Miss Rodney's Leisure

George Gissing

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A young woman of about eight−and−twenty, in tailor−made costume, with unadorned hat of brown felt, and irreproachable umbrella; a young woman who walked faster than anyone in Wattleborough, yet never looked hurried; who crossed a muddy street seemingly without a thought for her skirts, yet somehow was never splashed; who held up her head like one thoroughly at home in the world, and frequently smiled at her own thoughts. Those who did not know her asked who she was; those who had already made her acquaintance talked a good deal of the new mistress at the High School, by name Miss Rodney. In less than a week after her arrival in the town, her opinions were cited and discussed by Wattleborough ladies. She brought with her the air of a University; she knew a great number of important people; she had a quiet decision of speech and manner which was found very impressive in Wattleborough drawing−rooms. The headmistress spoke of her in high terms, and the incumbent of St Luke's who knew her family, reported that she had always been remarkably clever.

A stranger in the town, Miss Rodney was recommended to the lodgings of Mrs Ducker, a churchwarden's widow; but there she remained only for a week or two, and it was understood that she left because the rooms 'lacked character.' Some persons understood this as an imputation on Mrs Ducker, and were astonished; others, who caught a glimpse of Miss Rodney's meaning, thought she must be 'fanciful.' Her final choice of an abode gave general surprise, for though the street was one of those which Wattleborough opinion classed as 'respectable,' the house itself, as Miss Rodney might have learnt from the incumbent of St Luke's, in whose parish it was situated, had objectionable features. Nothing grave could be alleged against Mrs Turpin, who regularly attended the Sunday evening service; but her husband, a carpenter, spent far too much time at The Swan with Two Necks; and then there was a lodger, young Mr Rawcliffe, concerning whom Wattleborough had for some time been too well informed. Of such comments upon her proceeding Miss Rodney made light; in the aspect of the rooms she found a certain 'quaintness' which decidedly pleased her. 'And as for Mrs Grundy,' she added, 'je m'en fiche,' which certain ladies of culture declared to be a polite expression of contempt.

Miss Rodney never wasted time, and in matters of business had cultivated a notable brevity. Her interview with Mrs Turpin, when she engaged the rooms, occupied perhaps a quarter of an hour; in that space of time she had sufficiently surveyed the house, had learnt all that seemed necessary as to its occupants, and had stated in the clearest possible way her present requirements.

'As a matter of course,' was her closing remark, 'the rooms will be thoroughly cleaned before I come in. At present they are filthy.'

The landlady was too much astonished to reply; Miss Rodney's tones and bearing had so impressed her that she was at a loss for her usual loquacity, and could only stammer respectfully broken answers to whatever was asked. Assuredly no one had ever dared to tell her that her lodgings were 'filthy' — any ordinary person who had ventured upon such an insult would have been overwhelmed with clamorous retort. But Miss Rodney, with a pleasant smile and nod, went her way, and Mrs Turpin stood at the open door gazing after her, bewildered 'twixt satisfaction and resentment.

She was an easy−going, wool−witted creature, not ill−disposed, but sometimes mendacious and very indolent. Her life had always been what it was now — one of slatternly comfort and daylong gossip, for she came of a small tradesman's family, and had married an artisan who was always in well−paid work. Her children were two daughters, who, at seventeen and fifteen, remained in the house with her doing little or nothing, though they were supposed to 'wait upon the lodgers.' For some months only two of the four rooms Mrs Turpin was able to let had been occupied, one by 'young Mr Rawcliffe,' always so called, though his age was nearly thirty, but, as was well known, he belonged to the 'real gentry, and Mrs Turpin held him in reverence on that account. No matter for his little weaknesses — of which evil tongues, said Mrs Turpin, of course made the most. He might be irregular in payment; he might come home 'at all hours,' and make unnecessary noise in going upstairs; he might at times

grumble when his chop was ill−cooked; and, to tell the truth, he might occasionally be 'a little too free' with the young ladies — that is to say, with Mabel and Lily Turpin; but all these things were forgiven him because he was 'a real gentleman,' and spent just as little time as he liked daily in a solicitor's office.

Miss Rodney arrived early on Saturday afternoon. Smiling and silent, she saw her luggage taken up to the bedroom; she paid the cabman; she beckoned her landlady into the parlour, which was on the ground−floor front.

'You haven't had time yet, Mrs Turpin, to clean the rooms?'

The landlady stammered a half−indignant surprise. Why, she and her daughters had given the room a thorough turn−out. It was done only yesterday, and hours had been devoted to it.

'I see,' interrupted Miss Rodney, with quiet decision, 'that our notions of cleanliness differ considerably. I'm going out now, and I shall not be back till six o'clock. You will please to clean the bedroom before then. The sitting−room shall be done on Monday.'

And therewith Miss Rodney left the house.

On her return she found the bedroom relatively clean, and, knowing that too much must not be expected at once, she made no comment. That night, as she sat reading at eleven o'clock, a strange sound arose in the back part of the house; it was a man's voice, hilariously mirthful and breaking into rude song. After listening for a few minutes, Miss Rodney rang her bell, and the landlady appeared.

'Whose voice is that I hear?'

'Voice, miss ?'

'Who is shouting and singing?' asked Miss Rodney, in a disinterested tone.

'I'm sorry if it disturbs you, miss. You'll hear no more.'

'Mrs Turpin, I asked who it was.'

'My 'usband, miss. But ——'

'Thank you. Good night, Mrs Turpin.'

There was quiet for an hour or more. At something after midnight, when Miss Rodney had just finished writing half a dozen letters, there sounded a latch−key in the front door, and some one entered. This person, whoever it was, seemed to stumble about the passage in the dark, and at length banged against the listener's door. Miss Rodney started up and flung the door open. By the light of her lamp she saw a moustachioed face, highly flushed, and grinning.

'Beg pardon,' cried the man, in a voice which harmonized with his look and bearing. 'Infernally dark here; haven't got a match. You're Miss — pardon — forgotten the name — new lodger. Oblige me with a light? Thanks awfully.'

Without a word Miss Rodney took a matchbox from her chimney−piece, entered the passage, entered the second parlour — that occupied by Mr Rawcliffe — and lit a candle which stood on the table.

'You'll be so kind,' she said, looking her fellow−lodger in the eyes, 'as not to set the house on fire.'

'Oh, no fear,' he replied, with a high laugh. 'Quite accustomed. Thanks awfully, Miss — pardon — forgotten the name.

But Miss Rodney was back in her sitting−room and had closed the door.

Her breakfast next morning was served by Mabel Turpin, the elder daughter, a stupidly good−natured girl, who would fain have entered into conversation. Miss Rodney replied to a question that she had slept well, and added that, when she rang her bell, she would like to see Mrs Turpin. Twenty minutes later the landlady entered.

'You wanted me, miss,' she began, in what was meant for a voice of dignity and reserve. 'I don't really wait on lodgers myself.'

'We'll talk about that another time, Mrs Turpin. I wanted to say, first of all, that you have spoiled a piece of good bacon and two good eggs. I must trouble you to cook better than this.'

'I'm very sorry, miss, that nothing seems to suit you ——'

'Oh, we shall get right in time!' interrupted Miss Rodney cheerfully. 'You will find that I have patience. Then I wanted to ask you whether your husband and your lodger come home tipsy every night, or only on Saturdays?'

The woman opened her eyes as wide as saucers, trying hard to look indignant.

'Tipsy, miss?'

'Well, perhaps I should have said "drunk"; I beg your pardon.'

'All I can say, miss, is that young Mr Rawcliffe has never behaved himself in this house excepting as the

gentleman he is. You don't perhaps know that he belongs to a very high−connected family, miss, or I'm sure you wouldn't ——'

'I see,' interposed Miss Rodney. 'That accounts for it. But your husband. Is he highly connected?'

'I'm sure, miss, nobody could ever say that my 'usband took too much — not to say really too much. You may have heard him a bit merry, miss, but where's the harm of a Saturday night?'

'Thank you. Then it is only on Saturday nights that Mr Turpin becomes merry. I'm glad to know that. I shall get used to these little things.'

But Mrs Turpin did not feel sure that she would get used to her lodger. Sunday was spoilt for her by this beginning. When her husband woke from his prolonged slumbers, and shouted for breakfast (which on this day of rest he always took in bed), the good woman went to him with downcast visage, and spoke querulously of Miss Rodney's behaviour.

'I won't wait upon her, so there! The girls may do it, and if she isn't satisfied let her give notice. I'm sure I shan't be sorry. She's given me more trouble in a day than poor Mrs Brown did all the months she was here. I won't be at her beck and call, so there!'

Before night came this declaration was repeated times innumerable, and as it happened that Miss Rodney made no demand for her landlady's attendance, the good woman enjoyed a sense of triumphant self−assertion. On Monday morning Mabel took in the breakfast, and reported that Miss Rodney had made no remark; but, a quarter of an hour later, the bell rang, and Mrs Turpin was summoned. Very red in the face, she obeyed. Having civilly greeted her, Miss Rodney inquired at what hour Mr Turpin took his breakfast, and was answered with an air of surprise that he always left the house on weekdays at half−past seven.

'In that case,' said Miss Rodney, 'I will ask permission to come into your kitchen at a quarter to eight to−morrow morning, to show you how to fry bacon and boil eggs. You mustn't mind. You know that teaching is my profession.'

Mrs Turpin, nevertheless, seemed to mind very much. Her generally good−tempered face wore a dogged sullenness, and she began to mutter something about such a thing never having been heard of; but Miss Rodney paid no heed, renewed the appointment for the next morning, and waved a cheerful dismissal.

Talking with a friend that day, the High School mistress gave a humorous description of her lodgings, and when the friend remarked that they must be very uncomfortable, and that surely she would not stay there, Miss Rodney replied that she had the firmest intention of staying, and, what was more, of being comfortable.

'I'm going to take that household in hand,' she added. 'The woman is foolish, but can be managed, I think, with a little patience. I'm going to tackle the drunken husband as soon as I see my way. And as for the highly connected gentleman whose candle I had the honour of lighting, I shall turn him out.'

'You have your work set!' exclaimed the friend laughing.

'Oh, a little employment for my leisure! This kind of thing relieves the monotony of a teacher's life, and prevents one from growing old.'

Very systematically she pursued her purpose of getting Mrs Turpin 'in hand.' The two points at which she first aimed were the keeping clean of her rooms and the decent preparation of her meals. Never losing her temper, never seeming to notice the landlady's sullen mood, always using a tone of legitimate authority, touched sometimes with humorous compassion, she exacted obedience to her directions, but was well aware that at any moment the burden of a new civilization might prove too heavy for the Turpin family and cause revolt. A week went by; it was again Saturday, and Miss Rodney devoted a part of the morning (there being no school to−day) to culinary instruction. Mabel and Lily shared the lesson with their mother, but both young ladies wore an air of condescension, and grimaced at Miss Rodney behind her back. Mrs Turpin was obstinately mute. The pride of ignorance stiffened her backbone and curled her lip.

Miss Rodney's leisure generally had its task; though as a matter of principle she took daily exercise, her walking or cycling was always an opportunity for thinking something out, and this afternoon, as she sped on wheels some ten miles from Wattleborough, her mind was busy with the problem of Mrs Turpin's husband. From her clerical friend of St Luke's she had learnt that Turpin was at bottom a decent sort of man, rather intelligent, and that it was only during the last year or two that he had taken to passing his evenings at the public−house. Causes for this decline could be suggested. The carpenter had lost his only son, a lad of whom he was very fond; the boy's death quite broke him down at the time, and perhaps he had begun to drink as a way of forgetting the

trouble. Perhaps, too, his foolish, slatternly wife bore part of the blame, for his home had always been comfortless, and such companionship must, in the long−run, tell on a man. Reflecting upon this, Miss Rodney had an idea, and she took no time in putting it into practice. When Mabel brought in her tea, she asked the girl whether her father was at home.

'I think he is, miss,' was the distant reply — for Mabel had been bidden by her mother to 'show a proper spirit' when Miss Rodney addressed her.

'You think so? Will you please make sure, and, if you are right, ask Mr Turpin to be so kind as to let me have a word with him.'

Startled and puzzled, the girl left the room. Miss Rodney waited, but no one came. When ten minutes had elapsed she rang the bell. A few minutes more and there sounded a heavy foot in the passage; then a heavy knock at the door, and Mr Turpin presented himself. He was a short, sturdy man, with hair and beard of the hue known as ginger, and a face which told in his favour. Vicious he could assuredly not be, with those honest grey eyes; but one easily imagined him weak in character, and his attitude as he stood just within the room, half respectful, half assertive, betrayed an embarrassment altogether encouraging to Miss Rodney. In her pleasantest tone she begged him to be seated.

'Thank you, miss,' he replied, in a deep voice, which sounded huskily, but had nothing of surliness; 'I suppose you want to complain about something, and I'd rather get it over standing.'

'I was not going to make any complaint, Mr Turpin.'

'I'm glad to hear it, miss; for my wife wished me to say she'd done about all she could, and if things weren't to your liking, she thought it would be best for all if you suited yourself in somebody else's lodgings.'

It evidently cost the man no little effort to deliver his message; there was a nervous twitching about his person, and he could not look Miss Rodney straight in the face. She, observant of this, kept a very steady eye on him, and spoke with all possible calmness.

'I have not the least desire to change my lodgings, Mr Turpin. Things are going on quite well. There is an improvement in the cooking, in the cleaning, in everything; and, with a little patience, I am sure we shall all come to understand one another. What I wanted to speak to you about was a little practical matter in which you may be able to help me. I teach mathematics at the High School, and I have an idea that I might make certain points in geometry easier to my younger girls if I could demonstrate them in a mechanical way. Pray look here. You see the shapes I have sketched on this piece of paper; do you think you could make them for me in wood?'

The carpenter was moved to a show of reluctant interest. He took the paper, balanced himself now on one leg, now on the other, and said at length that he thought he saw what was wanted. Miss Rodney, coming to his side, explained in more detail; his interest grew more active.

'That's Euclid, miss ?'

'To be sure. Do you remember your Euclid?'

'My own schooling never went as far as that,' he replied, in a muttering voice; 'but my Harry used to do Euclid at the Grammar School, and I got into a sort of way of doing it with him.'

Miss Rodney kept a moment's silence; then quietly and kindly she asked one or two questions about the boy who had died. The father answered in an awkward, confused way, as if speaking only by constraint.

'Well, I'll see what I can do, miss,' he added, abruptly, folding the paper to take away. 'You'd like them soon?'

'Yes. I was going to ask you, Mr Turpin, whether you could do them this evening. Then I should have them for Monday morning.'

Turpin hesitated, shuffled his feet, and seemed to reflect uneasily; but he said at length that he 'would see about it', and, with a rough bow, got out of the room. That night no hilarious sounds came from the kitchen. On Sunday morning, when Miss Rodney went into her sitting−room, she found on the table the wooden geometrical forms, excellently made, just as she wished. Mabel, who came with breakfast, was bidden to thank her father, and to say that Miss Rodney would like to speak with him again, if his leisure allowed, after tea−time on Monday. At that hour the carpenter did not fail to present himself, distrustful still, but less embarrassed. Miss Rodney praised his work, and desired to pay for it. Oh! that wasn't worth talking about, said Turpin; but the lady insisted, and money changed hands. This piece of business transacted, Miss Rodney produced a Euclid, and asked Turpin to show her how far he had gone in it with his boy Harry. The subject proved fruitful of conversation. It became evident that the carpenter had a mathematical bias, and could be readily interested in such things as geometrical

problems. Why should he not take up the subject again?

'Nay, miss,' replied Turpin, speaking at length quite naturally; 'I shouldn't have the heart. If my Harry had lived ——'

But Miss Rodney stuck to her point, and succeeded in making him promise that he would get out the old Euclid and have a look at it in his leisure time. As he withdrew, the man had a pleasant smile on his honest face.

On the next Saturday evening the house was again quiet.

Meanwhile, relations between Mrs Turpin and her lodger were becoming less strained. For the first time in her life the flabby, foolish woman had to do with a person of firm will and bright intelligence; not being vicious of temper, she necessarily felt herself submitting to domination, and darkly surmised that the rule might in some way be for her good. All the sluggard and the slattern in her, all the obstinacy of lifelong habits, hung back from the new things which Miss Rodney was forcing upon her acceptance, but she was no longer moved by active resentment. To be told that she cooked badly had long ceased to be an insult, and was becoming merely a worrying truism. That she lived in dirt there seemed no way of denying, and though every muscle groaned, she began to look upon the physical exertion of dusting and scrubbing as part of her lot in life. Why she submitted, Mrs Turpin could not have told you. And, as was presently to be seen, there were regions of her mind still unconquered, instincts of resistance which yet had to come into play.

For, during all this time, Miss Rodney had had her eye on her fellow−lodger, Mr Rawcliffe, and the more she observed this gentleman, the more resolute she became to turn him out of the house; but it was plain to her that the undertaking would be no easy one. In the landlady's eyes Mr Rawcliffe, though not perhaps a faultless specimen of humanity, conferred an honour on her house by residing in it; the idea of giving him notice to quit was inconceivable to her. This came out very clearly in the first frank conversation which Miss Rodney held with her on the topic. It happened that Mr Rawcliffe had passed an evening at home, in the company of his friends. After supping together, the gentlemen indulged in merriment which, towards midnight, became uproarious. In the morning Mrs Turpin mumbled a shamefaced apology for this disturbance of Miss Rodney's repose.

'Why don't you take this opportunity and get rid of him?' asked the lodger in her matter−of−fact tone.

'Oh, miss!'

'Yes, it's your plain duty to do so. He gives your house a bad character; he sets a bad example to your husband; he has a bad influence on your daughters.'

'Oh, miss, I don't think ——'

'Just so, Mrs Turpin; you don't think. If you had, you would long ago have noticed that his behaviour to those girls is not at all such as it should be. More than once I have chanced to hear bits of talk, when either Mabel or Lily was in his sitting−room, and didn't like the tone of it. In plain English, the man is a blackguard.'

Mrs Turpin gasped.

'But, miss, you forget what family he belongs to.'

'Don't be a simpleton, Mrs Turpin. The blackguard is found in every rank of life. Now, suppose you go to him as soon as he gets up, and quietly give him notice. You've no idea how much better you would feel after it.'

But Mrs Turpin trembled at the suggestion. It was evident that no ordinary argument or persuasion would bring her to such a step. Miss Rodney put the matter aside for the moment.

She had found no difficulty in getting information about Mr Rawcliffe. It was true that he belonged to a family of some esteem in the Wattleborough neighbourhood, but his father had died in embarrassed circumstances, and his mother was now the wife of a prosperous merchant in another town. To his stepfather Rawcliffe owed an expensive education and two or three starts in life. He was in his second year of articles to a Wattleborough solicitor, but there seemed little probability of his ever earning a living by the law, and reports of his excesses which reached the stepfather's ears had begun to make the young man's position decidedly precarious. The incumbent of St Luke's, whom Rawcliffe had more than once insulted, took much interest in Miss Rodney's design against this common enemy; he could not himself take active part in the campaign, but he never met the High School mistress without inquiring what progress she had made. The conquest of Turpin, who now for several weeks had kept sober, and spent his evenings in mathematical study, was a most encouraging circumstance; but Miss Rodney had no thought of using her influence over her landlady's husband to assail Rawcliffe's position. She would rely upon herself alone, in this as in all other undertakings.

Only by constant watchfulness and energy did she maintain her control over Mrs Turpin, who was ready at

any moment to relapse into her old slatternly ways. It was not enough to hold the ground that had been gained; there must be progressive conquest; and to this end Miss Rodney one day broached the subject which had already been discussed between her and her clerical ally.

'Why do you keep both your girls at home, Mrs Turpin?' she asked.

'What should I do with them, miss? I don't hold with sending girls into shops, or else they've an aunt in Birmingham, who's manageress of ——'

'That isn't my idea,' interposed Miss Rodney quietly. 'I have been asked if I knew of a girl who would go into a country−house not far from here as second housemaid, and it occurred to me that Lily ——'

A sound of indignant protest escaped the landlady, which Miss Rodney, steadily regarding her, purposely misinterpreted.

'No, no, of course, she is not really capable of taking such a position. But the lady of whom I am speaking would not mind an untrained girl, who came from a decent house. Isn't it worth thinking of?'

Mrs Turpin was red with suppressed indignation, but as usual she could not look her lodger defiantly in the face.

'We're not so poor, miss,' she exclaimed, 'that we need send our daughters into service.'

'Why, of course not, Mrs Turpin, and that's one of the reasons why Lily might suit this lady.'

But here was another rock of resistance which promised to give Miss Rodney a good deal of trouble. The landlady's pride was outraged, and after the manner of the inarticulate she could think of no adequate reply save that which took the form of personal abuse. Restrained from this by more than one consideration, she stood voiceless, her bosom heaving.

'Well, you shall think it over,' said Miss Rodney, 'and we'll speak of it again in a day or two.'

Mrs Turpin, without another word, took herself out of the room.

Save for that singular meeting on Miss Rodney's first night in the house, Mr Rawcliffe and the energetic lady had held no intercourse whatever. Their parlours being opposite each other on the ground floor, they necessarily came face to face now and then, but the High School mistress behaved as though she saw no one, and the solicitor's clerk, after one or two attempts at polite formality, adopted a like demeanour. The man's proximity caused his neighbour a ceaseless irritation; of all objectionable types of humanity, this loafing and boozing degenerate was, to Miss Rodney, perhaps the least endurable; his mere countenance excited her animosity, for feebleness and conceit, things abhorrent to her, were legible in every line of the trivial features; and a full moustache, evidently subjected to training, served only as emphasis of foppish imbecility. 'I could beat him!' she exclaimed more than once within herself, overcome with contemptuous wrath, when she passed Mr Rawcliffe. And, indeed, had it been possible to settle the matter thus simply, no doubt Mr Rawcliffe's rooms would very soon have been vacant.

The crisis upon which Miss Rodney had resolved came about, quite unexpectedly, one Sunday evening. Mrs Turpin and her daughters had gone, as usual, to church, the carpenter had gone to smoke a pipe with a neighbour, and Mr Rawcliffe believed himself alone in the house. But Miss Rodney was not at church this evening; she had a headache, and after tea lay down in her bedroom for a while. Soon impatient of repose, she got up and went to her parlour. The door, to her surprise, was partly open; entering — the tread of her slippered feet was noiseless — she beheld an astonishing spectacle. Before her writing−table, his back turned to her, stood Mr Rawcliffe, engaged in the deliberate perusal of a letter which he had found there. For a moment she observed him; then she spoke.

'What business have you here?'

Rawcliffe gave such a start that he almost jumped from the ground. His face, as he put down the letter and turned, was that of a gibbering idiot; his lips moved, but no sound came from them.

'What are you doing in my room?' demanded Miss Rodney, in her severest tones.

'I really beg your pardon — I really beg ——'

'I suppose this is not the first visit with which you have honoured me?'

'The first — indeed — I assure you — the very first! A foolish curiosity; I really feel quite ashamed of myself; I throw myself upon your indulgence.'

The man had become voluble; he approached Miss Rodney smiling in a sickly way, his head bobbing forward.

'It's something,' she replied, 'that you have still the grace to feel ashamed. Well, there's no need for us to discuss this matter; it can have, of course, only one result. To−morrow morning you will oblige me by giving

notice to Mrs Turpin — a week's notice.'

'Leave the house?' exclaimed Rawcliffe.

'On Saturday next — or as much sooner as you like.'

'Oh! but really ——'

'As you please,' said Miss Rodney, looking him sternly in the face. 'In that case I complain to the landlady of your behaviour, and insist on her getting rid of you. You ought to have been turned out long ago. You are a nuisance, and worse than a nuisance. Be so good as to leave the room.

Rawcliffe, his shoulders humped, moved towards the door; but before reaching it he stopped and said doggedly:

'I can't give notice.'

'Why not?'

'I owe Mrs Turpin money.'

'Naturally. But you will go, all the same.'

A vicious light flashed into the man's eyes.

'If it comes to that, I shall not go!'

'Indeed?' said Miss Rodney calmly and coldly. 'We will see about it. In the meantime, leave the room, sir!'

Rawcliffe nodded, grinned and withdrew.

Late that evening there was a conversation between Miss Rodney and Mrs Turpin. The landlady, though declaring herself horrified at what had happened, did her best to plead for Mr Rawcliffe's forgiveness, and would not be brought to the point of promising to give him notice.

'Very well, Mrs Turpin,' said Miss Rodney at length, 'either he leaves the house or I do.'

Resolved, as she was, not to quit her lodgings, this was a bold declaration. A meeker spirit would have trembled at the possibility that Mrs Turpin might be only too glad to free herself from a subjection which, again and again, had all but driven her to extremities. But Miss Rodney had the soul of a conqueror; she saw only her will, and the straight way to it.

'To tell you the truth, miss,' said the landlady, sore perplexed, 'he's rather backward with his rent ——'

'Very foolish of you to have allowed him to get into your debt. The probability is that he would never pay his arrears; they will only increase, the longer he stays. But I have no more time to spare at present. Please understand that by Saturday next it must be settled which of your lodgers is to go.'

Mrs Turpin had never been so worried. The more she thought of the possibility of Miss Rodney's leaving the house, the less did she like it. Notwithstanding Mr Rawcliffe's 'family,' it was growing clear to her that, as a stamp of respectability and a source of credit, the High School mistress was worth more than the solicitor's clerk. Then there was the astonishing change that had come over Turpin, owing, it seemed, to his talk with Miss Rodney; the man spent all his leisure time in 'making shapes and figuring' — just as he used to do when poor Harry was at the Grammar School. If Miss Rodney disappeared, it seemed only too probable that Turpin would be off again to The Swan with Two Necks. On the other hand, the thought of 'giving notice' to Mr Rawcliffe caused her something like dismay; how could she have the face to turn a real gentleman out of her house? Yes, but was it not true that she had lost money by him — and stood to lose more? She had never dared to tell her husband of Mr Rawcliffe's frequent shortcomings in the matter of weekly payments. When the easy−going young man smiled and nodded, and said, 'It'll be all right, you know, Mrs Turpin; you can trust me, I hope,' she could do nothing but acquiesce. And Mr Rawcliffe was more and more disposed to take advantage of this weakness. If she could find courage to go through with the thing, perhaps she would be glad when it was over.

Three days went by. Rawcliffe led an unusually quiet and regular life. There came the day on which his weekly bill was presented. Mrs Turpin brought it in person at breakfast, and stood with it in her hand, an image of vacillation. Her lodger made one of his familiar jokes; she laughed feebly. No; the words would not come to her lips; she was physically incapable of giving him notice.

'By the bye, Mrs Turpin,' said Rawcliffe in an offhand way, as he glanced at the bill, 'how much exactly do I owe you)'

Pleasantly agitated, his landlady mentioned the sum.

'Ah! I must settle that. I tell you what, Mrs Turpin. Let it stand over for another month, and we'll square things up at Christmas. Will that suit you?'

And, by way of encouragement, he paid his week's account on the spot, without a penny of deduction. Mrs Turpin left the room in greater embarrassment than ever.

Saturday came. At breakfast Miss Rodney sent for the landlady, who made a timid appearance just within the room.

'Good morning, Mrs Turpin. What news have you for me? You know what I mean?'

The landlady took a step forward, and began babbling excuses, explanations, entreaties. She was coldly and decisively interrupted.

'Thank you, Mrs Turpin, that will do. A week to−day I leave.'

With a sound which was half a sob and half grunt Mrs Turpin bounced from the room. It was now inevitable that she should report the state of things to her husband, and that evening half an hour's circumlocution brought her to the point. Which of the two lodgers should go? The carpenter paused, pipe in mouth, before him a geometrical figure over which he had puzzled for a day or two, and about which, if he could find courage, he wished to consult the High School mistress. He reflected for five minutes, and uttered an unhesitating decision. Mr Rawcliffe must go. Naturally, his wife broke into indignant clamour, and the debate lasted for an hour or two; but Turpin could be firm when he liked, and he had solid reasons for preferring to keep Miss Rodney in the house. At four o'clock Mrs Turpin crept softly to the sitting−room where her offended lodger was quietly reading.

'I wanted just to say, miss, that I'm willing to give Mr Rawcliffe notice next Wednesday.'

'Thank you, Mrs Turpin,' was the cold reply. 'I have already taken other rooms.'

The landlady gasped, and for a moment could say nothing. Then she besought Miss Rodney to change her mind. Mr Rawcliffe should leave, indeed he should, on Wednesday week. But Miss Rodney had only one reply; she had found other rooms that suited her, and she requested to be left in peace.

At eleven Mr Rawcliffe came home. He was unnaturally sober, for Saturday night, and found his way into the parlour without difficulty. There in a minute or two he was confronted by his landlady and her husband: they closed the door behind them, and stood in a resolute attitude.

'Mr Rawcliffe,' began Turpin, 'you must leave these lodgings, sir, on Wednesday next.'

'Hullo! what's all this about?' cried the other. 'What do you mean, Turpin?'

The carpenter made plain his meaning; he spoke of Miss Rodney's complaint, of the irregular payment (for his wife, in her stress, had avowed everything), and of other subjects of dissatisfaction; the lodger must go, there was an end of it. Rawcliffe, putting on all his dignity, demanded the legal week's notice; Turpin demanded the sum in arrear. There was an exchange of high words, and the interview ended with mutual defiance. A moment after Turpin and his wife knocked at Miss Rodney's door, for she was still in her parlour. There followed a brief conversation, with the result that Miss Rodney graciously consented to remain, on the understanding that Mr Rawcliffe left the house not later than Wednesday.

Enraged at the treatment he was receiving, Rawcliffe loudly declared that he would not budge. Turpin warned him that if he had made no preparations for departure on Wednesday, he would be forcibly ejected, and the door closed against him.

'You haven't the right to do it,' shouted the lodger. 'I'll sue you for damages.'

'And I,' retorted the carpenter, 'will sue you for the money you owe me!'

The end could not be doubtful. Rawcliffe, besides being a poor creature, knew very well that it was dangerous for him to get involved in a scandal; his stepfather, upon whom he depended, asked but a fair excuse for cutting him adrift, and more than one grave warning had come from his mother during the past few months. But he enjoyed a little blustering, and even at breakfast−time on Wednesday his attitude was that of contemptuous defiance. In vain had Mrs Turpin tried to coax him with maternal suavity; in vain had Mabel and Lily, when serving his meals, whispered abuse of Miss Rodney, and promised to find some way of getting rid of her, so that Rawcliffe might return. In a voice loud enough to be heard by his enemy in the opposite parlour, he declared that no 'cat of a school teacher should get the better of him.' As a matter of fact, however, he arranged on Tuesday evening to take a couple of cheaper rooms just outside the town, and ordered a cab to come for him at eleven next morning.

'You know what the understanding is, Mr Rawcliffe,' said Turpin, putting his head into the room as the lodger sat at breakfast. 'I'm a man of my word.'

'Don't come bawling here!' cried the other, with a face of scorn.

And at noon the house knew him no more.

Miss Rodney, on that same day, was able to offer her landlady a new lodger. She had not spoken of this before, being resolved to triumph by mere force of will.

'The next thing,' she remarked to a friend, when telling the story, 'is to pack off one of the girls into service. I shall manage it by Christmas,' and she added with humorous complacency, it does one good to be making a sort of order in one's own little corner of the world.'