes on the floor.

"I—I haven't left you!" she cried, defiantly, the scarlet spot deepening in her cheeks. "And so how can I come back, pray?"

She cast a triumphant look on him, as if to ask how he thought he was going to answer that unanswerable question. Burnett's eyes were fixed on the largest porridge splash at his feet, and he only sighed heavily.

There was a short pause. Then Burnett in a hurried, stifled, voice:

"'Tis true—for all the same!"

"What's true?" asked the woman, with a toss of her head, and another flash of her eyes.

"What they're sayin' o' ye an'—an' that feller Caldwell," mumbled her husband. A savage glow lit up his downcast eyes one minute; the next, all the light was out, and they reassumed their normal dulness of appearance.

Mrs. Burnett made no reply, but resumed operations in her
porridge

porridge saucepan. The spoon clattered loudly against its metal sides, and Luce's hand trembled. Burnett shifted from one foot to the other. At last he burst out into speech again.

"I've never ill-treated ye, nor come home boozy, nor knocked the children about," said the navvy. "Ye've had my weekly wages reg'lar an' full always ! and I've let ye go yer own way in the 'ouse an' never put in my oar in nothink, but let ye 'ave yer own way in everythink," he repeated, doggedly. "An' I can't think"—he choked—"I can't think why ye're treatin' me so !"

Mrs. Burnett poured out porridge into six chipped plates. Her hands were shaking, and some of the scalding stuff splashed on to them. She bit her lips and spoke never a word.

"Lucy !"

She started ; Burnett's voice was so soft and tremulous, and full of pleading love. Since the early days of their marriage, ten years ago, he had not called her anything but Luce. Now another man called her Lucy, whose voice was like music to her weary soul.

"Lucy," said Burnett, huskily, "oh, my girl, do come back, an'—an' love me as you used !"

As his sad voice died away there came from without the sound of many little footsteps and voices. A look of extreme relief passed over the woman's face. The Burnett children, in spite of the irregular ways of the household, showed a remarkable genius for coming up to time, so far as the hours of the meals were concerned. The difficulty often was that they were ready for the meal before it was ready for them. Burnett slunk back to his corner at sound of their approach ; something like despair flitted across his stubbly, inexpressive face.

"You—you don't understand me !" cried Mrs. Burnett,
hurriedly,

hurriedly, over her shoulder, as her husband moved heavily away. There was the suspicion of a sob in her voice. "You never have understood me—never! And talking of ill-treatment and all that shows you don't and can't understand me!"

Burnett showed a face of blank, mystified despair at the eternal feminine wail. It was as incomprehensible to him as if it had been uttered in a foreign language of which he was entirely ignorant. It was the navy's loss that Caldwell understood it as completely as man ever can.

The day after Burnett ventured his appeal, a momentous thing happened. It occurred at noon, and was nothing less than the breathless descent on the Burnett fold of Mrs. Burnett's twin sister.

Mrs. Burnett's sister was also a wife of ten years' experience; but she was not a mother. It was her one bitter sorrow. Tidings of the Burnett-Caldwell scandal had reached her in her little Northamptonshire village, and her unexpected visit was the result. It occurred at the midday dinner hour, which, strange to say, was up to time that day. The Burnett flock were despatching slabs of suet pudding and treacle, carved and ladled out by Mrs. Burnett, at the kitchen dresser, when the cloaked and bonnetted apparition, omitting the formality of knocking, appeared in the doorway. Burnett was eating a solitary dinner on the bank overlooking the line in course of construction.

"Annie!" cried Mrs. Burnett. She fell back a step; her face, dyed suddenly scarlet at sight of her visitor, rapidly changed to a deadly pallor.

"Luce," said the other woman.

"Not before the children!" cried Lucretia, putting out her hands, as if warding off a blow. "Oh, not a word before the children, Annie!" she cried, passionately.

The

The other woman had Lucretia's splendid, slightly scornful eyes. Molly had her aunt's large, full mouth.

"I wasn't goin' to say a word," returned Annie; her sad lips trembled. "'Tisn't no use; I knew that afore I came. I know you, Luce! No! an' I won't sit down an' eat anythink, Luce; I've a back train to catch, an' time's short. I came to ask, Luce, if——"

She faltered here, and changed colour. Lucretia bit her lips.

"Well," she said, sullenly, "if what?"

"I came to ask if I could take the children home with me for a spell, Luce," said her sister, softly.

An indescribable tumult took possession of Lucretia's soul. Many conflicting voices clamoured for a hearing. Luce, confounded, taken by surprise, and dismayed to death at heart, listened, with difficulty, to the loudest and most importunate.

"Yes," she said, heavily, at last; "you can, if you like."

Mrs. Burnett's sister had come, primed with the best intention in the world. She had not for a moment expected that her deliberately planned request would be granted. When Luce muttered out her slow "Yes," she was amazed, but not dismayed. She thought she was acting for the best in removing the Burnett children from the immediate scene of their mother's sin; but the wisdom of her act may be questioned. In less than half an hour the entire flock was ready to start, baggage, such as it was, and all.

The parting was brief, and without undue expression of sentiment. The eleven months old baby was asleep when it changed hands. The childless woman received it with a most motherly, caressing movement; Luce's face was hard and rigid. The younger children were jubilant at the thought of the journey, but cried at having to leave their home, as they went down the little
garden

garden path into the road. Jack Spratt neither cried nor laughed. He was awed by Molly's proud, pale face.

"Leave me—her," whispered Lucretia, with a little catch of her breath, and nodding, feverishly, in the direction of her eldest daughter, now occupied in nursing the youngest boy but one.

"God's sake not her—out of any of 'em!" cried back Molly's aunt, in a fierce, incoherent undertone; and Molly was swept off in the general exodus.

Mrs. Burnett watched them as they went down the dusty road. Molly carried the youngest baby, and her aunt had her late burden, a sturdy two-year-old. The two younger girls clasped hands, and walked demurely in front of the hen-in-charge. Jack Spratt walked alone, a few paces in front, as became the man of the party. Mrs. Burnett watched them, with dry eyes and burning eyeballs, until they were out of sight. Then she went indoors, and fell into a chair, sobbing and weeping, till her emotions seemed as if they would tear her thin frame asunder.

"Oh, if she had only left me Molly!" she moaned, in the intervals of her heavy sobbing. "If she had only left me my pretty Molly—my pretty, pretty girl!"

She had not recovered herself till four o'clock chimed out, unevenly, from the dilapidated kitchen clock. At that moment a man's footstep was heard to approach from without; and a man's voice called her name, softly, through the half-opened doorway.

He called her Lucy, and Mrs. Burnett leaped to her feet, and with a little, strangled cry, threw herself upon his breast. His arms met tightly round her, and he held her thus pressed to him, for a minute, without speaking. He could see her nerves were shattered, and that she was in a more desperate state even than when she had given him her first promise. "Oh, they've taken
away

away my children, Jamie!" she sobbed out, at last. "Take me home with you! don't leave me here in my empty home, Jamie! I can't bear it!"

Caldwell held her closer to him. He had come, fearing for once a possible refusal, on purpose to ask her that to which her own beseeching words to him now gave the affirmatory answer.

Five minutes later Luce left her home on his arm. "I'll take you right away from this one-horse place, Lucy," Caldwell said to her, as they went out. "My work is done here, with the doing of the line's."

He referred to the completion of the line, the last detail of whose construction would be an accomplished fact by sunset. With the running of the first train, thercon, on the morrow, Caldwell's duties, as assistant superintendent of the men at work on it, would be over.

"I'll belong to you now, Jamie, for ever and ever," Lucretia whispered up to him, as they gained his front door. She did not mind now if all the world saw her enter Caldwell's house. "They've taken my children away, and I'll only belong to you now, for ever and ever, Jamie," she repeated, as he led her into her new home. He bent and kissed her quivering lips.

When Burnett was going home that night, a neighbour, overflowing with news, darted out, from the next house. She had been waiting three hours for his advent, although she knew he could not be due in Aspect Road till past six. She was consumed with fear lest another neighbour should tell him the news before she had the chance.

She followed Burnett up his garden plot, in order to drive the bits of information deeper down into his dull, clouded brain.

"Their aunt came, Burnett, sure as I'm a livin' woman, and took 'em all away—the baby an' that limb, Molly, herself!"
reiterated

reiterated the shrill-voiced informant. "How you stare, man! I tell you they're gone, the whole lot o' them; at half-past one they went past our windys, and says I, 'Lawks, that's Burnett's lot!'"

Burnett turned on his threshold and faced her with working jaws. She was not overcome at sight of his distress. Her mind flew off on a fresh tangent.

"An' Caldwell took *her* off, Burnett," went on the shrill tale-bearer. "In bare daylight, as bold as brass, she went off on his arm! these eyes o' mine saw it! 'twas like a theayter piece! and thinks I, oh, that poor soul, Burnett, who——"

The navvy waved her back, and she retired, somewhat awed at last, by his expression and his speechlessness. Burnett entered his empty home.

"I don't believe her," he muttered, staring vacantly around. "It's a damned lie!"

Nevertheless, the rooms were empty of wife, of children, and of children's clothes and broken toys. Burnett fell to thinking that perhaps the neighbour had not lied, after all.

A headless rag doll, lying under a chair, caught his eye. He remembered, with the first thrill of pain, recognised as such, that he had left his baby sucking it, contentedly, in its cradle when he went out that morning to put the finishing touches to the line. He stooped and picked it up, and stood, stroking it, mechanically, with his grimy hand. Burnett had not an ounce of sentiment about him, though he had a greater capacity for affection than Luce had ever discovered. After a while he ceased stroking the headless doll, and put it in his breast-pocket. He was not an heroic figure, in his far from clean working suit, and with his broad, undeveloped features and stubbly hair and beard; but, as he awkwardly shovelled the rag doll to his breast, his lower lip
trembling

trembling the while, he seemed to be invested with a pathetic majesty that was far above any physical grandeur.

"The children's gone," thought Burnett, rousing himself with a heavy sigh. "But their aunt 'ull take care of 'em till—till the home's ready for 'em ag'in."

He went out, swiftly closing the door behind him. Twilight was falling, and a sense of great loneliness caught him for the first time, as if two hands had clutched him by the throat. He wheeled sharply towards Caldwell's house.

"She must come back if she thinks o' the children, and knows I'm mor'n willing to have her back ag'in," he said to himself with a tearless sob. "She must do that!"

A bell hung to his hand by Caldwell's front door, and he pulled it. Though he was quite calm and composed to all outward appearances, he was, in reality, labouring under a violent excitement that made him feel sick and giddy. There was no response of any kind to his ring, and his eye caught the knocker on the door. He wondered, dully, why he had not seen it before, and struck it loudly several times on the metal plate.

There was a dreadful silence. Burnett's throat contracted. Then there came the sound of footsteps, and Caldwell himself threw the door open. He did not recognise his visitor at first, and met him with an impatient exclamation.

Burnett moved doggedly forward over the threshold, and a hanging lamp in the hall revealed his identity. Caldwell gave vent to a little low whistle of astonishment.

"I—I want to see my wife," stammered the navy. He found it difficult to speak, owing to the dry condition of his lips. As Caldwell continued to preserve silence, he cried again, striking his nailed boot sharply on the hall floor, "I tell you I want to see the woman who's my wife!"

"Oh,

"Oh, come in, come in," said the assistant superintendent, blandly. "Only no violence before the lady, you know, and no threats."

"I'm not such a fool as to threaten," cried out Burnett, shaking from head to foot in his violent excitement. "I know I'm a fool and can't understand women like her," he added, bitterly. "But I'm not such a fool as to threaten her or any woman!"

"Oh, come in," repeated Caldwell, opening a door at the end of the passage. He passed in himself, and Burnett followed heavily. Lucretia was within; she had heard voices and had risen. As Caldwell entered she ran to him and clasped his arm. Burnett faced them.

"Well," said Caldwell, at last, breaking a momentous silence. "Here is the lady you wanted to see. Say what you have to say, please, and have done with it. We are particularly engaged to-night."

The outrageous nature of this last remark was apparently lost upon the navy. He was looking at Lucretia intently. He had never ceased looking at her since he had entered the room. Lucretia looked only at her lover.

Suddenly Burnett ran forward with extended arms. "Oh, my lass!" he cried; "my dear, own lass! come home with me again, an' we'll forget all this! Come home with me, Lucy! come home, my poor dear! Oh, do come home!"

Two scalding tears slowly trickled down the navy's weather-beaten cheeks. Lucretia shot a glance towards him. There was no relenting in her eyes.

"You see she won't come," began Caldwell, lightly, after another pause. "She doesn't want——"

"Let her speak herself," broke in Burnett, hoarsely. "You've spoke

spoke too much for her, as well as to her, damn you! Now don't interfere now between man and wife!"

"Don't you coerce her," retorted Caldwell, blandly. "She knows her own mind, I should hope! If she doesn't want to come back to you, she doesn't!"

"Well, let her speak for herself, for God Almighty's sake," cried Burnett. "An' don't put your words into her mouth."

"Answer him, dear," said Caldwell, turning his face towards Lucretia. "And in your own words, as your heart dictates. Choose, Lucy! will you have him or me?"

"Oh! Jamie, Jamie!"

"You see," said Caldwell, holding Lucretia to his heart, as he faced the speechless man, a few paces in front of him. "She chooses me."

Burnett's mouth opened and shut. He said nothing.

"She made a mistake when she married you," said Caldwell, coolly. "She found it out when she saw me, and now she's rectifying it. It's quite natural, you know, and an event of every day occurrence."

"I don't know about no ev'ry day 'vents," sobbed the navy. "But I know you've broke my heart, an' I hope you'll burn in hell fires!"

Lucretia's flaming face looked up above Caldwell's caressing arms.

"And if he does," she cried back, "by God Almighty, John Burnett! I'll burn with him too!"

Her fierce, adoring eyes devoured her lover's face. Caldwell bent his head till his lips met hers.

Burnett heard their kiss as he went heavily out.

He crossed the threshold and drew the door sharply to behind him. Then he turned, swiftly, impulsively. Lucretia's

name

name choked in his throat. The hard, unyielding door reminded him of the futility of his effort, and he laughed, mocking, in his anguish, his own bitter mistake. There was no moon; the twilight had passed, leaving the darker night behind. A tear stood out on his worn, whitened cheeks and his teeth clenched on a sob, when he lifted the latch of his house door and passed into his dishonoured home.

"The children's gone, too," he said again, gazing round the empty room, in dreary, vacant misery. "But this aunt 'll bring 'em back ag'in some day, when Molly's grown more handylike, to shift for me an' the little uns alone. An' I'll stay on 'ere till they comes. I'll not go too. An' p'raps—p'raps—she'll come back too, some day. . . ."

He stumbled, slowly and awkwardly, up and down his kitchen, painfully working out his scheme of the future in his dull, heavy brain. "I don't understand her," he muttered, again, his future revolving round his wife as its sole, eternal pivot. He had not yet realised that Lucretia was lost to him for ever. "I don't understand her," he groaned, "nor any woman; but p'raps she'll grow tired and 'ave no place to lay her tired 'ead in—my poor lass!—an' p'raps she'll remember our only home we ever 'ad together, she an' me, an' so p'raps she'll come back to it at last. If I goes on livin' 'ere, same as ever, p'raps she'll come back at last."

Dawn broke over the grey wilderness of slate roofs, over the railroad, where it circled round the eastern suburb of the town, over the dreary brickfields.

"I'll light a fire, so as she'll see there's no change 'ere," thought Burnett, setting, awkwardly enough, to his unwonted task. A fitful eagerness flashed over his stolid face.

There was a slight breeze from the west. The pale, twisted smoke

smoke column from Burnett's chimney overtook the larger volume that was gaily spouting from the big chimney on the assistant superintendent's house. Both were mingled together as they were blown, eastwards, over the town. At his usual time Burnett went down to his work on the line.

"If so be as she gives a thought to—to what she's left be'ind," he thought, "she'll see me goin' an' think I'm the same as usual. 'Twill make 'er comin' back the easier."

He clung to the one remaining hope that Lucretia's faithlessness had not uprooted and cast out of his life. Without that anchor to his miserable soul he would have been like a ship adrift on an open sea, and shipwreck would speedily have followed. Contrary to habit, he went home at midday, to eat his dinner in his own house.

"'Twill seem more—more homelike," he thought. "An' 'twill be another chanst for 'er to see I'm not meanin' to leave my home."

The long, hot afternoon of toil dragged to a weary close on the line.

Burnett sat by his cottage door, staring, steadily, across the railroad. The sun went slowly down beyond the deserted brickfields; the twilight drew closer around him, and shut him in, alone. A board with "To Let" written across it, in bright black letters had been set up above the fence in front of the assistant superintendent's late home, since midday.

"But she'll come back some day," thought Burnett. His dry, miserable eyes looked, blankly, into the growing darkness. "She must—she must do that! She must know—she looked at my chimney as she . . . as she went . . . an' she must know how I love her. . . ."

Night fell slowly over the town.