GEORGE GISSING

THE ODD WOMEN

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Chapter 1

The Fold and the Shepherd

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‘So tomorrow, Alice,’ said Dr. Madden, as he walked with his eldest daughter on the coast-downs by Clevedon, ‘I shall take steps for insuring my life for a thousand pounds.’

It was the outcome of a long and intimate conversation. Alice Madden, aged nineteen, a plain, shy, gentle-mannered girl, short of stature, and in movement something less than graceful, wore a pleased look as she glanced at her father’s face and then turned her eyes across the blue channel to the Welsh hills. She was flattered by the confidence reposed in her, for Dr. Madden, reticent by nature, had never been known to speak in the domestic circle about his pecuniary affairs. He seemed to be the kind of man who would inspire his children with affection: grave but benign, amiably diffident, with a hint of lurking mirthfulness about his eyes and lips. And today he was in the best of humours; professional prospects, as he had just explained to Alice, were more encouraging than hitherto; for twenty years he had practised medicine at Clevedon, but with such trifling emolument that the needs of his large family left him scarce a margin over expenditure; now, at the age of forty-nine — it was 1872 — he looked forward with a larger hope. Might he not reasonably count on ten or fifteen more years of activity? Clevedon was growing in repute as a seaside

resort; new houses were rising; assuredly his practice would continue to extend.

‘I don’t think girls ought to be troubled about this kind of thing,’ he added apologetically. ‘Let men grapple with the world; for, as the old hymn says, “’tis their nature to.” I should grieve indeed if I thought my girls would ever have to distress themselves about money matters. But I find I have got into the habit, Alice, of talking to you very much as I should talk with your dear mother if she were with us.’

Mrs. Madden, having given birth to six daughters, had fulfilled her function in this wonderful world; for two years she had been resting in the old churchyard that looks upon the Severn sea. Father and daughter sighed as they recalled her memory. A sweet, calm, unpretending woman; admirable in the domesticities; in speech and thought distinguished by a native refinement, which in the most fastidious eyes would have established her claim to the title of lady. She had known but little repose, and secret anxieties told upon her countenance long before the final collapse of health.

‘And yet,’ pursued the doctor — doctor only by courtesy — when he had stooped to pluck and examine a flower, ‘I made a point of never discussing these matters with her. As no doubt you guess, life has been rather an uphill journey with us. But the home must be guarded against sordid cares to the last possible moment; nothing upsets me more than the sight of those poor homes where wife and children are obliged to talk from morning to night of how the sorry earnings shall be laid out. No, no; women, old or young, should never have to think about money.

The magnificent summer sunshine, and the western breeze that tasted of ocean, heightened his natural cheeriness. Dr. Madden fell into a familiar strain of prescience.

‘There will come a day, Alice, when neither man nor woman is troubled with such sordid care. Not yet awhile; no, no; but the day will come. Human beings are not destined to struggle for ever like beasts of prey. Give them time; let civilization grow. You know what our poet says: “There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe —”’

He quoted the couplet with a subdued fervour which characterized the man and explained his worldly lot. Elkanah Madden should never have entered the medical profession; mere humanitarianism had prompted the choice in his dreamy youth; he became an empiric, nothing more. ‘Our poet,’ said the doctor; Clevedon was chiefly interesting to him for its literary associations. Tennyson he worshipped; he never passed Coleridge’s cottage without bowing in spirit. From the contact of coarse actualities his nature shrank.

When he and Alice returned from their walk it was the hour of family tea. A guest was present this afternoon; the eight persons who sat down to table were as many as the little parlour could comfortably contain. Of the sisters, next in age to Alice came Virginia, a pretty but delicate girl of seventeen. Gertrude, Martha, and Isabel, ranging from fourteen to ten, had no physical charm but that of youthfulness; Isabel surpassed her eldest sister in downright plainness of feature. The youngest, Monica, was a bonny little maiden only just five years old, dark and bright-eyed.

The parents had omitted no care in shepherding their fold. Partly at home, and partly in local schools, the young ladies had received instruction suitable to their breeding, and the elder ones were disposed to better this education by private study. The atmosphere of the house was intellectual; books, especially the poets, lay in every room. But it never occurred to Dr. Madden that his daughters would do well to study with a professional object. In hours of melancholy he had of course dreaded the risks of life, and resolved, always with postponement, to make some practical provision for his family; in educating them as well as circumstances allowed, he conceived that he was doing the next best thing to saving money, for, if a fatality befell, teaching would always be their resource. The thought, however, of his girls having to work for money was so utterly repulsive to him that he could never seriously dwell upon it. A vague piety supported his courage. Providence would not deal harshly with him and his dear ones. He enjoyed excellent health; his practice decidedly improved. The one duty clearly before him was to set an example of righteous life, and to develop the girls' minds — in every proper direction. For, as to training them for any path save those trodden by English ladies of the familiar type, he could not have dreamt of any such thing. Dr. Madden's hopes for the race were inseparable from a maintenance of morals and conventions such as the average man assumes in his estimate of women.

The guest at table was a young girl named Rhoda Nunn. Tall, thin, eager-looking, but with promise of bodily vigour, she was singled at a glance as no member of the Madden

family. Her immaturity (but fifteen, she looked two years older) appeared in nervous restlessness, and in her manner of speaking, childish at times in the hustling of inconsequent thoughts, yet striving to imitate the talk of her seniors. She had a good head, in both senses of the phrase; might or might not develop a certain beauty, but would assuredly put forth the fruits of intellect. Her mother, an invalid, was spending the summer months at Clevedon, with Dr. Madden for medical adviser, and in this way the girl became friendly with the Madden household. Its younger members she treated rather condescendingly; childish things she had long ago put away, and her sole pleasure was in intellectual talk. With a frankness peculiar to her, indicative of pride, Miss Nunn let it be known that she would have to earn her living, probably as a school teacher; study for examinations occupied most of her day, and her hours of leisure were frequently spent either at the Maddens or with a family named Smithson — people, these latter, for whom she had a profound and somewhat mysterious admiration. Mr. Smithson, a widower with a consumptive daughter, was a harsh-featured, rough-voiced man of about five-and-thirty, secretly much disliked by Dr. Madden because of his aggressive radicalism; if women’s observation could be trusted, Rhoda Nunn had simply fallen in love with him, had made him, perhaps unconsciously, the object of her earliest passion. Alice and Virginia commented on the fact in their private colloquy with a shamefaced amusement; they feared that it spoke ill for the young lady’s breeding. None the less they thought Rhoda a remarkable person, and listened to her utterances respectfully.

‘And what is your latest paradox, Miss Nunn?’ inquired the doctor, with grave facetiousness, when he had looked round the young faces at his board.

‘Really, I forget, doctor. Oh, but I wanted to ask you, Do you think women ought to sit in Parliament?’

‘Why, no,’ was the response, as if after due consideration. ‘If they are there at all they ought to stand.’

‘Oh, I can’t get you to talk seriously,’ rejoined Rhoda, with an air of vexation, whilst the others were good-naturedly laughing. ‘Mr. Smithson thinks there ought to be female members of Parliament.

‘Does he? Have the girls told you that there’s a nightingale in Mr. Williams’s orchard?’

It was always thus. Dr. Madden did not care to discuss even playfully the radical notions which Rhoda got from her objectionable friend. His daughters would not have ventured to express an opinion on such topics when he was present; apart with Miss Nunn, they betrayed a timid interest in whatever proposition she advanced, but no gleam of originality distinguished their arguments.

After tea the little company fell into groups — some out of doors beneath the apple-trees, others near the piano at which Virginia was playing Mendelssohn. Monica ran about among them with her five-year-old prattle, ever watched by her father, who lounged in a canvas chair against the sunny ivied wall, pipe in mouth. Dr. Madden was thinking how happy they made him, these kind, gentle girls; how his love for them seemed to ripen with every summer; what a delightful old age his would be, when some were married and had children of their own, and the others tended him —

they whom he had tended. Virginia would probably be sought in marriage; she had good looks, a graceful demeanour, a bright understanding. Gertrude also, perhaps. And little Monica — ah, little Monica! she would be the beauty of the family. When Monica had grown up it would be time for him to retire from practice; by then he would doubtless have saved money.

He must find more society for them; they had always been too much alone, whence their shyness among strangers. If their mother had but lived!

‘Rhoda wishes you to read us something, father,’ said his eldest girl, who had approached whilst he was lost in dream.

He often read aloud to them from the poets; Coleridge and Tennyson by preference. Little persuasion was needed. Alice brought the volume, and he selected ‘The Lotus–Eaters.’ The girls grouped themselves about him, delighted to listen. Many an hour of summer evening had they thus spent, none more peaceful than the present. The reader’s cadenced voice blended with the song of a thrush.

‘“Let us alone. Time driveth onward fast, And in a little while our lips are dumb. Let us alone. What is it that will last? All thing’ are taken from us —”’

There came an interruption, hurried, peremptory. A farmer over at Kingston Seymour had been seized with alarming illness; the doctor must come at once.

‘Very sorry, girls. Tell James to put the horse in, sharp as he can.

In ten minutes Dr. Madden was driving at full speed, alone in his dog-cart, towards the scene of duty.

About seven o’clock Rhoda Nunn took leave, remarking with her usual directness, that before going home she would walk along the sea-front in the hope of a meeting with Mr. Smithson and his daughter. Mrs. Nunn was not well enough to leave the house today; but, said Rhoda, the invalid preferred being left alone at such times.

‘Are you sure she prefers it?’ Alice ventured to ask. The girl gave her a look of surprise.

‘Why should mother say what she doesn’t mean?’

It was uttered with an ingenuousness which threw some light on Rhoda’s character.

By nine o’clock the younger trio of sisters had gone to bed; Alice, Virginia, and Gertrude sat in the parlour, occupied with books, from time to time exchanging a quiet remark. A tap at the door scarcely drew their attention, for they supposed it was the maid-servant coming to lay supper. But when the door opened there was a mysterious silence; Alice looked up and saw the expected face, wearing, however, so strange an expression that she rose with sudden fear.

‘Can I speak to you, please, miss?’

The dialogue out in the passage was brief. A messenger had just arrived with the tidings that Dr. Madden, driving back from Kingston Seymour, had been thrown from his vehicle and lay insensible at a roadside cottage.

* * * * *

For some time the doctor had been intending to buy a new horse; his faithful old roadster was very weak in the knees.

As in other matters, so in this, postponement became fatality; the horse stumbled and fell, and its driver was flung head forward into the road. Some hours later they brought him to his home, and for a day or two there were hopes that he might rally. But the sufferer’s respite only permitted him to dictate and sign a brief will; this duty performed, Dr. Madden closed his lips for ever.

Chapter 2

Adrift

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Just before Christmas of 1887, a lady past her twenties, and with a look of discouraged weariness on her thin face, knocked at a house-door in a little street by Lavender Hill. A card in the window gave notice that a bedroom was here to let. When the door opened, and a clean, grave, elderly woman presented herself, the visitor, regarding her anxiously, made known that she was in search of a lodging.

‘It may be for a few weeks only, or it may be for a longer period,’ she said in a low, tired voice, with an accent of good breeding. ‘I have a difficulty in finding precisely what I want. One room would be sufficient, and I ask for very little attendance.’

She had but one room to let, replied the other. It might be inspected.

They went upstairs. The room was at the back of the house, small, but neatly furnished. Its appearance seemed to gratify the visitor, for she smiled timidly.

‘What rent should you ask?’

‘That would depend, mum, on what attendance was required.’

‘Yes — of course. I think — will you permit me to sit down? I am really very tired. Thank you. I require very little attendance indeed. My ways are very simple. I should make the bed myself, and — and, do the other little things that

are necessary from day to day. Perhaps I might ask you to sweep the room out — once a week or so.'

The landlady grew meditative. Possibly she had had experience of lodgers who were anxious to give as little trouble as possible. She glanced furtively at the stranger.

'And what,' was her question at length, 'would you be thinking of paying?'

'Perhaps I had better explain my position. For several years I have been companion to a lady in Hampshire. Her death has thrown me on my own resources — I hope only for a short time. I have come to London because a younger sister of mine is employed here in a house of business; she recommended me to seek for lodgings in this part; I might as well be near her whilst I am endeavouring to find another post; perhaps I may be fortunate enough to find one in London. Quietness and economy are necessary to me. A house like yours would suit me very well — very well indeed. Could we not agree upon terms within my — within my power?'

Again the landlady pondered.

'Would you be willing to pay five and sixpence?'

'Yes, I would pay five and sixpence — if you are quite sure that you could let me live in my own way with satisfaction to yourself. I— in fact, I am a vegetarian, and as the meals I take are so very simple, I feel that I might just as well prepare them myself. Would you object to my doing so in this room? A kettle and a saucepan are really all — absolutely all — that I should need to use. As I shall be much at home, it will be of course necessary for me to have a fire.'

In the course of half an hour an agreement had been devised which seemed fairly satisfactory to both parties.

‘I’m not one of the graspin’ ones,’ remarked the landlady. ‘I think I may say that of myself. If I make five or six shillings a week out of my spare room, I don’t grumble. But the party as takes it must do their duty on *their* side. You haven’t told me your name yet, mum.’

‘Miss Madden. My luggage is at the railway station; it shall be brought here this evening. And, as I am quite unknown to you, I shall be glad to pay my rent in advance.’

‘Well, I don’t ask for that; but it’s just as you like.’

‘Then I will pay you five and sixpence at once. Be so kind as to let me have a receipt.’

So Miss Madden established herself at Lavender Hill, and dwelt there alone for three months.

She received letters frequently, but only one person called upon her. This was her sister Monica, now serving at a draper’s in Walworth Road. The young lady came every Sunday, and in bad weather spent the whole day up in the little bedroom. Lodger and landlady were on remarkably good terms; the one paid her dues with exactness, and the other did many a little kindness not bargained for in the original contract.

Time went on to the spring of ‘88. Then, one afternoon, Miss Madden descended to the kitchen and tapped in her usual timid way at the door.

‘Are you at leisure, Mrs. Conisbee? Could I have a little conversation with you?’

The landlady was alone, and with no more engrossing occupation than the ironing of some linen she had recently

washed.

‘I have mentioned my elder sister now and then. I am sorry to say she is leaving her post with the family at Hereford. The children are going to school, so that her services are no longer needed.’

‘Indeed, mum?’

‘Yes. For a shorter or longer time she will be in need of a home. Now it has occurred to me, Mrs. Conisbee, that — that I would ask you whether you would have any objection to her sharing my room with me? Of course there must be an extra payment. The room is small for two persons, but then the arrangement would only be temporary. My sister is a good and experienced teacher, and I am sure she will have no difficulty in obtaining another engagement.’

Mrs. Conisbee reflected, but without a shade of discontent. By this time she knew that her lodger was thoroughly to be trusted.

‘Well, it’s if *you* can manage, mum,’ she replied. ‘I don’t see as I could have any fault to find, if you thought you could both live in that little room. And as for the rent, *I* should be quite satisfied if we said seven shillings instead of five and six.’

‘Thank you, Mrs. Conisbee; thank you very much indeed. I will write to my sister at once; the news will be a great relief to her. We shall have quite an enjoyable little holiday together.’

A week later the eldest of the three Miss Maddens arrived. As it was quite impossible to find space for her boxes in the bedroom, Mrs. Conisbee allowed them to be deposited in the room occupied by her daughter, which was

on the same floor. In a day or two the sisters had begun a life of orderly tenor. When weather permitted they were out either in the morning or afternoon. Alice Madden was in London for the first time; she desired to see the sights, but suffered the restrictions of poverty and ill-health. After nightfall, neither she nor Virginia ever left home.

There was not much personal likeness between them.

The elder (now five-and-thirty) tended to corpulence, the result of sedentary life; she had round shoulders and very short legs. Her face would not have been disagreeable but for its spoilt complexion; the homely features, if health had but rounded and coloured them, would have expressed pleasantly enough the gentleness and sincerity of her character. Her cheeks were loose, puffy, and permanently of the hue which is produced by cold; her forehead generally had a few pimples; her shapeless chin lost itself in two or three fleshy fissures. Scarcely less shy than in girlhood, she walked with a quick, ungainly movement as if seeking to escape from some one, her head bent forward.

Virginia (about thirty-three) had also an unhealthy look, but the poverty, or vitiation, of her blood manifested itself in less unsightly forms. One saw that she had been comely, and from certain points of view her countenance still had a grace, a sweetness, all the more noticeable because of its threatened extinction. For she was rapidly ageing; her lax lips grew laxer, with emphasis of a characteristic one would rather not have perceived there; her eyes sank into deeper hollows; wrinkles extended their network; the flesh of her neck wore away. Her tall meagre body did not seem strong enough to hold itself upright.

Alice had brown hair, but very little of it. Virginia's was inclined to be ruddy; it surmounted her small head in coils and plaits not without beauty. The voice of the elder sister had contracted an unpleasant hoarseness, but she spoke with good enunciation; a slight stiffness and pedantry of phrase came, no doubt, of her scholastic habits. Virginia was much more natural in manner and fluent in speech, even as she moved far more gracefully.

It was now sixteen years since the death of Dr. Madden of Clevedon. The story of his daughters' lives in the interval may be told with brevity suitable to so unexciting a narrative.

When the doctor's affairs were set in order, it was found that the patrimony of his six girls amounted, as nearly as possible, to eight hundred pounds.

Eight hundred pounds is, to be sure, a sum of money; but how, in these circumstances, was it to be applied?

There came over from Cheltenham a bachelor uncle, aged about sixty. This gentleman lived on an annuity of seventy pounds, which would terminate when *he* did. It might be reckoned to him for righteousness that he spent the railway fare between Cheltenham and Clevedon to attend his brother's funeral, and to speak a kind word to his nieces. Influence he had none; initiative, very little. There was no reckoning upon him for aid of any kind.

From Richmond in Yorkshire, in reply to a letter from Alice, wrote an old, old aunt of the late Mrs. Madden, who had occasionally sent the girls presents. Her communication was barely legible; it seemed to contain fortifying texts of Scripture, but nothing in the way of worldly counsel. This old

lady had no possessions to bequeath. And, as far as the girls knew, she was their mother's only surviving relative.

The executor of the will was a Clevedon tradesman, a kind and capable friend of the family for many years, a man of parts and attainments superior to his station. In council with certain other well-disposed persons, who regarded the Maddens' circumstances with friendly anxiety, Mr. Hungerford (testamentary instruction allowing him much freedom of action) decided that the three elder girls must forthwith become self-supporting, and that the three younger should live together in the care of a lady of small means, who offered to house and keep them for the bare outlay necessitated. A prudent investment of the eight hundred pounds might, by this arrangement, feed, clothe, and in some sort educate Martha, Isabel, and Monica. To see thus far ahead sufficed for the present; fresh circumstances could be dealt with as they arose.

Alice obtained a situation as nursery-governess at sixteen pounds a year. Virginia was fortunate enough to be accepted as companion by a gentlewoman at Weston-super-Mare; her payment, twelve pounds. Gertrude, fourteen years old, also went to Weston, where she was offered employment in a fancy-goods shop — her payment nothing at all, but lodging, board, and dress assured to her.

Ten years went by, and saw many changes.

Gertrude and Martha were dead; the former of consumption, the other drowned by the overturning of a pleasure-boat. Mr. Hungerford also was dead, and a new guardian administered the fund which was still a common property of the four surviving daughters. Alice plied her

domestic teaching; Virginia remained a ‘companion.’ Isabel, now aged twenty, taught in a Board School at Bridgewater, and Monica, just fifteen, was on the point of being apprenticed to a draper at Weston, where Virginia abode. To serve behind a counter would not have been Monica’s choice if any more liberal employment had seemed within her reach. She had no aptitude whatever for giving instruction; indeed, had no aptitude for anything but being a pretty, cheerful, engaging girl, much dependent on the love and gentleness of those about her. In speech and bearing Monica greatly resembled her mother; that is to say, she had native elegance. Certainly it might be deemed a pity that such a girl could not be introduced to one of the higher walks of life; but the time had come when she must ‘do something’, and the people to whose guidance she looked had but narrow experience of life. Alice and Virginia sighed over the contrast with bygone hopes, but their own careers made it seem probable that Monica would be better off ‘in business’ than in a more strictly genteel position. And there was every likelihood that, at such a place as Weston, with her sister for occasional chaperon, she would ere long find herself relieved of the necessity of working for a livelihood.

To the others, no wooer had yet presented himself. Alice, if she had ever dreamt of marriage, must by now have resigned herself to spinsterhood. Virginia could scarce hope that her faded prettiness, her health damaged by attendance upon an exacting invalid and in profitless study when she ought to have been sleeping, would attract any man in search of a wife. Poor Isabel was so extremely plain. Monica, if her promise were fulfilled, would be by far the

best looking, as well as the sprightliest, of the family. She must marry; of course she must marry! Her sisters gladdened in the thought.

Isabel was soon worked into illness. Brain trouble came on, resulting in melancholia. A charitable institution ultimately received her, and there, at two-and-twenty, the poor hard-featured girl drowned herself in a bath.

Their numbers had thus been reduced by half. Up to now, the income of their eight hundred pounds had served, impartially, the ends now of this, now of that one, doing a little good to all, saving them from many an hour of bitterness which must else have been added to their lot. By a new arrangement, the capital was at length made over to Alice and Virginia jointly, the youngest sister having a claim upon them to the extent of an annual nine pounds. A trifle, but it would buy her clothing — and then Monica was sure to marry. Thank Heaven, she was sure to marry!

Without notable event, matrimonial or other, time went on to this present year of 1888.

Late in June, Monica would complete her twenty-first year; the elders, full of affection for the sister, who so notably surpassed them in beauty of person, talked much about her as the time approached, devising how to procure her a little pleasure on her birthday. Virginia thought a suitable present would be a copy of ‘the Christian Year’.

‘She has really no time for continuous reading. A verse of Keble — just one verse at bedtime and in the morning might be strength to the poor girl.’

Alice assented.

‘We must join to buy it, dear,’ she added, with anxious look. ‘It wouldn’t be justifiable to spend more than two or three shillings.’

‘I fear not.’

They were preparing their midday meal, the substantial repast of the day. In a little saucepan on an oil cooking-stove was some plain rice, bubbling as Alice stirred it. Virginia fetched from downstairs (Mrs. Conisbee had assigned to them a shelf in her larder) bread, butter, cheese, a pot of preserve, and arranged the table (three feet by one and a half) at which they were accustomed to eat. The rice being ready, it was turned out in two proportions; made savoury with a little butter, pepper, and salt, it invited them to sit down.

As they had been out in the morning, the afternoon would be spent in domestic occupations. The low cane-chair Virginia had appropriated to her sister, because of the latter’s headaches and backaches, and other disorders; she herself sat on an ordinary chair of the bedside species, to which by this time she had become used. Their sewing, when they did any, was strictly indispensable; if nothing demanded the needle, both preferred a book. Alice, who had never been a student in the proper sense of the word, read for the twentieth time a few volumes in her possession — poetry, popular history, and half a dozen novels such as the average mother of children would have approved in the governess’s hands. With Virginia the case was somewhat different. Up to about her twenty-fourth year she had pursued one subject with a zeal limited only by her opportunities; study absolutely disinterested, seeing that

she had never supposed it would increase her value as a ‘companion’, or enable her to take any better position. Her one intellectual desire was to know as much as possible about ecclesiastical history. Not in a spirit of fanaticism; she was devout, but in moderation, and never spoke bitterly on religious topics. The growth of the Christian Church, old sects and schisms, the Councils, affairs of Papal policy — these things had a very genuine interest for her; circumstances favouring, she might have become an erudite woman; But the conditions were so far from favourable that all she succeeded in doing was to undermine her health. Upon a sudden breakdown there followed mental lassitude, from which she never recovered. It being subsequently her duty to read novels aloud for the lady whom she ‘companioned,’ new novels at the rate of a volume a day, she lost all power of giving her mind to anything but the feebler fiction. Nowadays she procured such works from a lending library, on a subscription of a shilling a month. Ashamed at first to indulge this taste before Alice, she tried more solid literature, but this either sent her to sleep or induced headache. The feeble novels reappeared, and as Alice made no adverse comment, they soon came and went with the old regularity.

This afternoon the sisters were disposed for conversation. The same grave thought preoccupied both of them, and they soon made it their subject.

‘Surely,’ Alice began by murmuring, half absently, ‘I shall soon hear of something.’

‘I am dreadfully uneasy on my own account,’ her sister replied.

‘You think the person at Southend won’t write again?’

‘I’m afraid not. And she seemed so *very* unsatisfactory. Positively illiterate — oh, I couldn’t bear that.’ Virginia gave a shudder as she spoke.

‘I almost wish,’ said Alice, ‘that I had accepted the place at Plymouth.’

‘Oh, my dear! Five children and not a penny of salary. It was a shameless proposal.’

‘It was, indeed,’ sighed the poor governess. ‘But there is so little choice for people like myself. Certificates, and even degrees, are asked for on every hand. With nothing but references to past employers, what can one expect? I know it will end in my taking a place without salary.’

‘People seem to have still less need of *me*,’ lamented the companion. ‘I wish now that I had gone to Norwich as lady-help.’

‘Dear, your health would *never* have supported it.’

‘I don’t know. Possibly the more active life might do me good. It *might*, you know, Alice.’

The other admitted this possibility with a deep sigh.

‘Let us review our position,’ she then exclaimed.

It was a phrase frequently on her lips, and always made her more cheerful. Virginia also seemed to welcome it as an encouragement.

‘Mine,’ said the companion, ‘is almost as serious as it could be. I have only one pound left, with the exception of the dividend.’

‘I have rather more than four pounds still. Now, let us think,’ Alice paused. ‘Supposing we neither of us obtain employment before the end of this year. We have to live, in

that case, more than six months — you on seven pounds, and I on ten.'

'It's impossible,' said Virginia.

'Let us see. Put it in another form. We have both to live together on seventeen pounds. That is —' she made a computation on a piece of paper —'that is two pounds, sixteen shillings and eightpence a month — let us suppose this month at an end. That represents fourteen shillings and twopence a week. Yes, we can do it!'

She laid down her pencil with an air of triumph. Her dull eyes brightened as though she had discovered a new source of income.

'We cannot, dear,' urged Virginia in a subdued voice. 'Seven shillings rent; that leaves only seven and twopence a week for everything — everything.'

'We *could* do it, dear,' persisted the other. 'If it came to the very worst, our food need not cost more than sixpence a day — three and sixpence a week. I do really believe, Virgie, we could support life on less — say, on fourpence. Yes, we could dear!'

They looked fixedly at each other, like people about to stake everything on their courage.

'Is such a life worthy of the name?' asked Virginia in tones of awe.

'We shan't be driven to that. Oh, we certainly shall not. But it helps one to know that, strictly speaking, we are *independent* for another six months.'

That word gave Virginia an obvious thrill.

'Independent! Oh, Alice, what a blessed thing is independence! Do you know, my dear, I am afraid I have not

exerted myself as I might have done to find a new place. These comfortable lodgings, and the pleasure of seeing Monica once a week, have tempted me into idleness. It isn't really my wish to be idle; I know the harm it does me; but oh! if one could work in a home of one's own!'

Alice had a startled, apprehensive look, as if her sister were touching on a subject hardly proper for discussion, or at least dangerous.

'I'm afraid it's no use thinking of that, dear,' she answered awkwardly.

'No use; no use whatever. I am wrong to indulge in such thoughts.'

'Whatever happens, my dear,' said Alice presently, with all the impressiveness of tone she could command, 'we must never entrench upon our capital — never — never!'

'Oh, never! If we grow old and useless —'

'If no one will give us even board and lodging for our services —'

'If we haven't a friend to look to,' Alice threw in, as though they were answering each other in a doleful litany, 'then indeed we shall be glad that nothing tempted us to entrench on our capital! It would just keep us'— her voice sank —'from the workhouse.'

After this each took up a volume, and until teatime they read quietly.

From six to nine in the evening they again talked and read alternately. Their conversation was now retrospective; each revived memories of what she had endured in one or the other house of bondage. Never had it been their lot to serve 'really nice' people — this phrase of theirs was

anything but meaningless. They had lived with more or less well-to-do families in the lower middle class — people who could not have inherited refinement, and had not acquired any, neither proletarians nor gentlefolk, consumed with a disease of vulgar pretentiousness, inflated with the miasma of democracy. It would have been but a natural result of such a life if the sisters had commented upon it in a spirit somewhat akin to that of their employers; but they spoke without rancour, without scandalmongering. They knew themselves superior to the women who had grudgingly paid them, and often smiled at recollections which would have moved the servile mind to venomous abuse.

At nine o'clock they took a cup of cocoa and a biscuit, and half an hour later they went to bed. Lamp oil was costly; and indeed they felt glad to say as early as possible that another day had gone by.

Their hour of rising was eight. Mrs. Conisbee provided hot water for their breakfast. On descending to fetch it, Virginia found that the postman had left a letter for her. The writing on the envelope seemed to be a stranger's. She ran upstairs again in excitement.

'Who can this be from, Alice?'

The elder sister had one of her headaches this morning; she was clay colour, and tottered in moving about. The close atmosphere of the bedroom would alone have accounted for such a malady. But an unexpected letter made her for the moment oblivious of suffering.

'Posted in London,' she said, examining the envelope eagerly.

'Some one you have been in correspondence with?'

‘It’s months since I wrote to any one in London.’

For full five minutes they debated the mystery, afraid of dashing their hopes by breaking the envelope. At length Virginia summoned courage. Standing at a distance from the other, she took out the sheet of paper with tremulous hand, and glanced fearfully at the signature.

‘What *do* you think? It’s Miss Nunn!’

‘Miss Nunn! Never! How could she have got the address?’

Again the difficulty was discussed whilst its ready solution lay neglected.

‘Do read it!’ said Alice at length, her throbbing head, made worse by the agitation, obliging her to sink down into the chair.

The letter ran thus:—

‘DEAR Miss MADDEN— This morning I chanced to meet with Mrs. Darby, who was passing through London on her way home from the seaside. We had only five minutes’ talk (it was at a railway station), but she mentioned that you were at present in London, and gave me your address. After all these years, how glad I should be to see you! The struggle of life has made me selfish; I have neglected my old friends. And yet I am bound to add that some of *them* have neglected *me*. Would you rather that I came to your lodgings or you to mine? Which you like. I hear that your elder sister is with you, and that Monica is also in London somewhere. Do let us all see each other once more. Write as soon as you can. My kindest regards to all of you. — Sincerely yours,

RHODA NUNN.’

‘How like her,’ exclaimed Virginia, when she had read this aloud, ‘to remember that perhaps we may not care to receive visitors! She was always so thoughtful. And it is true that I *ought* to have written to her.’

‘We shall go to her, of course?’

‘Oh yes, as she gives us the choice. How delightful! I wonder what she is doing? She writes cheerfully; I am sure she must be in a good position. What is the address? Queen’s Road, Chelsea. Oh, I’m so glad it’s not very far. We can walk there and back easily.’

For several years they had lost sight of Rhoda Nunn. She left Clevedon shortly after the Maddens were scattered, and they heard she had become a teacher. About the date of Monica’s apprenticeship at Weston, Miss Nunn had a chance meeting with Virginia and the younger girl; she was still teaching, but spoke of her work with extreme discontent, and hinted at vague projects. Whether she succeeded in releasing herself the Maddens never heard.

It was a morning of doubtful fairness. Before going to bed last night they had decided to walk out together this morning and purchase the present for Monica’s birthday, which was next Sunday. But Alice felt too unwell to leave the house. Virginia should write a reply to Miss Nunn’s letter, and then go to the bookseller’s alone.

She set forth at half-past nine. With extreme care she had preserved an out-of-doors dress into the third summer; it did not look shabby. Her mantle was in its second year only; the original fawn colour had gone to an indeterminate grey. Her hat of brown straw was a possession for ever; it underwent new trimming, at an outlay of a few pence, when

that became unavoidable. Yet Virginia could not have been judged anything but a lady. She wore her garments as only a lady can (the position and movement of the arms has much to do with this), and had the step never to be acquired by a person of vulgar instincts.

A very long walk was before her. She wished to get as far as the Strand bookshops, not only for the sake of choice, but because this region pleased her and gave her a sense of holiday. Past Battersea Park, over Chelsea Bridge, then the weary stretch to Victoria Station, and the upward labour to Charing Cross. Five miles, at least, measured by pavement. But Virginia walked quickly; at half-past eleven she was within sight of her goal.

A presentable copy of Keble's work cost less than she had imagined. This rejoiced her. But after leaving the shop she had a singular expression on her face — something more than weariness, something less than anxiety, something other than calculation. In front of Charing Cross Station she stopped, looking vaguely about her. Perhaps she had it in her mind to return home by omnibus, and was dreading the expense. Yet of a sudden she turned and went up the approach to the railway.

At the entrance again she stopped. Her features were now working in the strangest way, as though a difficulty of breathing had assailed her. In her eyes was an eager yet frightened look; her lips stood apart.

Another quick movement, and she entered the station. She went straight to the door of the refreshment room, and looked in through the glass. Two or three people were