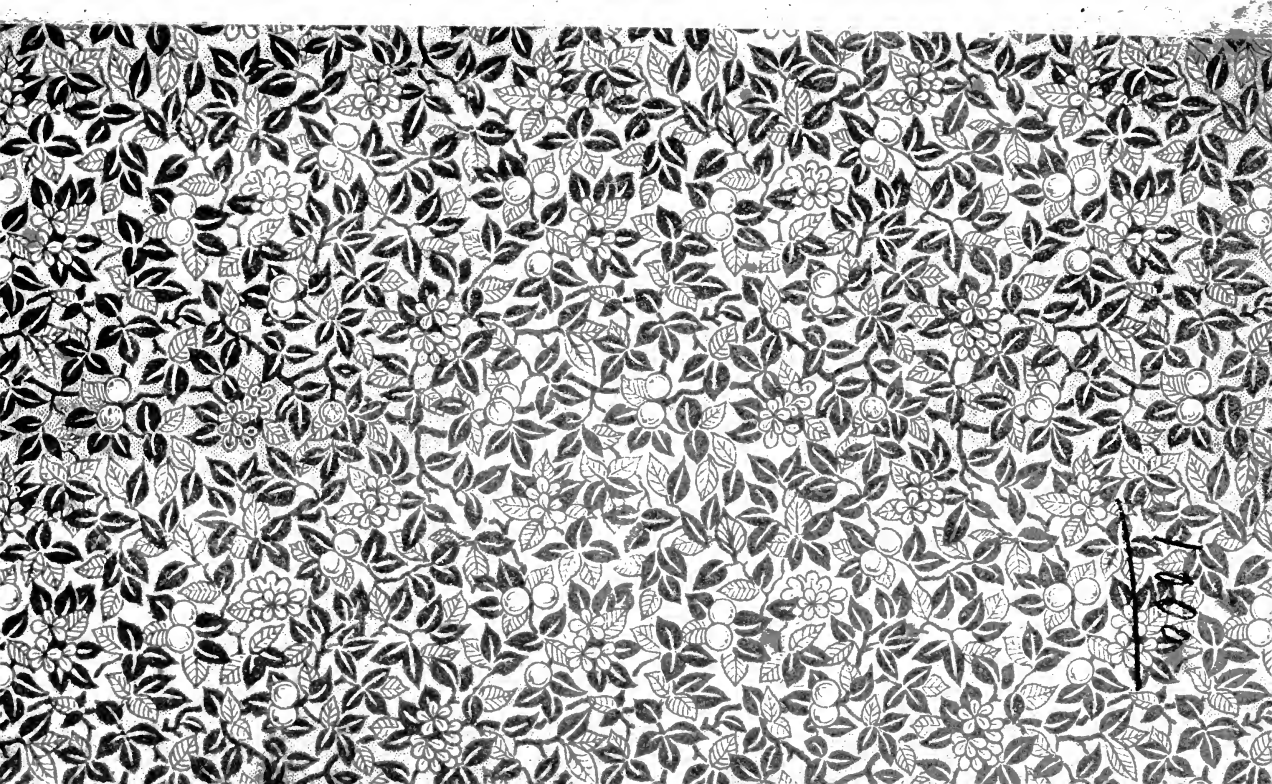

FOXGLOVE MANOR

FOXGLOVE MANOR

A Novel

BY
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"GOD AND THE MAN," "THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD,"
"THE NEW ABELARD," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE following attempt at a tragedy in fiction (a tragedy, however, without a tragic ending) must not be construed into an attack on the English priesthood generally. I have simply pictured, in the Rev. Charles Santley, a type of man which exists, and of which I have had personal experience. Fortunately, such men are uncommon; still more fortunately, the clergymen of the English Establishment are for the most part sane and healthy men, too unimaginative for morbid deviations.

ROBERT BUCHANAN.

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FOXGLOVE MANOR.

CHAPTER I.

ST. CUTHBERT'S.

As the sweet, clear voices of the surpliced choristers rose in the closing verse of the hymn, and the vicar, in his white robe and violet hood, ascended the pulpit steps, old Gabriel Ware, sexton and doorkeeper of St. Cuthbert's, limped across the pavement and slipped into the porch, as his custom was at sermon-time on Sunday afternoons.

He waited till the singing had ceased and the congregation had settled in

their pews; and while he listened to the vicar announcing his text—"For in Him we live, and move, and have our being"—he fumbled in the pockets beneath his black gown of office, and then limped noiselessly out into the sunshine, where, after a glance round him, he pulled out a short clay pipe, well seasoned, filled it with twist, and began his usual after-dinner smoke.

It was a hot, shimmering July afternoon, and it was much pleasanter to sit out of doors on a tombstone, listening to the vicar's voice as it came though the dark lancets like a sound of running water.

Half a mile or so away, nestled in trees, was the village of Omberley, with its glimpses of white walls and tiled or slated roofs. Then there were soft, hazy stretches of pasture, with idyllic

groupings of cattle and sheep and trees. The fields of wheat and barley, turnips and potatoes, lay out idle and warm, growing and taking no care, and apparently causing none. The sight and smell of the land filled Gabriel with a stolid satisfaction at the order of nature and the providential gift of tobacco.

There was but the faintest breeze stirring, and it wafted all manner of sweet odours and lulling whispers about the graveyard. Everywhere there was evidence of a fervent throbbing vitality and joyousness. The soft green turf which spread all round the church to the limits of the churchyard, here billowing over a nameless grave, here crusting with moss the base of a tombstone or a marble cross or a pillared urn, here edging round an oblong plot brilliant with flowers and hothouse

plants,—the very turf seemed stirred by glad impulses, and quivering with a crush of hurrying insect life. Daisies and buttercups and little blue and pink eyed flowers danced among the restless spears of grass with a merry hardihood. Laburnums and sycamores stood drowsing in the hot shining air, but they were not asleep, and were not silent. A persistent undertone came from among their shadowy boughs, as if the sap were buzzing through every leaf and stalk. Up their trunks, toiling through the rugged ravines of the rough bark, travelling along the branches, flitting from one cool leaf to another, myriads of nameless winged and creeping things went to and fro, and added their murmurs to the vast, vague resonance of life. A soft, ceaseless whispering was diffused from the tall green

spires of a row of poplars which went along the iron railing that separated the enclosure from the high-road. Blue and yellow butterflies fluttered from one flowery grave to another; the big booming humble-bee went blundering among the blossoms; a grasshopper was singing shrilly in the bushes near the railing; a laborious caravan of ants was crossing the stony wilderness of the gravel path; a dragon-fly hawked to and fro beneath the sycamores; small birds dropped twittering on cross or urn for an instant, flashed away up into a tree, and then darted off into the fields, as though too full of excitement and gamesomeness to rest more than a moment anywhere. Soft fleecy masses of luminous cloud slumbered in the hot blue sky overhead, and only in its remote deeps did there seem to be unimpassioned

quietude and a sabbath stillness—only there and in the church.

Notwithstanding the dazzling sunshine and the heat, the church was cool and dim and fragrant. The black and red tiles of the pavement, the brown massive pillars and airy arches of sandstone, the oaken pews, the spacious sanctuary with its wide stone steps, affected one with a refreshing sense of coolness and comfort. The light entered soft and subdued through richly stained glass, for the windows looked, not on familiar breadths of English landscape glowing and ripening in the July sun, but seemed rather to open into the strangely coloured world of nineteen centuries ago. The blessing of the little children, the raising of Lazarus, the interview at the well with the woman of Samaria, the minstrel rout about the house of the ruler whose little

maid lay not dead but sleeping, took the place of the mundane scenes beheld through unhallowed windows. Even the unpictured lancets were filled with leaded panes of crimson and blue and gold. Then there was a faint, pleasant odour of incense about the building, emphasizing the contrast between the mood of nature and the mood of man. St. Cuthbert's was floridly ritualistic, and the vicar was one of those who felt that, in an age of spiritual disquiet and unbelief, a man cannot cling with too many hands to the great Revelation which appeared to be daily growing more elusive, and who believed that if the soul may be lost, it may also be, in a measure, saved through the senses. Feigned devotions and the absence of any appeal to the physical nature of man had, he was convinced, drawn innumer-

able souls into indifference on the one hand, and into Catholicism on the other. If there was a resurrection of the body as well as of the soul, surely the body ought not to be abandoned as a thing accursed, from which no good can come. The vicar encountered no difficulty in realizing his views of the dignity of flesh and blood at St. Cuthbert's.

A thick, softly toned carpet lay on the broad stone steps which led up to the communion table. Behind the communion table, and for some distance to right and left, the sanctuary walls were hung with richly coloured tapestry. The table itself—or the altar, as it was usually called—was draped with violet silk, embroidered with amber crosses, and upon it stood a large crucifix of brass, with vases of flowers, and massive brazen candlesticks on either side. In the

centre a large brass gasalier was suspended from a large ring, containing an enamelled cross, and beneath it hung an oil-lamp, which was kept perpetually burning. Amid all the coolness and fragrance and mystical flush of colour, that little leaf of flame floating in its glass cup attracted the attention of the stranger most singularly. It piqued the imagination, and added an indescribable feeling of hallowed sorcery to the general effect, which was that of an influence too spiritual not to excite reverence, but too sensuous to be considered sacred. Stepping out of the churchyard, with its throbbing warmth and glad undertones of commotion, into the cool, soft-lighted, artificially coloured atmosphere of the church, one might have felt as if dropped into the Middle Ages, but for the modern appearance of the congregation.

St. Cuthbert's was the fashionable place of worship at Omberley, and its afternoon service was always well attended, though at a glance one perceived, from the chromatic effect of the pews, that the large majority of the congregation were of the more emotional sex. As the vicar gave out his text, his taste for the bright and beautiful must have been gratified by the flowers and feathers and dainty dresses, and still more by the rows of young and pretty faces which were raised towards the pulpit with such varied expression of interest, affection, and admiration.

The Rev. Charles Santley had been Vicar of St. Cuthbert's for little less than a year. He was unmarried, just turned thirty, a little over the middle height, and remarkably handsome. It was not to be wondered at that, with such recom-

mendations, the new vicar had at the very outset fascinated the maids and matrons of his congregation. A bright shapely face, with soft dark eyes, a complexion almost feminine in its clear flush, a broad scholarly forehead, black hair slightly thinned with study on the brow and at the temples, black moustache and short curling black beard,—such was the face of the vicar as he stood uncovered before you. His voice was musical and sympathetic; the pressure of his hand invited confidence and trust; his soft dark eyes not only looked into your heart, but conveyed the warmth and eagerness of his own; you felt instinctively that here you might turn for help which would never be found wanting, and seek advice that would never lead you astray, appeal for sympathy with a certainty that you would be understood,

obey the prompting to transfer the burthen of spiritual distress with a sure knowledge that your self-esteem would never be wounded. Of course there were ladies of a critical and censorious disposition among his flock, but even these were forced to acknowledge the charm of his presence and the kindliness of his disposition. Among the men he was less enthusiastically popular, as was natural enough; but he was still greatly liked for his frankness and cordiality, and his keen intellect and sterling common sense commanded their respect.

On one thing you might always reckon at St. Cuthbert's—a thoughtful, eloquent sermon, delivered in a voice full of exquisite modulations. It happened often enough that the preacher forgot the capacities of his hearers, and

became dreamy and mystical; but, though you failed to comprehend, you were conscious that the fault lay less with him than with your own smaller spiritual nature. This, too, happened only in certain passages, and never throughout an entire discourse. He began on the grass, as the lark does, and gradually rose higher and higher in the brightening heavens till your vision failed; but, if you waited patiently, he descended again to earth, still singing.

On this Sunday afternoon, preaching from the text in the Acts, he held his hearers spell-bound at the outset. Referring to the memorable discourse in which the text occurs, he conjured up before them Athens—glittering, garrulous, luxurious, profligate—the Athens St. Paul had seen. The vivid picture was crowded with magnificent temples,

countless altars, innumerable shapes of mortal loveliness. Here was the Agora, with its altar of the Twelve Gods, and its painted cloisters, and its plane trees, beneath whose shade were disputing groups of philosophers, in the garb of their various sects. Gods and goddesses, in shining marble, in gold and ivory, caught the eye wherever it fell. There were altars to Fame and Health and Energy, to Modesty and Persuasion, to Pity and to Oblivion. On the ledges of the precipitous Acropolis glittered the shrines of Bacchus and Æsculapius, Venus, Earth, and Ceres. Over all towered the splendid statue of Pallas, cast from the brazen spoils of Marathon, visible, as it flashed in the sun, to the sailor doubling the distant promontory of Sunium. Every divinity that it had entered into the imagination of man to

conceive or the heart of man to yearn for, every deified attribute of human nature, had here its shrine or its voluptuous image. "Ye men of Athens, all things which I behold bear witness to your carefulness in religion." It was easier, said the Roman satirist, to find a god than a man in Athens. And yet these men, with all their civilization, with all their art and poetry and philosophy, had not found God, and, notwithstanding all the statues and altars they had erected, were aware that they had not found Him; for St. Paul, as he traversed their resplendent city, and beheld their devotions, had found an altar with this inscription, "To THE UNKNOWN GOD." Referring then to those "certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoics," who encountered the apostle, he briefly

sketched the two great systems of Greek speculation, and their influence on the morality of the age: the pantheism of the Stoics, who recognized in the universe a rational, organizing soul which produced all things and absorbed all things,—who perceived in pleasure no good, in pain no evil,—who judged virtue to be virtue and vice vice, according as they conformed to reason; the materialism of the Epicureans, who perceived in creation a fortuitous concourse of atoms, acknowledged no Godhead, or, at best, an unknowable, irresponsible Godhead, throned in happy indifference far beyond human impetration,—taught that the soul perished as the body perished, and was dissipated like a streak of morning cloud into the infinite azure of the inane. Following Paul as the philosophers "took him and brought

him unto Areopagus," where from immemorial time the judges, seated on benches hewn out of the rock, had sat under the witnessing heavens, passing sentence on the greatest criminals and deciding the most solemn questions of religion, he glanced down once more at the city glittering with temples and thronged with gods and goddesses, and bringing into broad contrast the radiant Apollo and the voluptuous Aphrodite, with the scourged and thorn-crowned figure on the cross, he read the message of the apostle to the pagan world. On how many altars to-day might not the words "To the Unknown God" be fittingly inscribed! "In Him we live, and move, and have our being;" but how few of us have "felt after" and found Him! In a strain of impassioned eloquence the preacher spoke of

that unseen sustaining presence, which brooded over and encompassed us; of the yearning of the human heart for communion with the Creator; of the cry of anguish which rose from the depths of our being, when our eyes ached with straining into the night and saw nothing, when our quivering hands were reached out into the infinite and clasped but darkness; of the intense need we felt for a personal, tangible, sympathetic Being, for an incarnation of the divinity; of those ecstatic ascensions of the soul, in which man "felt after" and actually touched God; and, as he spoke, his glowing words gradually ceased to convey any definite meaning to the great majority of his hearers: but one face, flushed with joyous intelligence, one young beautiful face, with large, liquid blue eyes of worship, and with eager

tremulous lips, was all the while turned fixedly up to his.

Seated in a little curtained nook near the organ, a slim, fair girl of two and twenty watched the preacher with almost breathless earnestness. She was a bright little fragile-looking blossom of a being, who seemed scarcely to have yet slipped out of her girlhood. Her face was of that delicate white, tinged with a spot of pink, which so often indicates a consumptive constitution, but in her case this delicacy of complexion was owing rather to the fineness of the material of which nature had moulded her. Light fine hair, in silky confusion rather than curls, clustered about her forehead and temples. Her little hands still clasped the music-book from which she had been playing the accompaniment of the hymn—for Edith Dove was

the organist of St. Cuthbert's—as though from the outset she had been too absorbed to remember that she was holding it.

Occasionally the vicar turned towards the aisle in which she sat, and his glance rested on her for a moment, and each time their eyes met Edith's heart beat more rapidly, and a deeper tinge of rose-colour brightened her cheeks. But Mr. Santley showed no sign of kindred emotion; he was wholly absorbed in the fervid thoughts which flowed from his lips in such strains of exaltation. As his eyes wandered over the congregation, however, he suddenly saw another face which was turned attentively towards him, and which made him pause abruptly. He stopped in the midst of a sentence. He felt the action of his heart cease, and he knew

that the blood was driven from his cheeks. He looked dazedly down at his manuscript, but was unable to find the place where his memory had failed him. For a few seconds there was dead silence in the church, and the eyes of the congregation were turned inquiringly towards the pulpit. Then, stammering and flushing, he resumed almost at haphazard. But the enthusiasm of the preacher had deserted him; his attention was distracted by a rush of recollections and feelings which he could not banish; the words he had written seemed to him foreign and purposeless, and it was only with a resolute effort that he constrained himself to read the parallel he had drawn between the pantheism and materialism of the days of St. Paul and those of our own time. To the close of his sermon he never once

ventured to turn his eyes again in the direction of that face, but kept them fixed resolutely upon his manuscript. Not till he had descended the pulpit steps and was crossing the chancel, did he hazard a glance across the church towards that disquieting apparition.

When the service was ended, and the choristers, headed by the cross-bearer, had passed in procession down the nave to the vestry, the vicar hastily disrobed and issued into the churchyard. As with a strange fluttering hopefulness he had half anticipated, he was being waited for. A lady was moving slowly about among the graves, pausing now and again to read an inscription on a stone, but keeping a constant observation on the church doors. As he came out of the porch, she advanced to meet him, with a smile upon the face which

had so terribly disconcerted him. She was a most beautiful, starry-looking creature—a tall, graceful, supple figure, with the exquisitely moulded head of a Greek statue; a ripe rich complexion suffused with a blush-rose tint; large lovely black eyes full of fire and softness; long, curved, black eyelashes; a profusion of silky black hair parted in little waves on a broad, bright forehead; and a pair of sweet, red lips.

She held out a little white hand to him, and, as he took it, their first words were uttered simultaneously.

"Ellen!"

"Mr. Santley!"

"I never dreamed," said the vicar, excitedly, "I never dared to hope, to see you again!"

"Oh, the world is very small," she replied gaily, "and people keep crossing

each other at the most unexpected times and in the oddest of places. But I am so glad to see you. Are you doing well? You can scarcely imagine how curious it was when I recognized you to-day. Of course I had heard your name as our vicar, but I had no idea it could be *you*."

"I am sure you are not more glad than I am," rejoined the vicar. "Are you staying at Omberley? Have you friends here?"

She regarded him for a moment with a mixed expression of surprise and amusement.

"Do you not know that I am one of your parishioners now?" she asked, with a pleasant laugh.

He looked wonderingly into her dark, joyous eyes, and felt a sudden sense of chill and darkness within him, as a quick

intelligence of who and what she now was flashed into his mind.

"Are you at the Manor?" he asked, in a low, agitated voice.

"Yes," she answered, without noticing his emotion. "We arrived only yesterday, and have hardly had time yet to feel that we are at home; but I could not resist the inclination to see what sort of a church, and what sort of a vicar," she added, with a glance of sly candour, "we had at St. Cuthbert's. I am really so glad I came. Of course you will call and see us as soon and as often as you can, will you not? Mr. Haldane will be delighted, I know."

"You are very kind," said the vicar, scarcely aware of what he was saying.

"Indeed, I wish to be so," she replied, smiling. "Of course you know Mr. Haldane?"

"No; I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting him. He—you had gone abroad before I came to Omberley."

"Then you have not been here long?"

"Not quite a year yet."

"And do you like the place—and the people?"

"Both, very much indeed!"

"You are not married yet, I think Mr. Haldane said?"

The vicar looked at her with a sadness that was almost reproachful as he answered, "No; I have my sister living with me."

"How pleasant! You *must* bring Miss Santley with you when you come, will you not?"

As she spoke she moved slowly towards the gateway opening on to the road, where a little basket-carriage was

awaiting her. He accompanied her, and for a few seconds there was silence between them. Then they shook hands again before she got into the carriage, and she repeated her assurance—

"I am so glad to have met you, Mr. Santley!"

She took the reins, and, lightly flicking the ponies with the whip, flashed upon him a farewell smile from those dark, spiritual eyes and laughing lips.

The vicar turned back into the churchyard, and following a narrow path that led across the sward through a wicket and a small beech plantation, entered the Vicarage with a pale, troubled face.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE VICARAGE.

When he reached the house he found that his presence was needed at the bedside of a labourer, who had met with a serious accident a day or two before, and who was now sinking rapidly. Mr. Santley was a man who never begrudged time or trouble in the interests of his parishioners; and, though he had yet another service to attend, and was already fatigued by the work of the day, he readily signified his willingness to comply with the request of the dying man, and at once started for the village.

He felt at the moment that the duty placed before him would be a relief from the thronging recollections and the wild promptings which had set his heart and brain in a turmoil. As he went down the road, however, the face of the dying man who had sent to seek his priestly aid, and the face of the beautiful wife of the owner of Foxglove Manor, seemed to be striving for mastery over him; he was unable to concentrate his attention on any subject. His will was in abeyance, and he appeared to himself to be in a sort of waking nightmare, in which the most distorted thoughts of marriage and death, of a lost love and of a lost God, of the mockery of life, the mockery of youth, the mockery of religion, presented themselves before him in a hideous masquerade, till the function he was about to

fulfil appeared to him at one moment a sacrilege and at another a degrading folly.

To understand in some degree the vicar's mental condition, it is necessary to glance back on his past life. In early manhood Charles Santley had been seriously impressed with the sense of a special vocation to a religious life. He was the son of a wealthy merchant, whose entire fortune had perished in one of our great commercial crises, and whose death had followed close upon his ruin. Up to that period Charles had been undecided as to his choice of a pursuit; but the necessity of making an immediate selection resulted in his devoting himself to the Church. Barely sufficient had been saved from the wreck of their property to support his widowed mother and his sister. For

himself, he was endowed with a splendid physique, a keen intellect, and indomitable energy; and he at once flung himself into his new career. He supported himself by teaching until he was admitted to orders, when he obtained a curacy, and eventually, through the interest of some old friends of his father, he was presented with the living of St. Cuthbert's. In the course of these years of struggle, however, there was gradually developing within the man a spirit which threatened to render his success worse than useless to him. Ardent, emotional, profoundly convinced of the eternal truths of revelation and of the glorious mission of the Church, the young clergyman was at the same time boldly speculative and keenly alive to the grandiose developments of the modern schools of thought. It was not

till he stood on the extreme verge of science and looked beyond that he fully realized his position. He then perceived with horror that it was no longer impossible—that it was even no longer difficult—to regard the great message of redemption as a dream of the world, the glorious faith of Christendom as a purely ethnic mythology, morality as a merely natural growth of a natural instinct of self-preservation. Indeed, the difficulty consisted in believing otherwise. The Fatherhood of a personal God was slipping away from his soul; the Sonship of a Saviour was melting into a fantastic unreality; the conviction of a personal immortality was dissipating into mental mist and darkness. The mystery of evil was growing into a fiendish enigma; virtue passed him, and showed herself to be a hollow mask.

His whole nature rose in revolt against this horrible scientific travesty of God's universe. He shrank back alike from the new truths and from the theories evolved from them. His faith could not stand the test of the wider knowledge. If God were indeed a myth, immortality but a dream, virtue an unprofitable delusion, man simply a beast gifted with speech, better the old faith concerning all these—accepted though it were in despite of reason and in outrage of immortal truth—than the hideous simulacra of the new philosophy. He cast himself back upon the bosom of the Church; he clung to her as to the garment of God; but he was powerless to exorcise the spirit of scepticism. It rose before him in sacred places, it scoffed at his most earnest and impassioned utterances; he seemed to hear

within himself cynical laughter as he stood at the bedside of the dying; when he knelt to pray it stood at his ear and suggested blasphemy; it converted the solemn light of the Church into a motley atmosphere of superstition; it stimulated his strong animal nature to the very bounds of self-restraint. Still, if he was unable to exorcise it, he had yet the strength to contend with and to master it. Precisely because he was sceptical he was rigid in outward doctrine, zealous for forms, and indefatigable in the discharge of his clerical functions. In his passionate endeavour to convince himself, he convinced his hearers and confirmed them in the faith in which he was himself unable to trust.

To-day the old conflict between the sacerdotal and the sceptical was complicated by new elements of spiritual

discord. After seven years of hopeless separation, Charles Santley had once more stood face to face with the embodied dream and inspiration of his early manhood, and had found her, in the full lustre of her peerless womanhood, another man's wife. During those years he had, it was true, reconciled himself to what then had been forced upon him as the inevitable, and he had sternly set himself to master the problem of his existence, without any secret hope that in the coming years his success might bring her within his reach; but he had never forgotten her. She was to him the starry poetry of his youth. He looked back to the time when he had first known and loved her, as a sadder and a wiser world looks back to the Golden Age. The memory of her was the

ghost of an ancient worship, flitting in a dim rosy twilight about the Elysian fields of memory, and, it being twilight, the fields were touched with a hallowed feeling of loss and a divine sentiment of regret. And now—oh, bitter irony of time and fortune!—now that he had achieved success, now that all the old gulfs which had separated them were spanned with golden bridges, now that he might have claimed her and she might have been proud to acknowledge the claim, she once more crossed his life—a vision of beauty, a star of inspiration—and once more he knew that she was hopelessly, infinitely more hopelessly than ever, raised beyond his seeking.

He was detained so long at the bedside of the dying man that, by the time he had again reached the Vicarage, the

bells were ringing for evening service and the western sky was ablaze with sunset. In the church the light streamed through the lancets and the painted casements, filling the air with motley breadths of glowing colour, and painting pillar and arch and the brown sandstone with glorious blazonry. Even in the curtained nook near the organ the space was flooded with enchanted lights, and Edith Dove sat beside the tall gilded instrument like a picture of St. Cecilia in an illuminated missal. In the pulpit the vicar stood as if transfigured. He spoke, too, as though he felt that this was the splendour of a new heaven opening upon a new earth, and the glad rustle of the trees in the cool breeze outside was the murmur of paradise.

"We shall not all sleep, but we shall all

be changed," were the words of his text, and throughout the fervid exposition of the apostle's faith in the resurrection the sweet, blue eyes and the eager lips of the organist were turned towards the preacher. He seemed this evening, however, to be unconscious of her presence. He addressed himself entirely to the listeners in the pews in front of him, and never cast even a solitary glance towards the aisle where she sat.

At the close of the service Edith found Miss Santley waiting for her at the entrance. It had now been customary for several weeks past for Miss Dove to go over to the Vicarage on Sunday evening and remain to supper with Mr. Santley and his sister. They went slowly through the churchyard together, and took the little path

which led to the house. They remained chatting at the wicket for a few moments, expecting the appearance of the vicar. When Mr. Santley issued from the church, however, he passed quickly down the gravelled walk to the high-road. He had thrown a rapid look towards the plantation, and had seen the young women, but he gave no indication of having observed them.

"Why, Charles is not coming!" exclaimed Miss Santley, with surprise, as she saw her brother; "he surely cannot be going down to Omberley again."

"He is not going to Omberley, dear," said Edith, who had been watching for the vicar, and had been keen enough to notice the hasty glance he had cast in their direction; "he is going up the road."

"Then wherever can he be going

to? And he had not had tea yet, poor fellow!"

Miss Santley stepped a few paces back into the churchyard, and stood on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of him over the hedge; but the vicar had already passed out of sight.

"Never mind, dear," she said to Edith. "Shall we go in and have a little chat by ourselves? He may have some sick call or other, and he is sure to be back soon, or he would have told me where he was going. Come, you needn't look so sad," Miss Santley continued, as she observed the expression of her companion's face.

"I didn't think I was looking sad," replied Edith, blushing.

"Oh yes, you were; dreadfully," said Miss Santley, laughing in a bantering manner.

"You don't think Mr. Santley is—is not quite well?" asked Edith, timidly.

"Oh no; Charles is quite well, I am sure."

"Perhaps he is displeased with something," said Edith, as if speaking to herself rather than to Miss Santley.

"What a little fidget you are!" said her companion, taking the girl's arm. "I know what you are thinking of. I am sure he has no cause to be displeased with *you*, at any rate."

"I hope not," replied Miss Dove, brightening a little. "Only I felt a misgiving. You do feel misgivings about all sorts of things, don't you, Mary, without knowing why—a sort of presentiment and an uneasy feeling that something is going to happen?"

"Young people in love, I believe, experience feelings of that kind," said

Miss Santley, with mock gravity. "Come in, you dear little goose, and don't vex your poor wee heart like that. He will be back before we have got half our talk over."

The vicar strode rapidly along the road until he reached the summit of a rising ground, from which he could see two counties spread out before him in fruitful undulations of field and meadow and woodland. The sunset was burning down in front of him. Far away in the distant landscape were soft mists of blue smoke rising from half-hidden villages, and here and there flashed points of brightness where the sun struck on the windows of a farmstead. On either hand were great expanses of yellowing corn swaying in the cool breeze and reddening in the low crimson light. He left the road, and passed through a gate

into one of the fields. Following a footpath, he went along the hedge till he reached a stile. Here he was alone and concealed in a vast sea of rustling corn. He sat down on the top of the stile, and resting his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, gazed abstractedly into the glowing west.

A single word which escaped him betrayed the workings of his mind: "Married!"

Seven years ago, when Charles Santley began his struggle in life, he obtained through a clerical friend a position as teacher of classics in a seminary for young ladies in a small sea-side town in a southern county. He found his new labour especially congenial. A handsome young professor, whose attention was fixed on the Church, and who purposed to devote

himself to her service, was cordially welcomed by the devout ladies who conducted the establishment. They were three sisters who had been overlooked in the wide yearning crowd of unloved womanhood, and who had turned for consolation to the mystical passions of religion. Under their care a bevy of bright young creatures were brought up as in the chaste seclusion of a convent. Their impressionable natures were surrounded by a strange artificial atmosphere of spiritual emotion; life shone in upon them, as it were, through the lancets of a mediæval ecclesiasticism, and their young hearts, breaking into blossom, were coloured once and for ever with those deep glowing tints.

It was here that the young man, in the first dawn of the romance of man-

hood, met the beautiful girl who was now the wife of the owner of Foxglove Manor. She was then turned of seventeen, and had become aware of the first shy longings and sweet impulses of her nature. She was his favourite pupil, and sat at his right hand at the long table when he gave his lessons. He used her pen and pencil, referred to her books, touched her hand with his in the ordinary work of the lesson. Her clothes touched his clothes beneath the table. At times their feet met accidentally. She regularly put a flower in a glass of water before his place. All these trifles were the thrilling incidents of a delicious romance which the school-girl was making in her flurried little heart. He, too, was not insensible to the trifles which affected his passionate pupil. Her great dark eyes sent electric flashes

through him. Her breath reached him sweeter than roses. Her beautiful dark hair rubbed against his shoulder or his cheek, and he tried to prevent the hot blood from flushing into his face. When their hands touched he could have snatched hers and kissed it.

Ellen Derwent was happily not a boarder at the establishment, but resided with her aunt. Her family were wealthy country people, and Ellen, who had been ailing for a little while, had been ordered to the sea-side for change of air. Early in the bright mornings, and after the day's schooling was over, Ellen wandered about the sea-shore or took long walks along the cliffs. Santley met her first by accident, and after that, though the meetings might still be called accidental, each knew that to-morrow and to-morrow and yet again to-morrow the same in-

stinctive feeling—call it a divine chance or love's premonition—would bring them together.

Ah! happy, radiant days by that glad sea and in the wild loveliness of those romantic cliffs! Oh, vision of flushed cheek and shining eyes, and sweet red lips and throbbing bosom! Oh, dim heavenly summer dawns, when the sea mists were just brightening, and the little birds were singing, and the sea-side town was still half asleep, and only two lovers were walking hand in hand along the green brow of the cliffs! Oh, sweet autumn twilights which the shining eyes seemed to fill with dark burning lustre! Oh, kisses, sweeter than ever pressed by woman's lips before or since! Oh, thrill of clasped hands and mad palpitations of loving bosoms!

The swaying corn sounded like the

sea as the breeze passed over it, and the murmur broke the vicar's reverie.

"Married!"

Married? yes, married! The sweet secret could not be kept for ever, and when Miss Lilburn, Ellen's aunt, discovered it, she at once spoke to Mr. Santley. She did not oppose his suit—indeed, she liked him greatly, but love, after all, was no mere school-girl's dream. Was he in a position to make Ellen his wife? In any case, they must know about it at home. If Mr. Derwent approved, she would be most happy that Mr. Santley should visit her; but, in the meantime, it was only prudent that Ellen should discontinue these pleasant rambles.

He had never seen Ellen since, until her face made his heart stand still in the midst of his sermon.

The vicar rose from the stile with clenched hands and set teeth.

"Bitter, bitter!" he said, raising his face to the sky and shaking his head as though he saw above him an invisible face, and spoke half in exquisite pain, half in stoical endurance.

CHAPTER III.

"THERE IS A CHANGE!"

WHEN Edith and Miss Santley reached the Vicarage, they went into the parlour, which, besides having a western exposure, commanded to a considerable distance a view of the high-road along which the vicar had passed.

"I always think this is the pleasantest room in the house," said Miss Santley, as she drew an armchair into the recess of the open window, and Edith seated herself on the couch. "Charles prefers an eastern frontage, for the sake of the early morning, he says; but I am always

busy in the morning, so I suppose I like the afternoon light best, when I have a little time to sit and bask."

"Isn't it natural, too," suggested Edith, "that men should prefer sunrise and women sunset? Men are so active and sanguine, and have so many interests to engage their attention, and women—well, as a rule—are such dreamers! Is it not almost constitutional?"

"And when did you ever see me dreaming, may I ask?" inquired Miss Santley.

"Oh no; you are not one of the dreamers," replied Edith, quickly. "You should have been called Martha instead of Mary."

"Insinuating that I am a bit of a busybody, eh?" said Miss Santley, with a sly twinkle of humour.

"You know I did not mean to insinuate that."

"Or that you had yourself chosen the better part, eh?" she continued gaily.

Edith coloured deeply, and cast her eyes on the floor, while an expression of pain passed across her face.

"Nay, my dear, do not look hurt. You know that was only said in jest."

"You cannot tell how such jests hurt me," replied the girl, her lips beginning to tremble.

"Even between our two selves?" asked Miss Santley, taking Edith's hand gently and stroking it with both of hers. "You know, my dear little girl, how I love you, and how pleased I was when I discovered the way in which that poor little heart of yours was beating. You know that there is no one in the world whom I would more

gladly—ay, or a thousandth part so gladly—take for a sister. Don't you, Edith? Answer me, dear."

"Yes," replied the girl, letting her head hang upon her bosom, and feeling her face on flame.

"And have I not tried to help you? I know Charles is fond of you—I am sure of that. I have eyes in my head, my dear, though they are not so young and pretty as yours. And I know, too, that a little while ago he was anxious to know what I would say if he should propose to take a wife. I shall be only too pleased when he makes up his mind. It will relieve me of a great deal of care and anxiety. And he could not in the wide world choose a better or a dearer little girl."

Miss Santley was not ordinarily of a demonstrative disposition, but as she

uttered those last words she drew Edith towards her and kissed her on the forehead.

The vicar's sister was some twelve years his senior. A stout, homely, motherly little woman, with plain but pleasing features, brown hair, a shrewd but kindly expression, clear grey eyes, and a firm mouth and chin, she was as unlike the Vicar in personal appearance as she was unlike him in character and temperament. This family unlikeness, however, had had no prejudicial effect on their mutual affection, though in Miss Santley's case it was the source of much secret uneasiness on her brother's account. As unimaginative as she was practical, she was at a loss to understand her brother's emotional mysticism and dreamy idealism; but her knowledge of human nature made her timorously

aware of the dangers which beset the combination of a splendid physique with a glowing temperament which was almost febrile in its sensuous impulsiveness. She was spared the torture of sharing that darker secret of unbelief; but she was sufficiently conscious of the strong fervid nature of the vicar, to feel thankful that Edith had made a deep impression on him, and that when he did marry it would be a bright and congenial young creature who would be worthy of him and attached to herself.

"So why should it hurt you, if I do jest a little?" asked Miss Santley, as she kissed Edith. "Love cannot always be transcendental, otherwise two people will never come closely together. The best gift a couple of lovers can possess in common, is a capacity for a little fun and affectionate wit. Your solemn

lovers are always misunderstanding each other, and quarrelling and making it up again."

"But we are not lovers yet, Mary," said Edith in a timid whisper.

"Not yet, perhaps; but you will be soon, if I am capable of forming any opinion."

"I don't know, I don't know," Edith replied with a sigh; and her soft blue eyes filled with tears. Then raising her eyes imploringly to Miss Santley, and nervously taking her hand, she continued: "Oh, Mary, do not think me too forward and eager and unwomanly. Do not judge me too hardly. I know a girl should not give her heart away till she is asked for it. But I cannot help it—I love him—I love him so! I have done all I could to prevent myself from loving him, but it is no use—oh! it is no use."

She burst into a paroxysm of passionate sobbing, and Miss Santley, without saying a word, put her arms about her and softly caressed her soft flaxen hair.

The outburst was gradually subdued, and Edith, with a hot glowing face hidden on her friend's shoulder, was too ashamed to change her position.

"Do you feel better now, dear?" asked Miss Santley in a kindly voice.

"Oh, Mary, are you not ashamed of me—disgusted?"

Miss Santley replied in a woman's way with another kiss, and again fondled the girl's head.

After a pause of a few moments, she gently raised her face and regarded it affectionately.

"You must come upstairs and wash away those tell-tales before he returns. And"—she added a little hesitatingly—

"will you not trust me with the cause of all this trouble?"

"I am afraid you will laugh at me, dear, it must seem such a foolish cause to you. And I know you will say it was all simply my fancy."

"What was it?"

"You know, dear, where I sit in church?" Edith began, nervously playing with the lace on Miss Santley's dress. "Well, he always used to turn twice or thrice in my direction during the sermon. I used to think he did it because he knew I was there. And he did it this afternoon. But in the evening he never looked once during the whole time."

Miss Santley began to smile in spite of herself.

"Then when he came out of the church he saw you and me waiting for him—I saw him give one single sharp

look—and then he went on as if he had not perceived us. He would not have gone away like that, Mary, if I had not been with you."

"And is that all?" inquired Mary as Edith paused.

"I think it is quite enough," the latter replied sorrowfully. "It means that he is tired of me; he was displeased that I was with you; he did not want to speak to me."

"My dear girl, all this is simply silly fancy; you will make your whole life miserable if you imagine things in this way."

"I knew you would say that; but you do not understand. I hardly understand myself; but I know what I say is true. You remember old Harry Wilson down in the village—he has a wooden leg, you know, but when there is going

to be a bad change of weather, he says he can feel it in the foot he has lost; and he is always right. I think I am like him, dear; I have lost something, and it makes me feel when there is a change, long before the storm breaks."

"All this is nothing but nonsense, my little woman!" said Miss Santley reassuringly. "Come with me upstairs, and let us make ourselves presentable."

When Edith had bathed her face, the two came downstairs again, but instead of returning to the parlour they went into the library. This was specially the vicar's room, and, more than any other, it indicated the tastes and character of its occupant. The whole house, indeed, was tinged with the mediæval colouring of the church, and in all parts of it you came upon indications of the ecclesiastical spirit of the owner; but here the

vicar had given fullest expression to his fancy, and the room had as much the appearance of an oratory as of a library. At one end a small alcove jutted out into the plantation, and the windows were filled with stained glass. On the walls hung several of Raphael's cartoons; on the mantelpiece stood, under glass, a marble group of The Dead Christ; the furniture, which was of carved oak, suggested the stalls in the chancel; the brass gasalier and brackets were of ecclesiastical design; and, lastly, the library shelves were solemnly weighted with long rows of theology, sermons, and Biblical literature in several languages. In a separate bookcase, which was kept locked, were gathered together a number of scientific works and volumes of modern speculative philosophy. A third bookcase

was devoted to history, poetry, travels, and miscellaneous works. The great bulk of the library, however, was clerical, and the vicar had within arm's reach a fair epitome of all that the good men of all ages and many countries had discovered regarding the mystery of the world and the relationship of man.

In one corner of the room stood a tall richly carved triangular cupboard of black oak, and it too, like the bookcase of science, was kept perpetually locked.

As Edith entered the room her eyes fell upon it, and turning to her companion she asked—

"Oh, Mary, have you discovered the skeleton yet?"

"No," replied Miss Santley, with a laugh. "Charles is forgetful enough in some things, but he has never yet left the key in that lock. I once asked him

what it was he concealed so carefully, but he refused to satisfy my curiosity; so I resolved to trust to chance and his carelessness. I have waited so long, however, that my curiosity has at last been tired out. I don't suppose, after all, it is anything worth knowing."

"And why does he always keep this bookcase locked too? The books all look so fresh and new, and they are much more attractive than those dusty old fellows any one can look into. I should like to read several of those, one hears so much about them. There is Darwin, 'The Descent of Man'—I have read articles about that book in the magazines, and I know he believes Adam and Eve were apes in Paradise or something like that."

"Oh, my dear, Charles would never allow you to read those books on any

account. They are all dreadfully wicked and blasphemous. He only reads them himself to refute them and to be able to show how false and dangerous they are."

Edith, who had approached the window, now suddenly started back, and a bright flush rose to her face.

"Here is Mr. Santley, Mary! How pale and wearied he looks!"

A moment or two later the vicar entered the library. At the sight of Miss Dove he paused for an instant, and then advancing, held out his hand to her.

"You here, Miss Edith!" he said coldly. "How are you, and how is your aunt?"

He did not wait for an answer, but went to his writing-table and sat down.

The two women exchanged glances of

surprise, and Edith's face grew sad and white.

"Are you not well, Charles?" his sister asked, going up to him and looking solicitously into his face.

"I am not very well this evening," replied the vicar; "it is the weather, I think. If Miss Edith will excuse me, I think I will leave you and lie down. I feel tired."

He rose again abruptly, and Edith stood regarding him with large, wistful eyes. He moved towards the door, and then suddenly stopped and turned to her.

"Good evening," he said once more, holding out his hand and speaking in a cold, distant manner. "Present my compliments to your aunt."

"I hope you will be well in the morning," said Edith, timidly.

"Thanks. Yes; I expect I shall be all right again after a little rest."

He turned and left her, and Miss Santley, glancing at her significantly, followed him to his room.

"He has over-exerted himself to-day," said Mary a little later, as she accompanied Miss Dove to the garden gate. "He had a sick call in the afternoon, and was unable to take his usual rest. You will excuse my not accompanying you home, will you not?"

"Oh certainly," said Edith. "I hope it is nothing serious. Would you not like to see Dr. Spruce? I can call, you know."

"He says he does not need the doctor; he knows what is the matter with him, and only requires rest. Good night, dear! I am so sorry I cannot go part of the way with you."

"Do not think of that," said Edith, shaking hands. "It is not late, and you must not leave him."

The sunset had lowered down to its last red embers, but it was still quite light as Edith turned away from the Vicarage gate. She proceeded slowly down the road towards the village for a few moments, and then paused and looked back. No one was on the road. Retracing her steps, she passed the Vicarage at a quick pace, and took the direction which the vicar had taken an hour before. Strangely enough, she stopped at the top of the rising ground where he had stopped; went through the same gate, into the same field, and, following the same path, reached the stile on which he had sat. Here she sat down, with the great sea of corn whispering and murmuring about her,

and the distant landscape growing gradually more and more indistinct in the bluish vapour of the twilight. Alone and hidden from observation, she sat on the step with her arms on the cross-bar of the stile and her head laid on them, weeping bitterly.

"I have lost something, and it makes me feel when there is a change!"

CHAPTER IV.

GEORGE HALDANE.

THE low-lying landscape had vanished in the twilight, and the stars were twinkling in the clear blue sky before Edith rose, dried her eyes, and began to return homeward. The moon had risen, but had yet scarcely freed itself from the tops of the dark woods, through which it shone round and ruddy. As she passed the Vicarage, she paused and looked up at the windows. She felt prompted to steal quietly up to the door and inquire whether Mr. Santley

was any better, but a fear arising from many causes held her back. Besides, the house was in darkness, and every one seemed to have retired to rest.

Since Edith had been in the habit of visiting the Vicarage, this was the first occasion on which she had returned home alone. Unreasonable as she acknowledged the suspicion to be, she could not rid herself of the belief that Mr. Santley's indisposition had been assumed as an excuse for avoiding her. She strove to convince herself that she was foolishly sensitive and jealous, to hope that the change in the vicar's manner was but an illusion of her excited fancy, to feel confident that when she saw him to-morrow she would recognize how childish she had been.

Miss Dove was exceedingly fond of music, and during the week she was

accustomed to spend hours alone in the church, giving utterance to her thoughts and feelings in dreamy voluntaries, which were the fugitive inspiration of the moment, or filling the cool, richly lighted aisles with the impassioned strains of Mozart, Haydn, and Mendelssohn. The sound of the organ could be heard at the Vicarage, and Mr. Santley had been in the habit of going into the church, and conversing with her while she played. It was with the hope that one of his favourite pieces would again bring him to her that, during the afternoon of the following day, Edith took her seat at the organ. With nervous, eager fingers she swept the key-board, and sent her troubled heart into the yearning anguish and clamorous impetration of the *Agnus Dei* of Haydn's No. 2. When she had finished

she rested for a little, and glanced expectantly down the aisle; but no footstep disturbed the quiet of the place. She then turned to another of the vicar's favourites—a *Gloria* of Mozart's. The volumes of throbbing sound vibrated through the stained windows, and floated across the bright churchyard to the Vicarage; but Edith's hope was not realized. She played till she felt wearied, rather with the hopelessness of her task than with the physical exertion; but the schoolboy who blew the organ for her was exhausted, and when she saw how red and hot he looked, she closed the instrument and dismissed him. Every day that week she repeated her experiment, but her music had apparently lost its magical influence. The vicar never came. She called thrice to see Miss Santley, but each time he was away

from home. Once she saw him in the village, and her heart began to beat violently as he approached; but they were on different sides of the street, and instead of crossing over to her, as he had always done hitherto, he merely smiled, raised his hat, and passed on. Sunday came round at length, and she looked forward with a sad, painful wonder to the customary visit in the evening.

It was a bright, breezy sabbath morning, and the great limes and sycamores which buried Foxglove Manor in a wilderness of billowy verdure, rolled gladsomely in the sun, and filled the world with a vast sealike *susurrus*. On the stone terrace which ran along the front of the mansion the master of the Manor was lounging, with a cigar in his mouth, and a huge deer-hound basking

at his feet; while in the shadow of the room his wife stood at an open French window, conversing with him.

Mr. Haldane was a tall, broad-shouldered, powerful man of about forty years of age. His face, especially in repose, was by no means handsome. His grave, large, strongly marked features expressed decision, daring, and indomitable force. His forehead was broad, and deeply marked with the perpendicular lines of long mental labour. The poise of his head suggested a habit of boldly confronting an opponent. His short hair and closely trimmed beard were touched with gray, and gave a certain keenness and frostiness to his appearance. A grim, self-sufficing, iron-natured man, one would have said, until one had looked into his bright blue-gray eyes, which lit up his strong, rugged face with

an expression of frankness and dry humour.

"My dear Nell," he said at length, in answer to the persistent persuasion of his wife, "do not be cross. There are two things in the world which I abhor beyond all others: a damp church and a dry sermon. Invite your vicar as often as you please. I will do my best to entertain him; but do not press me to sit out an interminable farrago of irritating platitudes in a chilly, straight-backed pew."

"I assure you, George, you will be charmed with him, if you will only let me prevail on you to come."

"Why cannot you Christians dispense with incense, and allow smoking instead —at least during the sermon?"

Mrs. Haldane made a little grimace of horror.

"You would then have whole burnt offerings dedicated with a devout and cheerful heart."

"George, you are shockingly profane! I see it is no use urging you any further; but I did think you would have put yourself to even some little inconvenience for my sake."

"For your sake, Nell!" replied Mr. Haldane, laughing. "Why did you not say so sooner? You know I would do anything on those terms. Have I not often told you the married philosopher has but one moral law—to do his wife's will in all things."

"Then you will accompany me?"

"Certainly I will."

"You are a dear, good old bear," exclaimed Mrs. Haldane, slipping on to the terrace and caressing his head with both hands. "But you know you *are* a

bear, and you will try for once to be nice and good-natured, will you not? And you will not be cold and cynical with him because he is ideal and enthusiastic? And if you do not acknowledge that he is a delightful preacher, and that the dear little church is charming——"

"You will not ask me to go again?"

"I was going to say that, but it will be wiser to make no promises. You know, dear, you should go to church, if it were only for the sake of giving a good example; and it is my duty to try and persuade you to go. And oh, George, seriously I do wish you could feel that it drew you nearer to God; that where two or three are gathered together, He is in the midst of them. Now, do not smile in that hard, derisive way. I know I cannot argue with you, but if I cannot reply to your reasoning, you cannot con-

vince my heart. I do believe, in spite of all logic, that I have a heavenly Father who loves and watches over me and you too, dear; and I should be wretched——"

"My dear little woman," said Mr. Haldane, taking both her hands in one of his, "you have no cause to be wretched. I have no wish to deprive you of your belief in a heavenly Father. With women the illusions of the heart last longer than with men; and perhaps, in these days of change and innovation, it is as well that women have still a creed to find comfort in. For my part, I confess I hardly understand what it is attracts you in your religion. The civilized world, so far as I can see, has outgrown the golden age of worship, and *latria* is one of the lost arts."

The presence of the master of Fox-

glove Manor created considerable surprise and curiosity among the congregation at St. Cuthbert's. Though he had lived in the neighbourhood for the last twelve years, this was the first time he had been seen inside a church. Much more attention was paid during the service to the beautiful lady of the Manor, and the grim, powerful man who sat beside her, than was in keeping with the sacred character of the occasion. Mr. Haldane, on his part, though he did his best by imitating the example of his wife to conform to the ritual, was keenly critical of the whole service. The dim religious light of the painted windows pleased his eye, but failed to exercise any influence on his feelings. The decorations of the church seemed to him insincere and artificial. He missed in the atmosphere that sense of reverence

which he had experienced in the old cathedrals in Spain and Italy. The ceremonies appeared dry, joyless, and uninteresting, and as he watched the congregation bowing, kneeling, praying, singing, pageants of the jubilant mythic worship of the ancient world crowded upon his imagination.

"What are you thinking of?" his wife once whispered, as she caught a sidelong glance at his abstracted face.

"Diana at Ephesus!" he replied, with a curious twinkle in his keen gray eyes.

Once or twice during the sermon a saturnine smile passed across his face, and Mrs. Haldane pressed his foot by way of warning; but otherwise he listened gravely throughout, with his large, strongly marked features turned to the preacher.

"Well, have you been interested,

dear?" asked Mrs. Haldane, when the service was over, and they were waiting in the churchyard for the vicar.

"Yes," he replied drily; "your vicar is interesting."

"Now, what do you mean by that?"

"He will repay study, my dear."

Mrs. Haldane looked sharply into her husband's face, but was dissatisfied with her scrutiny.

"You don't like him?"

"I have no reason yet to like or dislike him. In a general way, I should prefer to say that I do like him."

"But what do you mean by your remark that he will repay study?"

"Perhaps you will not understand me," he answered thoughtfully. "Your vicar has a soul, Nell."

"So have we all, I suppose."

"At least he believes he has one,"

said Mr. Haldane, with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"Well!"

"And he is trying to save it."

"We all are, I hope."

"I beg your pardon, Nell; the phenomenon in these days is a psychological rarity, and, being rare, is naturally interesting. It is one of the obscure problems of cerebration. Ah! here comes your vicar."

With a bright smile Mrs. Haldane advanced to meet him, and cordially shook hands with him. "You must allow me to introduce you to my husband. George, Mr. Santley."

"My wife tells me," said Mr. Haldane, as they shook hands, "that she was an old pupil of yours."

"Yes," said the vicar, with an uneasy glance towards her, "many years ago."

"It is a little curious," continued Mr. Haldane, "how people lose sight of each other for years, and then are unexpectedly thrown together into the same small social circle, after they have quite forgotten each other's existence."

The vicar winced at the last words, but replied with a faint smile, "The great world is, after all, a very little world."

"Ah, my dear sir, I see I have started a familiar train of thought—the littleness of the world," said Mr. Haldane, with a dry light in his eyes.

"And you fear I may improve the occasion?" asked the vicar a little coldly.

"Pray do not misunderstand my husband," interposed Mrs. Haldane. "He was delighted with your sermon to-day; and I do not wonder, for you

have the power of appealing to the heart and raising the mind beyond earthly things. It was only a few moments ago that he told me he was deeply interested."

"I perceived that he was amused once or twice," replied the vicar, with a smile.

"I confess that I may have smiled at one or two points in your discourse."

"Excuse my interrupting you," said Mrs. Haldane; "will you not walk? You can spare time to accompany us a little way?"

Mr. Santley bowed, and Mrs. Haldane signed to the coachman to drive on slowly towards the village.

"For example," resumed Mr. Haldane, "I see you still stick to the old chronology and the mythic Eden."

"Certainly I do."

"And yet you should be aware that at least a thousand years before the date you fix for the creation of Adam, tribes of savage hunters and fishers peopled the old fir-woods of Denmark, and set their nets in the German Ocean."

"It may eventually prove necessary to revise the chronology of the Bible," replied the vicar; "but there is at present too much conflict of opinion among your archæologists to decide on the absolute age of these tribes. After all, the question is one of minor importance."

"Granted. But you cannot say the same of the efficacy of prayer."

Mrs. Haldane laid her hand on her husband's arm, and stopped abruptly. "Ask Mr. Santley to dinner, George, and then you can discuss as long and as profoundly as you like; but I will

not allow you to argue now. Besides, *I* want to talk to Mr. Santley."

Mr. Haldane laughed good-naturedly. "Just as you please, my dear. If Mr. Santley will favour us with his company, I shall be very glad. Your predecessor was a frequent visitor at our house. A jovial, rubicund fellow, whose troubles in this life were less of the world and the devil than of the flesh! A fat, ponderous man and a Tory, as all fat men are; a sort of Falstaff *in pontificalibus;* a man with a wit and a shrewd palate for old port. Poor fellow! he was snuffed out like a candle. One could have better spared a better man."

"Will you come to-morrow?" asked Mrs. Haldane; "and, if your sister can accompany you, will you bring her? You will excuse our informality and so short a notice."

"I shall be very happy to call to-morrow."

"Then, if you can spare me a few moments I will have a better opportunity of speaking to you. I must learn all about the parish, and I have a whole catechism of questions to ask you. You will come to-morrow, then?" she concluded, with one of those flashing looks from her great dark eyes.

He watched them drive away with that look burning in his brain and the pressure of her hand tingling through every nerve. He stood gazing after her with a passionate light in his eyes and an eager, yearning expression on his pale, agitated face. This was the woman he had lost, and now they were again thrown together in the same small social circle, after she had completely forgotten his existence! Those words

of her husband had cut him to the quick. Could she so soon, so easily, so completely have forgotten him? It seemed incredible. If she had used any such expression to her husband, was it not rather to forestall any jealous suspicion on his part? Clearly she had not divulged the secret of those school-girl days. *He* knew not the story of that sweet, imperishable romance; those burning kisses and unforgotten vows had been hidden from him; and in that concealment the vicar found a strange, subtle pleasure. It was at least one tie between him and her; one secret in common in which her husband had no share.

CHAPTER V.

THE LAMB AND THE SHEPHERD.

THE vicar was standing close beside the village school, and as he turned to go back home he saw the schoolmistress in the doorway of her little cottage. He started as though she had been looking into his heart, instead of watching the carriage as it bowled along towards the village. Without a moment's hesitation, however, he opened the schoolyard gate and went up to her.

"Well, Miss Greatheart, how are you to-day?"

Dora, a bright, merry-looking woman

of about thirty, dropped a curtsy, and invited the vicar into the house.

"Thank you, no; I must not stay. I have just been speaking, as you have seen, to my new parishioners. I call them new, though I suppose they are older in the parish than I am myself."

"Old as they are, this is the first time I ever set eyes on Mr. Haldane in our church, sir. His pretty wife must have converted him."

"Then they have not been long married?"

"Somewhere about two years, I should think. All last year they were away in Egypt and Palestine; and perhaps now that he's seen the Land, he believes in the Book."

"Indeed!"

"Seeing's believing, you know, sir; and if all tales be true, he used not to believe

in anything from the roof upward. Oh, you may well look shocked, sir, but he was quite an atheist and an infidel; but you see he was so rich that the gentry round about didn't care to give him the go-by. I suppose you haven't been to the Manor yet, sir? The old vicar, Mr. Hart, was always there. People did say he paid more court to the people at the Manor than he should have done, considering the need for him in the parish; and when Mr. Hart got his second stroke, there were those that said it was a judgment on him for high living, and the company he kept. But you know, sir, how folks' tongues will wag."

"Is the Manor far from here? Of course I have heard of the place, but I have never been near it."

"It's about four miles, sir, and a lonely place it is, and dismal it must be in

winter, with miles of wood about it. In summer it is not so bad, but it is awfully wild and solitary. I went over the grounds once, years ago. I became acquainted with one of the housemaids, you see, sir—quite a nice young person—and she invited me to tea. I remember it was getting dusk when I left, and she took me through the woods. Dear me, what a fright I got! I happened to look up, and there was a man, quite a giant, standing among the trees. I screamed, and would have run had not Jane—that was the maid, sir—laughed, and said it was only a statue. And so it was, for we went right up to it. All the woods are full of statues—quite improper and rude, and rather frightening to meet in the dusk. But now he is converted, Mrs. Haldane will have them all taken away, I should think. I don't believe

the place is haunted, though there are some strange stories told about it; but I do know that the chapel—there is an old chapel close by the house—is shut up, and no one goes near it but Mr. Haldane and his valet—a dark foreign person, with such eyes! Queer tales are told about lights being seen in it at all hours of the night, and some of the old folk believe that if any one could look in they would see that the foreign valet had horns and a cloven foot, and that his master was worshipping him. I think that's all nonsense myself; but there's no doubt Mr. Haldane used to be dreadfully wicked, and an atheist."

"If he was so very bad," said the vicar, smiling, "surely it was strange that Mr. Hart used to associate with him so much."

"Well, you see, sir, he was always

liberal, and kept a good table, and Mr. Hart was a cheerful liver. Then Mr. Haldane was always ready with his purse when there was a hard winter, or the crops were bad, or any poor person was ill."

"I see, I see," said the vicar.

"But his charity could not do him any good, people said, when he didn't believe there was a God, or that he had a soul."

"So they didn't consider it worth while to be thankful?"

"I don't think they did, sir."

"And was Mrs. Haldane staying at the Manor the first year of their marriage?"

"Yes; he brought her back with him after the honeymoon."

"And do they speak as kindly of her in the village as they do of her husband?"

"Oh, indeed, sir, they worship her. Even old Mother Grimsoll, who said she wanted to make a charity woman of her when you bought her that scarlet cloak last winter, has a good word for Mrs. Haldane. She isn't the least bit conceited, and she knows that poor people have their proper pride; and when she helps any one she makes them feel that they are doing her a favour. When Mr. Hart was alive she used to go round with him, devising and dispensing charities. It's only a pity she is married to—to—" — and Miss Greatheart beat impatiently on the ground with her foot in the effort to recall the word—"to an agnostic. Mr. Hart said he wasn't an atheist, but an agnostic, though I dare say if the truth were known one is worse than the other."

"You are not very charitable, Miss

Greatheart; come, now, confess," said the vicar, good-humouredly.

"Perhaps not, sir; but I have no patience with atheists and agnostics."

"An atheist," continued the vicar, "is a person who does not believe in a God; an agnostic is one who merely says he does not know whether there is a God or not."

"Doesn't know!" exclaimed Dora, indignantly. "Wherever was the man brought up?"

That evening, as Miss Santley and Edith went across from the church to the Vicarage together, the vicar joined them, and Miss Dove remained to supper as usual. The time passed pleasantly enough; but Edith was conscious of a certain restraint in the conversation, a curious chilliness in the atmosphere. When at length she rose

to go home, the vicar went to the window, and looked out for a few seconds.

"I think, Mary, you might accompany us; and when we have seen Miss Edith home, we could take a turn round together. It is a beautiful night."

Mary nodded assent, and Edith felt her heart sink within her. She was certain now that he was avoiding her. As she followed Miss Santley upstairs to put on her things, a sudden thought flashed upon her.

"I shall be with you in a moment, Mary," she said; "I have dropped my handkerchief, I think."

She ran back to the parlour, and met the vicar face to face as he paced the room.

She stood still, and looked at him silently for a moment. She had taken

him by surprise, and he too stood motionless.

"Well," he said at last, with a faint smile.

"Do you hate me, Charles?" she asked in a low, steady voice.

"Hate you! Why should I hate you, my dear Edith? What should put such thoughts——"

"I have only a few seconds to speak to you," Miss Dove continued hastily. "Answer me truly and directly. You do not hate me?"

"I shall never hate you, dear."

"'Why do you avoid me?"

"Have I avoided you?"

"You know you have. Why?"

"I have not avoided you, Edith."

"Do you still love me?"

"You know I do."

"As much as ever you did?"

"As much as ever."

"Can I see you to-morrow—alone?"

"You know I am going to the Manor."

"I know," said Edith, with a slight tone of bitterness. "You will return in the evening, I suppose? I shall wait for you on the road till nine o'clock."

"I may be detained, you know, Edith."

"Then I shall be practising in the church on Tuesday afternoon as usual."

"Very well," he assented.

"Am I still to trust you, Charles?" she asked, raising her soft blue eyes earnestly to his face.

"Yes."

"Yes?" She dwelt upon the word, still looking fondly up to him. He understood her, and bent over and kissed her.

"You will try to return home to-morrow before nine? I have been miserable all this week, and I have so much to say to you."

"I will try to see you," said the vicar.

"I must run now; Mary will wonder what has kept me."

The great woods about Foxglove Manor were certainly lovely, and in the winter, with the snow on their black branches, and snow on the fallen leaves and the open spaces between the clumps of forestry, the place might have seemed dreary and dismal; but on this July afternoon the vicar experienced an indescribable sense of buoyancy and enlargement among these vast tossing masses of foliage. Their incessant murmur filled the air with an inarticulate music, which recalled to his memory the singing pines of Theocritus and the voices

of the firs of the Hebrew prophets. A spirit of romance for ever haunts the woodland, as though the olden traditions of dryad and sylvan maiden had not yet been wholly superseded by the more accurate report of science. In the skirts of the great clusters of timber, cattle were grazing in groups of white and red; in the open spaces of pasture land between wood and wood, deer were visible among the patches of bracken. In the depths of the forest ways he came upon the colossal statues copied from the old masters; and at length, at a turn of the shadowy road, he found himself in view of the mansion—an ancient, square mass of brown sandstone, stained with weather and incrustations of moss and lichens, and covered all along the southern exposure with a dense growth of ivy. The grounds

immediately in front were laid out in formal plots for flowers and breadths of turf traversed by gravelled pathways. A little withdrawn from the house stood the ruined chapel of which the schoolmistress had spoken. The ivy had invaded it, and scaled every wall to the very eaves, while patches of stonecrop and houseleek, which had established themselves on the slated roof, gave it a singular aspect of complete abandonment.

As Mr. Santley entered one of the walks which led to the terraced entrance, Mrs. Haldane, who had observed his approach, appeared on the stone steps, and descended to meet him.

"How good of you to come so early!" she exclaimed. "George will be delighted. He is in his laboratory, experimenting as usual. We shall join

him, after you have had some refreshment."

"No refreshment for me, thank you."

"Are you quite sure? You must require something after so long a walk."

"Nothing really, I assure you."

"Well, I shall not press you, as we shall have dinner soon. Shall we go to Mr. Haldane? Have you visited the Manor before—not in our absence? How do you like it?"

"I envy you your magnificent woods.

"Yes; are they not charming? And you will like the house, too, when you have seen it."

"Do you not find it dull, however?" asked the vicar, looking into her face with an expression of keen scrutiny. "You are still young—in the blossom of your youth—and society must still have its attractions for you."

"One enjoys society all the more after a little seclusion."

"No doubt."

"And we have just returned, you must recollect, from a whole year of wandering and sight-seeing, so that it is a positive relief to awaken morning after morning and find the same peaceful landscape, the same quiet woods about one."

"That is very natural; but the heart does not long remain content with the unchanging face of nature, however beautiful it may be. Even the best and strongest require sympathy, and when once we become conscious of that want——"

"Have you begun to feel it?" she asked suddenly, as he paused.

"I suppose it is the inevitable experience of a clergyman in a country parish," he replied, with a smile.

"Yes, I suppose it is. So few can take an interest in your tastes, and aspirations, and intellectual pleasures, and pursuits. Is not that so?"

"It may seem vanity to think so."

"Oh no; I think not. The people you meet every day are mostly concerned in their turnips or the wheat or their cattle, and their talk is the merest village gossip. It must indeed be very depressing to listen day after day to nothing but that. One has, of course, a refuge in books."

"But books are not life. The day-dreams of the library are a poor substitute for the real action of a man's own heart and brain."

"Then one has also the great fields of natural science to explore. I think you will find the work of my husband interesting, and if you could turn your

mind in the same direction, you would find in him inexhaustible sympathy."

As she spoke, they reached the low-arched portal of the chapel. The thick oaken door, studded with big iron nails, was open, and before them stood a man who bowed profoundly to Mrs. Haldane, and then darted a swift, penetrating glance at the vicar.

"Mr. Haldane is within, Baptisto?" she asked.

"Yes, señora."

He stood aside to allow them to pass, and as Mr. Santley entered he regarded the man with an eye which photographed every feature of his dark Spanish face. It was a face which, once seen, stamped itself in haunting lineaments on the memory. A dusky olive complexion; a fierce, handsome mouth and chin; a broad, intelligent

forehead ; short, crisp black hair sprinkled with grey ; a thin, black moustache, twisted and pointed at the ends ; and a pair of big, black, unfathomable eyes, filled with liquid fire. It was the man's eyes that arrested the attention first, gave character not only to the face but to the man himself, and indeed served to identify him. In the village, "the foreign gentleman with the eyes" was the popular and sufficient description of Baptisto.

CHAPTER VI.

THE UNKNOWN GOD.

As the vicar entered the chapel, he stopped short, struck with astonishment at the singular appearance of the interior.

The sunlight streaming through the leaded diamond panes of the casements, instead of falling on the familiar pews, flagged nave, and solemn walls, shone with a startling effect on the heterogeneous contents of a museum and laboratory. Along one side of the building were ranged several glass cases containing collections of fossils, arctic and tropical shells, antique implements of

flint, stone, and bronze, and geological specimens. The walls were decorated with savage curiosities—shields of skin, carved clubs and paddles, spears and arrows tipped with flint or fishbone, mats of grass, strings of wampum, and dresses of skins and feathers. On a couple of small shelves grinned two rows of hideous crania, gathered as ethnic types from all quarters of the barbarian world, and beside them lay a plaster cast of a famous paleolithic skull. On the various stands and tables in different parts of the room were retorts and crucibles, curious tubes, glasses and flasks, electric jars and batteries, balances, microscopes, prisms, strange instruments of brass and glass, and a bewildering litter of odds and ends, for which only a student of science could find a name or a use. At the

further end of the room, under the coloured east window, stood an escritoire covered with a confused mass of paper, and beside it stood a small table piled with books.

As Mrs. Haldane and the vicar entered, the master of Foxglove Manor, who had been writing, rose, laid down his pipe, buttoned his old velvet shooting-jacket, and hastened forward to welcome his visitor.

Baptisto gravely set a couple of chairs, and, at a sign from his master, bowed profoundly, and retired to the further end of the apartment.

"Do you smoke, Mr. Santley?" Mr. Haldane asked, glancing at a box of new clay pipes.

"No, thank you; but I do not dislike the smell of tobacco. I find, however, that smoking disagrees with me—irri-

tates instead of soothing, as professors of the weed tell me it should do."

"Touches the solar plexus, eh? Then beware of it! The value of the solar system is often determined by the condition of the solar plexus."

"That does seem to be frequently the case," replied Mr. Santley, smiling.

"Invariably, my dear sir, as the ancients were well aware when they formulated that comprehensive, but little comprehended, proverb of the sound mind in the sound body. It is curious how frequently modern science finds herself demonstrating the truth of the guesses of the old philosophers!"

"I perceive you are devoted to science," said Mr. Santley, waving his hand towards the evidences of his host's taste.

"Oh yes, he is perpetually experi-

menting in some direction or other," said Mrs. Haldane, with a laugh. "I believe he and Baptisto would pass the night here, boiling germs or mounting all manner of invisible little monsters for the microscope, if I allowed them. You must know, Mr. Santley, that Mr. Haldane is writing a *magnum opus*—'The History of Morals,' I believe, is to be the title—and what with his experiments and his chapters, he can scarcely find time to dine."

"You have been happy in your subject," said the vicar, turning to the master of the Manor. "The history of morals must be an enthralling book. I can scarcely imagine any subject affording larger scope for literary genius than this of the development of that divine law written on the heart of Adam. Why do you smile, may I ask?"

"Pardon me; I was not conscious that I did smile, except mentally. You will excuse me, however, if I frankly say that I was smiling at your conception of the genesis of morality. What you term the divine law written on the heart of Adam represents to me a very advanced stage in the development of the moral sense. We must begin far beyond Adam, my dear sir, if we would arrive at a philosophic appreciation of the subject. We must explore as far as possible into that misty and enigmatic period which precedes historical record; approach as nearly as may be to the time when in the savage, possibly semi-simian, brain of the earliest of our predecessors experience had begun to reiterate her proofs that what was good was to his personal advantage, and that what was bad entailed loss and suffering. It has hitherto

been the habit to believe that the Decalogue was revealed from Sinai in thunder and lightning and clouds of darkness. As a dramatic image or allegory only should that be accepted. Clouds of darkness do indeed surround the genesis of the moral in man, and the law has been revealed by the deadly lightnings of disease and war and famine and misery, through unknown and innumerable generations. No divine law was written on the heart of the first man, or society would not be where it is to-day. No; unhappily, one might say, morality has been like everything else human—like everything else, human or not,—like the coloured flower to the plant, the gay plumage to the bird, a dearly bought conquest, a painfully laboured evolution.

Once or twice during Mr. Haldane's remarks, the vicar had raised his hand

in disclaimer, but waited till he had finished before speaking.

"I was about to protest," he now said, "against several of your expressions, but I fear controversy is of little good when the disputants argue from different premises. I perceive that you have accepted a theory of life which completely shuts out God from His creation."

"Pardon me; like the old Greek, I can still raise an altar to the unknown God."

"To a cold, remote, indifferent abstraction, then," replied Mr. Santley, impulsively; "to a God unknowing as unknown—a vague, unrealizable, impersonal Power."

"Impersonal, I grant you, and therefore more logical, even according to human reason, than the huge, passionate anthropomorphism of Jew and Christian.

Consciousness and personality imply the notion of limits and conditions; and which is the grander idea—a limited, conditioned Power, however great, or an absolute transcendent Godhead, free from all the limits which govern our finite being? God cannot be conscious as we understand consciousness, nor personal as we understand personality. If He were, then indeed we might well believe that we were made after His image and likeness."

"And can you find comfort in such a creed? Can you turn for strength, or grace, or consolation to such a power as you describe?"

"Why should I?" asked Mr. Haldane, smiling. "If I need any of these things, my need is the result of some law violated or unobserved. The world is ruled by law, and every breach of law

entails an inescapable penalty. If I suffer I must endure."

"That is cold comfort for all the sum of misery in the world."

"It is the only true comfort. The rest is delusion. Preach that every violated law avenges itself, not in some half mythical hell at the close of a life that seems illimitable—for men never do realize that they will one day die—but avenges itself here and now; preach that no crucified Redeemer can interfere between the violater of the law and its penalty; preach that if men sin they will infallibly suffer, and you will really do something to regenerate mankind. Christianity, with its doctrines of atonement and vicarious suffering and redemption, has done as much to fill the world with vice, crime, and disease as the most degraded creed of pagan or

savage. The groaning and travail of creation are clamant proofs that vicarious suffering and redemption are the veriest dreams."

"Either purposely or inadvertently you mix up the physical and the moral law," interposed the vicar.

"The physical and the moral are but one law, articles of the one universal code of nature."

"True," said the vicar. "I forgot that you denied man his immortal soul, as you deny him his divine sonship. And so you are content to believe that man is born to live, labour, suffer, and perish."

Concede that God is content that such should be man's destiny," replied Mr. Haldane, "what then?"

"What then?" echoed the vicar, rising from his chair with flashing eyes

and agitated face; "why, then life is a fiendish mockery!"

Mr. Haldane's face wore a grim smile as he heard the bitter emphasis of the vicar's reply.

"Ah, my worthy friend," he said, "you illustrate how necessary it is that when one has his hand full of truth he should only open it one finger at a time. If you revolt thus angrily against the new gospel, what can be expected from the ignorant and the vicious? The meaning and purpose of life does not depend on whether the individual man shall perish or shall be immortal. If perish he must, he may at least perish heroically. Annihilation or immortality does not affect the validity of religion, whose paramount aim is not to prepare for another world, but to make the best of this—to realize its ideal greatness and

nobility. If life should suddenly appear a mockery, contrast the present with that remote past of the naked savage of the stone age, or the brutal condition of his more remote sylvan ancestor, learning to walk erect and to articulate; and then summon up a vision of the possible future, when superstition shall have ceased to embitter man's life, when a knowledge of natural law shall have made men virtuous, when disease shall have vanished from the world, and the nations shall, in a golden age of peace and perfected arts, have learnt the method of a patriarchal longevity. Millions of individuals have wept and toiled and perished to secure for us the present; we and millions shall weep and toil and perish to secure the future for them."

"And that you take to be the significance of life, the progress of the race?"

"And is not that at least as noble a significance as a heaven peopled with the penitent thief, the drunkard, the gallow's-bird, the harlot, the thousand bestial types of humanity redeemed by vicarious agony—the thousand brutes of civilization who, in this age, are not fit for life even on this earth, to say nothing of an enlarged immortality?"

"But with ever-rising grades of immortality before them, even those bestial types might ascend to a perfect manhood, and shall they perish?"

"Have they not been ascending ever since the Miocene?" asked Mr. Haldane, with a scornful laugh. "However, it is little use discussing the matter. As you have said, we cannot agree upon first principles. Let me show you, instead, some of my curiosities. Did you ever see the Mentone skull? Here is a plaster cast of it."

"And do you accept this dark and comfortless creed of your husband?" asked Mr. Santley, turning to Mrs. Haldane as he took the cast in his hand.

"Oh no," she replied, raising her soft dark eyes to him earnestly; "the progress of humanity does not satisfy me as an explanation of the enigma of life in man or woman. I cannot abandon my old faith and trust in the God-Man for an unknown power who does not care for my suffering and cannot hear my prayers. What to me can such a god be? And what can life be but a mockery if my soul, with its yearnings and aspirations and ideals, ceases to exist after death—has no other world but this, in which I know its infinite wants can never be satisfied?"

The vicar's face brightened, and his

heart beat with a strange, impulsive ardour as he listened to her. Why had this woman, whose enthusiasm and sympathy might have enabled him to realize his own high ideal of the spiritual, been denied him? What evil destiny had bound her for ever to a man whose paralyzing creed must make a perpetual division between them — a man who could look into her sweet face and yet think of her as merely a beautiful animal; who could fold her in his arms, and yet tranquilly accept the teaching that at death that pure, radiant soul of hers would be for ever extinguished? These thoughts and feelings went through the vicar's consciousness swiftly as sunshine and shadow over a landscape.

His eyes dropped on the plaster cast in his hand.

"This is very old?" he asked musingly.

"One of the oldest skulls in the world," replied Mr. Haldane. "It was discovered by Dr. Rivière in a cave at Mentone, in a cliff overlooking the sea. The man belonged to the ancient stone age, and was contemporary with the mammoth and woolly rhinoceros of the Post-pliocene. The cave was a place of burial, and on the head of the skeleton was a thickly plaited network of sea-shells, with a fringe of deers' teeth around the edge; the limbs were adorned with bracelets and anklets of shells also; and in front of the face was placed a little oxide of iron, used as war-paint, no doubt."

"Even in the Post-pliocene, then," said the vicar, "it would appear that man believed in a hereafter."

"Ah, yes; it is an antique superstition, and even yet we have not outgrown it. Human progress is slow."

"And this face was raised to the blue sky ages ago, looking for God!"

Mr. Haldane shrugged his shoulders and smiled grimly.

"How is it possible that you, who must share the weaknesses and sorrows of the human heart, can so stoically accept the horrible prospect of annihilation?" asked the vicar, half angrily.

"I accept truths. Do you imagine I prefer annihilation? I could wish that life were ordered otherwise, but wishing cannot change an eternal system. Immortality cannot be achieved by defying annihilation."

"Have you realized death?" exclaimed the vicar, passionately. "Can you, dare you, look forward to a time

when, say, your wife shall lie cold and lifeless,—and hold to the doctrine that you have lost her for ever, that never again shall your spirit mingle with hers, that you and she are for all eternity divorced?"

"You appeal to the passions, and not to the reason," replied Mr. Haldane, coldly. "What holds good for the beast which perishes, holds good for all of us, and will hold good for those who come after us, and who will be greater and nobler than we."

"Be it so," replied the vicar, in an undertone. As he spoke he bit his lip, and his cheek coloured. The thought was not meant for utterance, but it slipped into words before he was aware. For the full significance of that thought was a singular exemplification of the conflicting spiritual and animal natures

of the man. That divorce of death which had been pronounced inevitable opened before him, in a dreamy vista of the future, a new world of ecstatic beatitude, where his soul and the radiant spirit of the woman who stood beside him should be mingled together in indissoluble communion.

CHAPTER VII.

CELESTIAL AFFINITIES.

SHORTLY afterwards Mrs. Haldane suggested that they should take a turn about the grounds, instead of wasting the sunshine indoors. As they left the chapel the vicar paused and looked back at the ivy-draped building, with its half-hidden lancets.

"You have turned a sacred edifice to a strange use," he said. "Here, within the walls where past generations have dwelt and worshipped, you have set up your apparatus for the destruction of man's holiest heritage. Pardon me if I

speak warmly, but to me this appears to be sacrilege."

"The Church has always been intolerant of science and research," replied Mr. Haldane, good-humouredly, "and it is the fortune of conflict if sometimes we are able to make reprisals. But, seriously, I see no desecration here."

"No desecration in converting God's house into a laboratory to analyze soul and spirit into function and force!"

"No desecration, *I* should say, in converting the shrine of a narrow, selfish superstition into a schoolroom where one may learn a truer and a grander theology, and a less presumptuous and illusive theory of life. It is, however, impossible for us to be at one on these matters; let us at least agree to differ amicably. Your predecesor and I found much of common interest. He was of

the old school, but life had taught him a kindly tolerance of opinion. To you, as I gleaned from your sermon yesterday, the new philosophy and modern criticism are familiar. You must surely concede that the old theological ground must be immeasurably widened, if you are still resolved to occupy it. Why should you fear truth, if God has indeed revealed Himself to the Church?"

"The Church does not fear truth," replied the vicar; "but she does fear the wild speculations and guesses at truth which unsettle the faith of the world. For myself I have looked into some of these fantastic theories of science, and I repudiate them as at once blasphemous and hopeless. It is easy to destroy the old trust in the beneficence of Providence, in the redemption and destiny of man; but when you have

accomplished that, you can go no further. Tyndall proves to you that all life in the world is the outcome of antecedent life; Haeckel contends that science must in the long run accept spontaneous generation. Your leading men are at loggerheads; and it signifies little which is right, for in either case the *causa causans* is only removed one link further back in the chain of causation. Some of you hold that there is only matter and force in the universe, but on others it is beginning to dawn that possibly matter and force are in the ultimate one and the same. And again, it signifies little which is right, for both, being conditioned, must have had a beginning. A God, a creative Power, is needed in the long run —'a power behind humanity, and behind all other things,' as Herbert Spencer describes it; a God of whom science can

predicate nothing, of whom science declares it to be beyond her province to speak, but of whom every heart is at some time vividly conscious and has been from the beginning—demonstrably from the Paleolithic period — until now."

"Oh, Mr. Santley, I am so pleased you have said that. I have often wished that I were able to answer my husband, but I have no power of argument," said Mrs. Haldane, looking gratefully at the vicar. "You must not think he is not a good, a real practical Christian, in spite of his opinions."

Mr. Haldane laughed quietly as his wife slipped her hand into his.

"As to the God of the Paleolithic man, Mr. Santley forgets that it was at best a personification of some of the great natural powers—wind, rain, thun-

der, sunshine, and moonlight; and as to Christianity, my dear, there is much in the teaching of Christ, and even of the Church, which I reverence and hold sacred. Morality, and the consequent civilization of the world, owes more to Christianity than to any other creed. It has done much evil, but I think it has done more good. Purified from its mythic delusions, it has still a splendid future before it."

"And *à propos* of practical Christianity, Mr. Santley," continued Mrs. Haldane, "I want to talk to you about the parish. I am eager to begin with my poor people again; and, by-the-bye, the children have, I understand, had no school treat yet this year. Now, sit down here and tell me all about your sick, in the first place."

Mr. Haldane stood listening to the

woes and illnesses of the village for a few minutes, and then left them together in deep discussions over flannels and medicines and nourishing food. Dinner passed pleasantly enough. The vicar had satisfied his conscience by protesting against the desecration of the chapel and the disastrous results of scientific research. Clearly it was useless, and worse than useless, to contend with this large-natured, clear-headed unbeliever. It was infinitely more agreeable to feel the soft dark light of Mrs. Haldane's eyes dwelling on his face, and to listen to the music of her voice as she told him of their travels abroad. In his imagination the scenes she described rose before him, and he and she were the central figures in the clear, new landscape. He thought of their walks on the cliffs and on the sea-shore, in the golden days

that had gone by. How easily it might have been!

The sun had gone down when he parted from his host and hostess at the great gate at the end of the avenue. He had declined their offer to drive him over to Omberley. He preferred walking in the cool of the evening, and the distance was, he professed, not at all too great. As he shook hands with her, that wild, etherial fancy of a world to come, in which her husband would have no claim to her, brightened his eyes and flushed his cheek. There was a strange nervous pressure in the touch of his hand, and an expression of surprise started into her face. He noticed it at once, and was warned. Mr. Haldane's farewell was bluffly cordial, and he warmly pressed the vicar to call on them at any time that best suited his convenience.

They were pretty sure to be always at home, and they were not likely to have too much company.

As he walked along the high-road, bordered on one side with the green murmuring masses of foliage, and on the other with waving breadths of corn, his mind was absorbed in that new dream of transcendent love. There was nothing earthly or gross in this dawning glow of spiritual passion; indeed, it raised him in delicious exaltation beyond the coarseness of the physical, till, as it suddenly occurred to him that somewhere on his way Edith was waiting for him, his heart rose in revulsion at the recollection of her. At the same time there was a large element of the sensuous beauty of transient humanity in that celestial forecast. The pure, radiant spirit of the woman he loved still wore the sweet

lineaments of her earthly loveliness. Death had not destroyed that magical face; those dark, luminous, loving eyes; that sweet shape of womanhood. The spiritual body was cast in the mould of the physical, and the chief difference lay in a shining mistiness of colour, which floated in a sort of elusive drapery about the glorified woman, and replaced the worldly silks and satins of the living wife. This spiritual being was no intangible abstraction, of which only the intellect could take cognizance. As in its temporal condition, it could still kiss and thrill with a touch. Clearly, however unconscious he might be of the fact, the vicar's conception of the divine was intensely human, and his spiritual idealizations were the immediate growth and delicate blossom of the senses.

A great stillness was growing over the

land as he pursued his way. The woodlands had been left behind him, and their incessant murmur was now inaudible. Sleep and quietude had fallen on the level fields; not an ear of wheat stirred, no leaf rustled. The birds had all gone to nest, except a solitary string of belated crows, flying low down in black dots against the distant silvery green horizon. The moon was rising through a low-lying haze, which had begun to spread over the landscape. The vicar looked at his watch. It was after nine o'clock. He began to hope that Edith had grown tired of waiting for him, and had returned home. He had a sickening feeling of repugnance and vague dread of meeting her.

Little more than a month after Mr. Santley had settled in Omberley, Miss Dove had come to live with her aunt.

Her father and mother had died within a year of each other, and the girl gladly accepted the offer of Mrs. Russell to consider her house as a home until she had had time to look about her. Edith had been left sufficiently well provided for, and her aunt, the widow of a banker, was in a position of independence, so that the disinterested offer was accepted without any sense of dependence or humiliation. The bright, innocent face of the girl instantly caught the eye of the vicar. He saw her frequently at her aunt's house, and gradually learned to esteem, not only her excellent qualities, but to find a use for her accomplishments. She was especially fond of music, and when the vicar suggested that she might add to the beauty of the service at St. Cuthbert's by interesting herself in the choir and presiding at the organ, she

eagerly acquiesced. The church was one of Edith's favourite haunts; and when the vicar, who was himself a lover of music, heard the soul-stirring vibrations of some masterpiece of the great composers, his steps were drawn by an easily explicable fatality to the side of the pretty performer. Still, it was a fatality. Slowly, and imperceptibly at first, the sense of pleasure at meeting grew up between the two; then swiftly and imperceptibly they found that there was something in the presence of each other that satisfied a vague, indefinable craving; and lastly, with a sudden access of self-consciousness, they looked into each other's eyes, and each became gladly and tremulously aware of the other's love. Edith was still young, almost too young yet to assume the station of the wife of the spiritual head of the parish;

and Mr. Santley was not sure as to the manner in which his sister would receive the intimation that there was, even in the remote future, to be a new mistress brought to the Vicarage. The girl was, however, still too happy in the knowledge that she was beloved to look forward to marriage. With a strange, feminine inconsistency, she regarded their union with a certain dread and shamefacedness. It seemed such a dreadful exposure that all the village should know that they loved each other. "Oh no, no; it must not be for a long, long time yet!" she once exclaimed nervously. "Is it not sufficient happiness to know that I am yours and you are mine? I cannot bear to think that every one must know our secret." To have those long, pleasant chats under cover of the music; to be invited to the Vicarage, and to sit and

talk with him there; to receive those haphazard glances, as it were, while he was preaching; to be escorted home by him in the evening when it was dark, and no one could see that her hand was on his arm; to receive those almost stolen kisses; to feel his arm about her waist;—what more could maiden desire to dream over for weeks and months—for years, if need were?

Edith was endowed with the intense feminine faith and fervid ideality of the worshipper. To sit at her lover's feet and to look up adoringly to him, was at once her favourite mental and physical attitude. On her side, she exercised a curious spiritual influence over him. There was such an aerial brightness and lightness about her, such sweet fragile loveliness in her form and figure, such tender abandonment of self in her dis-

position, that he felt he had not only a woman to love, but a beautiful child-like soul to keep unspotted from the world, to guide through the dark ways of life to the arms of the great loving Fatherhood of God. The presence of Edith helped him to banish the dark doubts and evil promptings of the spirit of unbelief. When she spoke to him of her spiritual experiences, he felt joyous ascensions of the heart which raised him nearer to heaven. She created in him the unspeakable holy longings and vague wants that give the lives of the mystic saints of Roman Catholicism so singular a blending of divine illumination and voluptuous colour. Unconsciously the vicar was realizing in his own nature Swedenborg's doctrine of celestial affinities. This love restored to him the innocence and ardour of the days of

Eden; he had found at once his Eve and his Paradise, and he felt that, as of old, God still walked in the garden in the cool of the day. Some such glamour surrounds the first developments of every sincere attachment. It is the first rosy tingling flush of dawn, dim and sweet and dreamy, and, like the dawn, it glows and brightens into the fierce clear heat of broad day, burning the dew from the petal and withering the blossom.

As Mr. Santley's thoughts turned to Edith, the recollection of these things came vividly upon him. Only a week ago, and she was the one woman in the world he believed he could have chosen for his wife. In an instant, at the sight of a face, all had been changed. His love had become a burthen, a shame, a dread to him. Edith had grown

hateful to him. At the same time, he could not deaden the sting of remorse as he reflected on his broken vows. The passionate protestations he had uttered sounded again in his ears in accents of bitter mockery; the pledges he had given seemed now to him hideous blasphemies.

At a bend of the road he suddenly came in sight of a figure moving before him in the dusk. He knew at a glance it was she, and he prepared himself for the meeting. Although he earnestly wished to disembarrass himself of her, he found himself unable to do so at once and brutally. He would try to estrange her, and free himself little by little.

As they approached each other he saw that Edith's face was grave and sad. She was trying to learn from his look in what manner she ought to speak to him.

His assurances on the previous evening had not tranquillized her, and she had still a terrible misgiving that a chasm was widening between them.

The vicar was the first to speak.

"I am a little later than I expected," he said, as he held out his hand to her.

"It does not signify *now*. I was only afraid that you might be so late I should have to go home without seeing you."

He made no reply, and they walked on side by side in silence for a few seconds. At last she stopped abruptly and looked at him.

"Charles," she said, "you know what you said to me last night?"

"Yes."

"Was it true?"

"Why should you ask such a question? Why should you doubt its truth?"

"I try not to doubt it, but I cannot

help it. Oh, tell me again that you do not hate and contemn me! Tell me you still love me."

"My dear Edith," replied the vicar, laying his hand on her arm, "you are not well. You have been overtaxing your strength and exciting yourself.'

Edith did not answer, but the tears rose to her eyes and began to run down her cheeks. She did not sob or make any sound of weeping, but her hand was pressed against her throat.

"Come, don't cry like that; you know I cannot bear to see you cry."

He stopped as he spoke, and took her hand in his. They stood still a little while, and she at length was able to speak.

"Do you remember," she asked in a low, broken voice, "that I once told you you were my conscience?"

He regarded her uneasily before he replied.

"Yes; you once said that, I know. But why return to that now?"

"And have you not been?"

He was silent.

"Your word," she continued, "has been my law; what you have said I have believed. Have I done wrong?"

"Why are you letting these things trouble you now?" he asked impatiently.

"Because I know that when a woman gives herself wholly to the man she loves, it is common for her to lose him, and I have begun to feel that I am losing you."

"I do not think I have given you any reason to feel that."

She did not speak again immediately, but stood with her innocent blue eyes

raised beseechingly to his face. Suddenly she took hold of his hands, and said—

"You told me that in the eyes of God we were man and wife, that no marriage ceremony could ever join us together more truly, that marriage really consisted in the union of heart and soul, not in the words of any priest—did you not? Was that true? Am I still your little wife?"

He hesitated. The blood had vanished from his cheek, leaving it haggard and pale; she felt his hands trembling in hers. Then, with a sudden impulse, he took her face between his hands and drew her towards him, as he answered—

"You are, darling. I will not do you any wrong."

CHAPTER VIII.

A SICK-CALL.

Mr. Santley's reply was as sincere at the moment it was spoken as it was impulsive. The saner and better part of him rose in sudden sympathy towards this young, confiding girl who had laid her whole being in his hands, to be his treasure or his plaything. He resolved to be faithful to the solemn pledge he had given her, and to cast from him for ever all thought of Mrs. Haldane, and all memory of that passionate episode of the past. He drew Edith's hand under his arm and held it

there. That warm little bit of responsive flesh and blood had still, he felt, a power to thrill through his nature. He bent down and kissed it. For some time their conversation was embarrassed, but gradually all sense of doubt and estrangement vanished, and he was telling her about his visit to the Manor. A pressure was laid upon him to make her such amends as he was able for his coldness during the past week, and he determined to break the spell which Mrs. Haldane's beauty threw over him by revealing their old friendship to Edith. It was not wise, but under the stress of remorse and a reviving passion men seldom act wisely. Except in the case of a jealous disposition, a woman is always pleased to hear of her lover's old vaguely cherished love affairs, when there is no possibility of their ever

coming to life again. She knows instinctively, even when she is not told so adoringly, that she supersedes all her predecessors and combines all their virtues and charms. He loved this one for her beauty and sweetness, that one for her clear bright intelligence; each in a different way; but her he loves in both the old ways, and in a new way also which she alone could inspire.

"Mrs. Haldane was an old pupil of mine—indeed, a favourite pupil—many years ago; so, naturally, I am much interested in her," said the vicar in a tentative manner.

The words were a revelation to Edith; they explained to her all her uneasiness and all his change of manner.

"And you find that you still love her a little?" Edith ventured to say in a sad, faltering tone.

"I never said I loved her, my dear," replied the vicar, with a forced laugh.

"But you did, did you not? She was your favourite pupil."

How uncomfortably keen-sighted this young person seemed to be, in spite of her soft, endearing ways!

"Would you be a little jealous if I said I did?" he asked, regarding her with a scrutinizing look.

"Jealous! Oh no. Why should I? Is she not married? And am I not really and truly your little wife?"

He pressed her hand gently for answer.

"And when you saw her again last Sunday, and saw how beautiful she was," Edith continued, "you felt sorry that you had lost her—just a little regretful, did you not?"

The vicar hesitated, and then did the

most foolish thing a man can do in such circumstances—confessed the truth.

"You will not be vexed, darling, if I say that I did feel regret?"

"You loved her very much?"

"She was my first love," replied the vicar. "But you must remember it was years ago. Long before I knew you; when I was quite a young man."

"And was she very fond of you?" Edith went on quietly.

"I used to think she was."

"But she was not true to you?"

"I do not blame her. I do not think it was her fault. Her people were wealthy, and I was poor, a poor teacher."

"And it was this made you so cold and hard to me all last week?"

Mr. Santley did not answer at once. It would be brutal to say yes, and he dared not hazard a denial.

"Oh, Charles, she never loved you as I have."

"Never, never," replied the vicar hurriedly; and a flush rose to his face.

"When you meet her, when you see her again," said Edith, grasping his arm with earnest emphasis, "will you remember that? Promise me."

"I will never forget it," said the vicar in a low voice.

He did not see Mrs. Haldane again, however, during the week. On the following Sunday his eyes wandered only for a moment towards the Manor pew, and he perceived that she was alone. When he met her after the service his manner was constrained, but she appeared not to notice it. She spoke again of the parish work, and told him that in a day or two she would drive over and accompany him on some of

his calls. He looked forward with uneasiness and self-distrust to her cooperation in his daily work. There was an irresistible something, a magical atmosphere, an invisible radiation of the enticing about this woman. Her large glowing black eyes seemed to fasten upon his soul and draw it beyond his control. Her starry smile intoxicated and maddened him. Beside her, Edith was but a weak, delicate child, with a child's clinging attachment, a child's credulity and trust, a child's little gusts of passion. His lost love was a woman —such a woman as men in old times would have perished for as a queen, would have worshipped as a goddess—such a woman, he fancied, as that Naomi whose beauty has been the mysterious tradition of five thousand years.

Early one afternoon, about the middle of the week, the vicar was just about to set out on his customary round of visitation, when Mrs. Haldane's pony-carriage drove up to the gate. He assisted her to alight, and returned with her to the house.

Miss Santley, who had been as sensitive to the change in her brother as Edith herself, regarded Mrs. Haldane with little favour. She was ready to acknowledge that it was very good and kind of the mistress of Foxglove Manor to interest herself in the wants and suffering of the parish, but she entertained grave misgivings as to the prudence of her brother and this old pupil of his being thrown too frequently together. She was just a little formal and reserved with her visitor, who announced her intention of

going with the vicar to this sick-call he had spoken of.

"You will have to walk, however," said Mr. Santley, "as the cottage is some little distance across the fields."

"I came prepared for walking," she replied, with a laugh. "James can put up at the village till our return."

"Will you do us the favour of taking tea with us?" asked Miss Santley. "You will require it, if my brother takes you his usual round."

"Thank you, I shall be very glad. If James calls for me at—what time shall I say?—six, will that be soon enough?"

The coachman received his instructions, and Mr. Santley and Mrs. Haldane set out on their first combined mission. They traversed half a dozen fields, and came in sight of a small cluster of cottages lying low in a green

hollow. A narrow lane ran past them to Omberley in one direction and to the high-road in another. Half a dozen poplars grew in a line along the lane, and the cottages were surrounded by small gardens, filled with fruit trees.

"What a picturesque little spot!" exclaimed Mrs. Haldane. "I think nothing looks so pretty as an English cottage with its white walls and tiled roof peering out from a cluster of apple and pear trees."

"Pretty enough, but damp!" replied the vicar. "In wet weather they are in a perfect quagmire. Ah, listen!"

They were now very near the houses, and the sound to which Mr. Santley called her attention was the voice of a man crying out in great pain.

"What can it be?" asked Mrs. Haldane, with a look of alarm.

"It is the poor fellow we are going to see. He was knocked down and run over by a cart about two years ago. His spine has been injured, and the doctors can do nothing for him. He is quite helpless, and has been bed-ridden all that time."

"Poor creature! what a dreadful thing it must be to suffer like that!"

"Sometimes for weeks together he feels no pain. Then he is suddenly seized by the most fearful torture, and you can hear his cries for a great distance."

As they approached the cottage the man's voice grew louder, and they could distinguish his words: "Oh, what shall I do? Oh, who'll tell me what to do?"

Mrs. Haldane shuddered. In that green, peaceful, picturesque spot that

persistent reiteration of the man's agony was horrible.

"Will you come in?" asked the vicar, doubtfully.

His companion signed her assent, and Mr. Santley knocked gently at the door. In a few seconds some one was heard coming down the staircase, and a little gray-haired, gray-faced woman, dressed in black, came to the door and curtsied to her visitors.

"Mansfield is very bad again to-day?" said the vicar.

"Ay, this be one of his bad days, sir. He have been that bad since Sunday, I haven't known what to do with him."

The voice of the sick man suddenly ceased, and he appeared to be listening.

"Who's there?" he shrieked out, after a pause. "Jennie, blast you! who's there?"

"He be raving mad, ma'am!" said Mrs. Mansfield, apologetically. "He don't know what he is saying."

"Jennie, you damned little varmint——"

"Hush, John, it be the parson!" his wife called up the staircase.

"To hell with the parson! Oh, what shall I do? Oh, who'll tell me what to do?"

"I'll go up to him, sir, and tell him you're here. He be very bad to-day, poor soul! Will it please you to walk in, ma'am?"

The little woman went upstairs, and her entrance to the sick-room was greeted with a volley of foul curses screamed out in furious rage. Gradually, however, the access of passion was exhausted, and the man was again heard repeating his hopeless appeal for relief.

"How do they live?" asked Mrs.

Haldane, glancing about the small but scrupulously clean room in which she stood. "Have they any grown-up children?"

"No, only their two selves. She is the bread-winner. She does knitting and sewing, and the neighbours, who are very kind to her, assist her with her garden and do her many little kindnesses."

"Poor woman! And she has endured this horrible infliction for two years!"

"If you please, sir, you can come up now," said Mrs. Mansfield from the top of the stairs.

The vicar went up, and Mrs. Haldane followed him. They entered a pretty large whitewashed bedroom, with raftered roof and a four-post bedstead in the centre of the room. Though meagrely furnished, everything was spotlessly clean

and tidy. On the bed lay a great gaunt man, panting and moaning, with his large filmy blue eyes turned up to the roof. He was far above the common stature, and his huge wasted frame, only half hidden by the bedclothes, was piteous to look at. His large venerable head, covered with thin, long white hair, filled one with surprise and regretful admiration. His face was thin and colourless, and a fringe of white beard gave it a still more deathly appearance. One could scarcely believe that the wreck before him was a common labourer. It seemed rather such a spectacle as Beatrice Cenci might have looked on had her father died cursing on his bed.

"Here's parson come to see thee, and a lady wi' him," said Mrs. Mansfield, raising her husband's head.

He looked at them with his glazed blue eyes, made prominent with pain, and his moaning grew louder, till they could again distinguish the constant cry for release from pain: "Oh, what shall I do? Oh, who'll tell me what to do?"

"Try to think of God, and pray to Him for help," said the vicar, bending over the suffering man.

"Oh, I have prayed and prayed and prayed," he replied querulously; "but it does no good."

"He were praying all day yesterday and singing hymns," said Mrs. Mansfield. "I don't know what's gotten hold of him to-day, but he have been dreadful. And he were ever such a pious, God-fearing man. It fair breaks my heart to hear him swearing like that. But God will not count it against him, for he's been clean beside himself."

"Well, let me hear you pray now, Mansfield," said the vicar. "Turn your heart and your mind to God, and He will comfort you."

"O God," said the sick man, with the obedient simplicity of a child, "I turn my heart and my mind to Thee; do Thou comfort me and take me to Thyself. O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour of mankind, do Thou remember me in Thy paradise. Look down upon me, O Lord, a miserable offender, and spare Thou them which confess their faults and are truly penitent."

With a strange light on his white, wasted face, with his gaunt hands folded on the counterpane before him, the old man sat up in bed and prayed in the same loud voice of pain and semi-delirium. A wild, inconceivable, interminable prayer; for long after they had left the house,

old Mansfield could be heard some hundreds of yards away, screaming to God for mercy and consolation.

"We had better leave him praying," said the vicar softly; "and when he begins cursing and swearing again, Mrs. Mansfield, just kneel down and pray in a loud voice beside him. It will suggest a new current to his thoughts."

"God won't count his cursing against him, sir, will he?" asked the little woman. "He were ever a sober Christian man till this misery came on him."

"No, no," said the vicar; "God judges the heart, not the tongue of delirium."

"How old is your husband?" inquired Mrs. Haldane.

"He be eighty-one come Martinmas, ma'am."

"Poor old man! And you do sewing and knitting, do you not?"

"Yes, ma'am, what he lets me do. He be main fractious whiles."

"And have you plenty to go on with at present?"

"I have what 'll keep me busy for a fortnight yet."

"I will see you again before then. I hope your husband will soon be better."

"There be no hope of that, ma'am. The only betterness for him 'll be when God takes him."

"I know you will be able to find a use for this," said Mrs. Haldane in a whisper, as they went out of the house. "Good-bye for the present."

"Oh, ma'am! God bless you!" said Mrs. Mansfield, the tears springing into her eyes as she looked at the gold coin in her hand.

CHAPTER IX.

A SUMMER SHOWER.

After that first round of visitation Mrs. Haldane and the vicar met very frequently.

She found that she could be of use to a great number of poor people, and the occupation afforded her by her self-imposed duties was novel and interesting. It is pleasant to take the place of Providence, and mete out help and gladness to afflicted humanity. She was actuated by no petty spirit of vanity or ostentation; and though she soon learned that the poorer and more necessitous people

are, the more thankless they are as a rule, these disagreeable experiences did not disillusion her. Very often she would leave her carriage at the village inn and accompany Mr. Santley on foot across the fields and down the deep green lanes to the different houses at which he was to call. Their conversations on these occasions were very interesting to her; and more than once as she drove back home in the evening she fell a-thinking of that distant school-girl past which had so nearly faded away from her memory, and began to wonder whether, if her family had not so promptly extinguished that little romance of hers, she would now have been the wife of the vicar of Omberley. No word had yet passed between them of that old time, and occasionally she felt just the least curiosity to know how

he regarded it. She knew he had not forgotten it, and she smiled to herself as she called to mind the way in which he had addressed her as "Ellen" that first Sunday. She had ever since been only Mrs. Haldane to him. There was a singular fascination about him which she was unable to explain to herself. She remembered his words, his looks, his gestures with a curious distinctness. She was conscious that, notwithstanding his reticence, he still entertained a warm attachment to her. She could see it in his eyes, could hear it in the tones of his voice, could feel it in the pressure of his hand. There is no incentive to affection so powerful and subtle as the knowledge that one is beloved. Without any analysis of her feelings or any misgiving whatever, Mrs. Haldane knew that the vicar's friendship was very dear

to her, that his sympathy and counsel were rapidly growing indispensable. Many things troubled her in connection with her husband—his indifference to any form of religion, his stern acceptance of the conclusions of science, however destructive they might be of all that the world had clung to as essential to goodness and happiness, his utter disbelief of the truths of revelation, his rejection of the only God in whom she could place trust and confidence. Diffidently at first, and with pain and doubt, she spoke to Mr. Santley of these troubles, and of the waverings of her own convictions. Her husband was so good, so upright and noble a man, that she could not despair of his some day returning to the faith and the Church of his boyhood. Could the vicar not aid her in winning him back to God? Then, too, at times her

husband's words appealed to her reason so irresistibly that she began to question whether after all she had not spent her life in the worship of a delusion. That did not happen often, but it terrified her that it should be possible for her at any time or in any circumstance to call in question the fatherhood of God or the divinity of Christ.

It was only natural that these matters should draw the vicar and his fair parishioner very close to each other; and that intimate relationship of soul with soul by subtle degrees widened and widened till each became deeply interested in everything that could in any way affect the other. In spite of his strongest resolve to be true to Edith, Mr. Santley felt himself irresistibly drawn to her beautiful rival. He struggled with the enchantment till

further resistance seemed useless, and then he sought refuge in self-deception. His nature, he fancied, was wide enough to include the love of both. To Edith he could give the affection of a husband, to Ellen the anticipative passion of a disfranchised spirit. One was a temporal, the other an eternal sentiment.

One afternoon, as they were returning from a visit, being on the edge of the moss about a couple of miles from the village, they were overtaken by a storm. There was a clump of trees hard by, and they entered it for shelter. Mrs. Haldane had her waterproof with her; but the rain drove in such drenching showers, that the vicar insisted on her standing under his umbrella and sheltering her person with her own. Side by side, with the large trunk of a beech-tree behind them and its tossing branches

overhead, they stood there for nearly half an hour. He held his umbrella over her so that his arm almost touched her further shoulder. They were very close together, and while she watched the flying volleys of rain he was gazing on the beautiful complexion of her face and neck, on the rich dark masses of her hair, her sweet arched eyebrows and long curving eyelashes. For years he had not been able to regard her so closely. She did not notice his scrutiny at first, but, when she did, little sunny flushes of colour made her loveliness still more electrical. They were talking of the storm at first, but now there was an interval of silence. She felt his eyes upon her face—they seemed to touch her, and the contract made her cheeks glow. At last she turned and looked straight at him.

"I was thinking of long ago," he said in answer to her look; "do you remember how once we were caught by a thunderstorm at Seacombe, and we stood together under a tree just as we are now?"

"What an excellent memory you have!" she said with a smile, while her colour again rose.

"I never forget anything," rejoined Mr. Santley with emphasis. "But surely you too recollect that?"

"Oh yes; I have not forgotten it," she said lightly. "We were very foolish people in those days."

"We were very happy people, were we not?"

"Yes, I think we were; it was a childish happiness."

"Manhood, then, has brought me no greater. Ah, Ellen, you seem to have

easily let the past slip away from you. With me it is as vivid to-day as if it were only yesterday that you and I walked on the cliffs together. Do you remember we went to the gipsy's camp in the sand-hills, and had our fortunes told ?"

Mrs. Haldane blushed and laughed.

"We were foolish enough to do anything, I think, at that time."

"That pretty gipsy girl with the dark almond eyes and red-and-amber headdress was sadly out in her reading of our destinies."

Mrs. Haldane made no reply. These reminiscences, and especially the tone in which the vicar dwelt on them, disquieted her.

"I think the worst of the shower is over now," she said, stepping from under his umbrella. As she spoke, however, a

fresh gust of wind and rain contradicted her, and she stepped further into the shelter of the tree. Mr. Santley clearly understood the significance of her words and action.

"It is raining far too heavily to go yet," he said gently. "Let me hold my umbrella over you."

She consented a little uneasily, but he laid his hand upon her arm and said—

"I have displeased you by referring to the past, have I not? Come, be frank with me. Surely we are good enough friends by this to speak candidly to each other."

She raised her great dark eyes to his face and replied gravely,

"I do not like you to speak of the past in that way. I do not think it is right. I hope we *are* good enough friends to speak candidly. I have trusted

you as a friend, as a very dear and true friend. I wish to keep you always my friend; but when you spoke just now of our childish liking for each other, I do not think you spoke as a—friend."

The vicar was silent, and his eyes were cast on the ground.

"Have I done you an injustice?" she asked in a low tone, after a little pause. "Then, pray, do forgive me."

The vicar regarded her with a look of sadness, and took the little gloved hand she held out to him.

"You do me injustice in thinking that I have forgotten your position."

Mrs. Haldane coloured deeply.

"No," continued the vicar, "I have not forgotten that. I *cannot* forget it. And if I still love you with the old love of those vanished years, if I love you with a love which will colour my whole

life, do not imagine that it is with any hope of a response in this world. I do your husband no injustice; I do you no dishonour. I loved you long before he knew you; I shall love you still in that after life in which he has deliberately abandoned all claim to you, in the very existence of which he places no belief. Between this and then let me be your friend—your brother; let me be as one in whom you will ever find sympathy and devotedness; one who can share and understand all your doubts and distress, all your temptations and trials. I do not ask you to love me; I only ask you to let me love you."

This gust of passion was so sudden, so unexpected, so overwhelming, that almost before she was aware, he had spoken and she had listened. And now as she thought of what he said a

strangely mixed sensation of doubt and pleasure awoke within her. All that he wished to be he was indeed already in her eyes—her adviser, sympathiser, friend. Only this secret unexpectant love which lived on the past and the future agitated her. And yet surely it was a pure spiritual love which asked for no return on this side of the grave. These thoughts occurred to her before she took the sober common-sense view of what he had said.

"You are taking too visionary, too feverish a view of life when you speak in that way," she said gently. "We cannot live on dreams. Our duties, our work, our disappointments and cares are too real for us to be satisfied with any love less real. You will some day meet some one worthy of your affection, capable of sympathising with you and

aiding you in your life-work—some one who will be a fitting helpmeet to you. For my part, I think that whenever we have missed what we are apt to consider a great happiness it is a sure sign that God intends some better thing for us."

The vicar shook his head silently.

"Oh, you must have more faith!" she continued brightly. "And it ought to be very easy for you to have faith in this matter. You have all the advantages on your side. And, if I may be frank with you, I will say that I think you would be happier if you *were* married. You need some responsive heart, and nowhere could one more need close companionship than in such a place as Omberley."

The rain had ceased, and as she spoke the last words she glanced up

at the clouds breaking away from the sunny blue of the sky.

"I think we may safely start now. How bright and sweet everything looks after the rain; and what a fragrance the fields have!"

Mr. Santley did not attempt to renew the conversation. Clearly she was not in the mood, and he believed that what he had said had fallen as seed in a generous soil, and would germinate in the warmth of her fervid temperament. It was enough that she knew he still loved her.

Such a knowledge is ever dangerous to an imaginative woman. For several days after that incident Mrs. Haldane never thought of the vicar, never heard his name mentioned without at the same time unconsciously recalling—or rather without having flashed upon her a

mental picture not only of that little wood near the moss, but of the romantic shore at Seacombe. She felt a strange tender interest in the man who had loved her so long, and still loved her so hopelessly, so unselfishly. Hitherto in their relationship she had only thought of herself, of her own needs and her own happiness. She had looked up to him. But that avowal had changed their position towards one another in a singular way. He to whom every one felt entitled to appeal to for advice, assistance, consolation, was evidently himself in need of human affection. She had hitherto regarded the priest rather than the man, but now the man chiefly engaged her attention, and attracted her sympathy while he excited and perplexed her imagination. What could she do to be of service to him? She

set her woman's wit to work in a woman's way, and speedily arrived at one means of serving him.

"George," she said to her husband one morning at breakfast, "I have been thinking of asking an old schoolfellow of mine, Hettie Taylor, to come and spend a few weeks with us. She lives in London, and she will be delighted with the change to the country, I know. What do you say?"

"Beginning to feel lonely already?" he asked, glancing up at her.

"Oh no, not at all. Only I have been thinking of her, and should like to have her with me again for a little while. I am sure you will like her. She is very pretty—such beautiful brown hair and eyes—and decidedly intellectual."

"Ask her by all means, then."

"Thanks. I will write to her to-day. No, not to-day—I shall be busy seeing after the children's picnic. Will you not come, dear? You know you love children."

"To a picnic, my dear girl!" cried Mr. Haldane aghast.

"Yes, in Barton Wood. The children are all going in a couple of waggons. And there will be some of the old people there if the weather is fine. Do come."

"A picnic, my dear Nell, is pure atavism—it is one of those lapses into savagery which betray the aboriginal arboreal blood," said Mr. Haldane, laughing. "No, no; I have too much respect for the civilization of the century and for my personal comfort to willingly retrograde to the Drift Period."

CHAPTER X.

THE KISS.

THE artist in search of a pretty rural subject could not do better than paint a village holiday—a holiday from which the men and women are all but excluded, and the village school-children and the old people are gathered together for a voyage through the leafy lanes to the picturesque playground of a neighbouring wood. Such an enjoyable spectacle as that presented on the day of the Omberley school-treat deserved to be immortalized by art, if only for the sake of filling a city parlour with a

sense of eternal summer. It was a glorious August morning that laughed out over Omberley on the day of the great picnic. The young people were astir early, for it had been impossible to sleep from the excitement they felt after the first glimmer of dawn. About ten o'clock the streets were gay with troops of children, clean, rosy-cheeked, and dressed in their Sunday clothes, who went singing to the rendezvous at the schoolhouse. There they were received by Miss Dora Greatheart, who inspected them all, and expressed her approbation at finding them so neat and prim. In twos and threes the old people, the men in tall hats and swallow-tailed coats for the most part, and the women in their best black gowns and church bonnets, came slowly along the road, gossiping and laughing and breathing

hard with the weakness of old age. Then came the musicians—old Gabriel Ware, the sexton, with his fiddle, and two younger men, one of whom played the concertina and the other the cornopean, each with a huge nosegay in his breast and wearing the jauntiest air conceivable. There was a happy buzz of excitement about the schoolhouse as the people assembled; a joyous babble of the clear treble voices of little lads and lasses, and the piping notes of garrulous patriarchs and ancient dames; a strange picture, as pathetic as it was pretty, of bright young faces and dancing little figures mingling among gray wrinkled visages and frail stooping shapes.

"Well, Dora, we are to have a fine day," said Edith, as she entered the garden and shook hands with the schoolmistress.

"Splendid; only we shall be a little late in starting. We should have been off at ten, and the waggons have not come yet. Why, here is old Daddy coming!"

She had stepped out to the road to look for the waggons, and now she went to welcome the new arrival whom she called Daddy. He was a very old, very wiry little man, with a funny little face full of wrinkles, a pair of little grey eyes, and a perfectly bald head. This was the oldest inhabitant of Omberley; and though he was in his ninety-second year, he was as brisk and hearty as many who were twenty years his juniors.

"Well, Daddy, you have actually come!" said Dora, shaking hands with him. "I am very glad. And how do you feel to-day? Pretty strong and hearty?'

"Strong as Samson, mistress, and hearty as—hearty as anything," replied the old man, with a chuckle.

"Please, miss," said a young woman who accompanied him, "mother sends her duty, and will you kindly take care of him and see as he doesn't go a-thinking."

Daddy's only symptom of senility was an aptitude to fall into a state of unconsciousness, and in these cases, which sometimes lasted for hours together, he would sit down wherever he was, and consequently ran considerable risks when he went out-of-doors alone. Though the old fellow was quite unable to give any account of himself during these lapses into oblivion, he always stoutly declared that he had been only thinking.

"And please, miss, you'll find his bacca-box and his pipe in his tail pocket,

and his hankercher, and the matches is in his vest pocket. He do forget where he puts his things."

Daddy laughed scornfully.

"I never forgets nothing, I don't," he said boastingly. "I can mind o' the great beech as was blown down on the green in the whirlywind of '92; ay, I mind——"

A loud cheer from the school children interrupted the flow of Daddy's reminiscences. The greeting was intended for the vicar and the patroness of the festival, Mrs. Haldane, who now drove up to the school-house. She was already acquainted with Dora, but she had not yet met either Edith or the oldest inhabitant. Mr. Santley introduced both as the waggons came in sight, and at once the cheering was renewed, and the children streamed out into the road.

What a fine sight those waggons were

—the long, curved, wheeled ships of the inland farmer, painted yellow and red, and drawn by big horses, with huge collars and bright iron chains! The semicircular canvas awning had been removed, but the wooden arches which supported it were wreathed with leaves and flowers, and festoons hung overhead between arch and arch. The horses, too, were gaily decked out, each having a nosegay between its ears, and its mane and tail tied up with ribbons. The bottom of the waggons were covered with trusses of straw, to make comfortable seats for the old folk. The more daring of the lads were already clambering up the wheels, and securing seats on the flakes which went along the sides of the rustic ship like a sort of outrigger.

Before allowing Daddy to be helped

on board, Miss Greatheart beckoned to her a little pale-faced girl who was obliged to use crutches.

"Nannie dear, I want you to look after Daddy as much as you can. When you are tired of him you must come and tell me. Don't let him go away by himself, and wake him up if he sleeps too long."

This was said in a whisper to the child, who smiled and nodded.

"Now, Daddy, here's little Nannie Swales," said Dora; "I want you to take care of her. You're the only person I can trust to look after her properly. And she likes to talk to you and see you smoke."

The little old man smiled and chuckled complacently.

"Put her aside of me, mistress, and I'll see as no ill comes to her."

What could have been more charmingly idyllic than those two great waggons, crowded with little shining-eyed tots, merry lads and lasses, withered old men and women, all happy and contented? The blue sky laughed down on them; the green leaves and flowers embowered them; and as a start was made, one of the musicians struck up "For we'll a-hunting go" on the concertina, and a score of clear, fresh voices joined in the jovial song.

Through the village, which turned out to wave hands to them as they passed singing and cheering, away through gold-green stretches of ripening harvest, past empty fields where the hay had all been cut and carted, between level expanses of root crops lying green in the hot sun, till at last the dark embankment of Barton Wood rises above

the distant sky. How cool and refreshing it is, after the glare of the midday sun, to get into the green shadowland of these grand old beeches and sycamores!

The road winds leisurely as if to seek out the coolest recesses of the wood, and beneath the great bunches of heavy foliage, what quiet, dim distances one sees between the trunks, strewn thick with withered leaves, through which the moss and grass and a thousand moist plants thrust their emerald way, and blue and pink and yellow flowers are clustered in cushions of velvet colour! A few yards away from the road the air seems brown and transparent. That must be the reason why the leaves of the mountain ash are so darkly green, and the berries so brilliantly crimson. If you pluck a bunch and take it out of

the wood, you will find it has become disenchanted; the colour is no longer the same.

The road is not a highway, but leads to an old quarry of brown sandstone. There has been no work done here for a few years, but many generations of stonemasons have plied hammer and chisel in this picturesque workshop. It is a tradition that the stone of Foxglove Manor, old as it is, was got here. The old church was built from these brown walls of stone; so was the Vicarage, and so were the windowsills and facings of all the houses in Omberley. It is an unusually large quarry, for a great deal of stone has been taken away during these two hundred odd years. A great deal of half-shaped stone lies about in large square and oblong blocks, both on the

floor of the quarry, and among the trees at its entrance. The trees must have sprung up since many of these blocks were cut, otherwise it is not easy to see why they should have been put where you now find them. On two sides the walls of rock are high and precipitous, but on the others the grass and ferns and beeches are carried into the quarry as on the swell of a green wave. A stone shed and hut, roofed with red tiles, stand at the foot of one of these slopes, and here the commissariat department has established itself. A romantic, green, cosy, convenient spot for a picnic and a dance!

The waggons were driven right into the quarry, and the horses were hobbled and allowed to graze beneath the trees. The hour before dinner was spent in wandering through the woods gathering

flowers and berries, in rolling about on the soft grass, or in smoking and chatting among the blocks of sandstone. When the cornopean sounded the signal for the feast, the youngsters came trooping in, dancing and eager to begin, for the excitement had prevented most of them from taking breakfast.

And what a luxurious feast it was! The vicar, Mrs. Haldane, Edith, and Miss Greatheart, went about the various groups seeing that every one was well supplied with what they liked best. After the cold meats, pies, and pastry, came a liberal distribution of fruit and milk to the children, and a glass of wine to the old people; and at this point Daddy was made the object of so much nudging and whispering and signalling, that at last he got upon his feet and made a wonderful little speech

on behalf of the company, keeping his wine-glass in his hand all the time, and every now and then holding it up between his eye and the light with the shrewd air of a connoisseur. Then there were three cheers for Mrs. Haldane, and three cheers for the vicar, three for Dora and for Edith, and happily some young rascal, whose milk had been too strong for him, proposed in a frightened scream three cheers for Daddy, which were very heartily given by all the school children, though the seniors looked much shocked and surprised at so daring a demonstration.

In about an hour the racing and games were to begin, and meanwhile Mrs. Haldane, the vicar, and the two young ladies were to have lunch together. It is not necessary to enter into any detail of the various sports which

took place, or to linger over the dancing and merrymaking that followed. When the fun was at its height, and Daddy was capering gaily to the jigging of the small orchestra, Edith, who felt only half interested, slipped quietly away into the wood. She was not surprised or aggrieved that Mr. Santley paid so much attention to the lady of the Manor, but she felt hurt that he seemed so completely to forget and overlook herself. She wished now to be a little alone in Arden, for Edith loved the woods, and in every glade she could imagine in her fanciful moments that Jaques, or Rosalind, or Touchstone had just gone by, so closely had she associated the dramatic idyl with every piece of English forest-land.

She followed at haphazard a foot-track that went through the trees until she

reached a brook, which she found she could cross by means of three slippery-looking stepping-stones, against which the water bickered and gurgled as it raced along. All the steep banks were knee-deep in beautiful ferns close by the water's edge, and higher up the slope grew luxurious tufts of wild flowers. The sound of the water was very pleasant to hear, and when she had nimbly jumped across it, instead of following the path, she went up the side of the stream to where a mountain ash leaned its dense clusters of blood-bright berries right across. At the foot of the tree was a large boulder, and, after a glance round her, she sat down and drew off her shoes and stockings. The weather was warm, and the clear, sun-flecked water was irresistibly inviting. There she sat for some time, dreamily paddling with her little white

feet, like a pretty dryad whose tree grew in too dry a soil.

She had finished playing with the cool stream, and was letting her feet dry in the patches of sunlight that pierced through the branches above her, when she heard a sound of voices. She hastily tried to draw on her stockings, but her skin was still too moist; and so, gathering her feet under her skirt, she concealed herself as much as possible from the observation of the intruders. As they approached she recognized the voices with a start, and crouched down behind the boulder more closely than before.

"We can go no further this way," said Mrs. Haldane.

"Oh yes, we can. I will assist you over the stones," the vicar rejoined.

"They look very treacherous and

slippery, and the water makes one nervous, running so fast."

"Look, it is quite safe!" said the vicar; and Edith, peeping from the side of the boulder, saw him step quickly across the brook. "It is a pity you should miss the old Roman camp, when you are so near it."

"If you will come back and assist me from this side, I will try them," said Mrs. Haldane.

The vicar returned across the brook, and Edith saw the lady gather her dress and prepare to step on to the first stone.

"Now, you must be ready to reach me your hand in case I need it."

"Oh, you will find it quite easy when you try. Don't stop, but go right across without hesitation."

Mrs. Haldane jumped fairly enough on to the first boulder, but, instead of

allowing the forward impetus to carry her on, she tried to stop and steady herself on the narrow footing among the rushing water. She lost at once her balance and her courage, and turning to him with outstretched arms, she cried out, "Quick! quick! I shall fall!"

She threw herself back to the side as she spoke, and he caught her in his arms. Her arms were about his neck, her face close to his; he felt her breath upon his cheek. It was only for an instant, and as she tried to recover herself, their eyes met with a flash of self-consciousness. In the passionate excitement of that supreme moment he strained her to his breast, and pressed his lips to her in a long, violent kiss.

Edith sprang to her feet as though she had been stung; but instantly she

recollected herself, and sank down into her hiding-place.

Mrs. Haldane tore herself from the arms that encircled her, and fronted the vicar with a flushed, angry face.

"Are you mad, Mr. Santley?" she asked indignantly. "Allow me to pass at once."

He stood aside trembling, white, and speechless; and she swept by him and hurried back through the wood.

The vicar looked after her, but stood as if rooted to the spot; while Edith, heedless of the hard stones and her naked feet, ran down wildly to the stepping-stones.

He turned as she approached, and there, with the water whirling between them, she confronted him like his outraged conscience.

CHAPTER XI.

EDITH.

"Is this your fidelity? is this your love?" she asked bitterly.

The deadly pallor of the vicar's face had given place to a flush of guilt and shame. He crossed the brook and stood beside her.

"Edith, I have done wrong. Can you forgive me?" he asked, attempting to take her hand.

"Do not touch me, Mr. Santley!" she exclaimed, stepping back from him. "Do not speak to me."

"Will you not forgive me, Edith?"

"Ask God to forgive you. It matters little now whether I forgive or not. Please go away and leave me."

"I cannot leave you in this manner. Say you forgive. I confess I have done wrong, but it was in the heat of passion, it was not premeditated."

"The heat of passion! Was it only in the heat of passion that you—— Oh, go at once, Mr. Santley! Go before I say what had better be left unspoken!"

The vicar paused and looked at her anxiously; but Edith, throwing her shoes and stockings on the ground, sat down on a stone, and resting her pale, unhappy face on her hands, gazed with a hard, fixed expression at the water.

"Dearest Edith, try to believe that what I did was only an act of momentary madness; blame me if you will, for I cannot too severely blame myself, but

do not look so relentless and unforgiving."

She never stirred or gave any indication that she had heard him, but sat staring at the water.

"You will be sorry for your unkindness afterwards," he continued.

She paid no heed to him, and he saw it was hopeless to try to effect a reconciliation at the present moment.

"Since you command me to go, I will go."

Still she appeared not to have heard him. He went back across the brook, and, glancing back once or twice, disappeared in the wood. A minute or two later he stole back again, and saw that she was still sitting by the brook in the same stony attitude. A vague sense of uneasiness took possession of him. He knew that even the meekest, frailest,

and gentlest of women are capable of the most tragic extremities when under the sway of passion. Yet what could he do? She would not speak to him, and was deaf to all he could say in extenuation of his conduct. Trusting to the effect of a little quiet reflection, and to the love which he knew she felt for him, he resolved at length to leave her to herself. After all he had, it seemed to him, more to fear from Mrs. Haldane than from Edith. To what frightful consequences he had exposed himself by that act of folly! Would she tell her husband? Would the story leak out and become the scandal of the country side? With a sickening dread of what the future had in store for him, he retraced his steps to the quarry.

Mrs. Haldane's first impulse was to order her carriage and at once drive

home, but her hurried walk through the wood gradually became slower as she reflected on the strange interpretation that would be put upon so sudden a departure. She had brought the vicar, and if she now hastened away without him, evil tongues would soon be busied with both her name and his. For the sake of the office he held, and for her own sake as well, she resolved to be silent on what had happened. She felt sure that the vicar would be sufficiently punished by the stings of his own conscience, and if any future chastisement were required he should find it in her distance and frigid treatment of him. Consequently, when Mrs. Haldane reached the quarry she assumed a cheerful, friendly air, stopped to say a few kind words to the old people, and interested herself in the amusements of

the children. It was now drawing near tea-time, and the sun was westering.

Mr. Santley felt relieved when he found that Mrs. Haldane had not abruptly left, as he dreaded she would do, but he made no attempt to speak to her or attract her attention. At tea-time she took a cup in her hand and joined a group of little girls, instead of taking her place at the table set aside for her.

The vicar's eye glanced restlessly about for Edith, but she had not obeyed the summons of the cornopean, and in the bustle and excitement, her absence was not noticed. It was only when the horses had been put into the shafts, and the children, after being counted, were taking their places in the waggons, that Miss Greatheart missed her.

"Have you seen Miss Dove, Mr. Santley?" she asked, after she had

searched in vain through the little crowd for Edith. "I don't think she was at tea."

"She went in the direction of the old camp," replied the vicar, hurriedly; "she cannot have heard the signal. Do not say anything. I think I shall be easily able to find her. If Mrs. Haldane asks for me, will you say I have gone to look for her? You can start as soon as you are ready; we shall easily overtake you."

So saying, Mr. Santley plunged into the wood, and hurried to the brook. Edith was still sitting where he had left her, but she had in the meanwhile put on her shoes and stockings. Instead of the fixed, determined expression, her face now wore a look of intense wretchedness, and evidently she had been crying. She looked up at the sound of his footsteps.

"Edith, we are going home," he said, as he reached the edge of the stream.

"You can go," was the answer.

"But not without you."

"Yes, without me. I am not going home. I am never going home any more. I have no home. Oh! mother, mother!"

The last words were uttered in a low, sobbing voice.

"Come, come, you must not speak like that. You must go home. What would your poor aunt say if you did anything so foolish?"

"Oh, what would she say if she knew how I have disgraced her and myself? No, I cannot go home any more."

"But you cannot stay here all night," said the vicar, with a chill, sinking tremor at the heart.

She gave no answer.

"Edith, my dear girl, for God's sake do not say you are thinking of doing anything rash!"

"What else can I do? What else am I fit for but disgrace and a miserable end? Oh, Mr. Santley, you swore to me that before God I was your true wife. I believed you then. I did not think you were only acting in a moment of passion. But now I see that it was a dreadful sin. I was not your wife; and oh! what have you made me instead?"

He was very pale, and he trembled from head to foot as he listened to her words.

"Do not speak so loud," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"What! do you feel ashamed? Are you afraid of any one knowing? But God knows it now, and my poor, poor

mother knows it—God help me!—and all the world will know it some day."

"Edith, you will not ruin me?"

"Have you not ruined me? Have you not cast me off for a woman who does not even care for you—for another man's wife? Oh no, do not be afraid. I will take my shame with me in silence. No one shall be able to say a word against you now, but all the world will know at the last."

"Edith, listen to me. I will tell you everything; I will hide nothing from you; but do not condemn me unheard. All that I said to you was true, and is still true. Till *she* came, I did really and most truly love you with all my heart and soul. You were my very wife, in God's eyes, if love and truth be, as they are, what makes the validity of marriage. I did not deceive you; I

did not speak in a moment of passion. Before Heaven I took you for my wife, and before Heaven I believed myself your husband."

"And then she came!" interposed Edith, bitterly.

"And then she came. I have told you all she was to me once, all I hoped she would one day be. But I have not told you how I have struggled to be true to you in every word and thought. It has been a hard and a bitter struggle—all the more hard and bitter that I have failed. I confess, Edith, that I have not been true. But are we all sinless? are we perfect?"

"We can at least be honourable. Your love of her is a crime."

"Her beauty maddens me. She is my evil angel. To see her is to love her and long for her. And instead of

helping me to conquer temptation, instead of trying to save me from myself, you cast me from you, you upbraid my weakness, you taunt me with your unhappiness. When she is not near, my better nature turns to you. You help me to believe in God, in goodness; she drives me to unbelief and atheism. Did you fancy I was a saint? Have not I my passions and temptations as well as other men? Even the just man falls seven times a day; if you indeed loved me as a true wife, you would find it in your heart to forgive even unto seventy times seven."

"You know how I have loved!"

"*Have* loved! Ay, and how easily you have ceased to love!"

"No, no; I have never ceased to love you. It is because I must still love and love you that I am so wretched."

"Then how can you be so unforgiving?"

"Oh, I am not unforgiving. I can forgive you anything, so long as I know that I am dear to you. Seven and seventy-seven times."

"And you forgive me now?"

"I do. But you will never any more——"

"You must help me not to; you must pray for me, and assist me to be ever faithful to you."

"I will, I will."

He drew her to him, and kissed her on the lips.

"And you will come home now?"

"Yes, with you."

"The waggons have started, and we must walk quickly to overtake them."

"Oh, I don't care now how far we have to walk."

"Mrs. Haldane, however, may have waited for us."

Edith stopped short.

"I couldn't go near her."

"Consider a moment, darling. She knows nothing about you, and she does not know that you know anything about her. It might look strange if she drove home without me, after bringing me here. I feared at first that she would have left instantly, but she did not. She may not wish to give people any reason for talking about any sudden coolness between us. Do you understand me?"

"Yes. I will go."

The vicar had correctly divined the course Mrs. Haldane had pursued. When she learned that Mr. Santley had gone in search of Edith, she drove very leisurely along, so that they might over-

take her. She had just got clear of the wood when, on looking round, she observed them coming through the trees. She drew up till they reached her; and when they had got in, she started a brisk conversation with Edith on all manner of topics. She was in her liveliest mood, and to Edith it seemed almost incredible that the scene she had witnessed at the brook was a very serious fact, and not an hallucination. Edith noticed, however, that the vicar seldom spoke, and that, though Mrs. Haldane listened and answered when he made any remark, the conversation was between Mrs. Haldane and herself.

At parting Mrs. Haldane gave him her finger-tips, and was apparently paying more attention to Edith when she said good-bye to him.

CHAPTER XII.

CONSCIENCE.

MRS. HALDANE came no more to the Vicarage that week, and on Sunday she did not remain, as she had hitherto done, for the communion at the close of the morning service. She was evidently deeply offended, and was doing all she could to avoid meeting the vicar. With him that week had been one of terrible conflict. Tortured with remorse and shame, he was still mad with passion. That kiss was still burning on his lips. He still could feel that voluptuous form in his arms. It

seemed, indeed, as though Mrs. Haldane were his evil genius, driving him on to destruction. He was unable to pray; and when he sat down to prepare his sermon, her face rose between him and the paper, and, starting up, he rushed from the house and walked rapidly away into the country. This was in the forenoon, and he walked on and on at a quick pace for several hours. He passed little hamlets and farmsteads which he did not notice, for his mind was absorbed in a wretchedness so intense that he scarcely was conscious of what he was doing. In the afternoon he came to a wood, and, worn out with fatigue and agitation, he entered it and flung himself beneath the shadow of a tree.

There he lay, a prey to conscience, till the sun went down. He had had

no food since morning, and he was now weak and nervous. He returned from the wood to the high-road and retraced his steps homeward. As he passed by the wayside cottages, he was tempted once or twice to stop and ask for bread and milk, but after a mental contest he each time conquered the pangs of hunger and thirst, and went on again. The fathers of the desert had subdued the lusts of the flesh by hunger and stripes and physical suffering, and if mortification could exorcise the evil spirit within him, he would have no mercy on himself. He was a great distance from home, and, notwithstanding his resolution to suffer and endure, he was several times forced to sit down and rest on heaps of broken stones by the wayside; and on one of these occasions a spray of bramble-berries

hanging over the hedge caught his eye, and looked so rich and sweet that he plucked one and raised it to his mouth. The next moment, however, he had flung it away from him. On another occasion he was startled to his feet by the sound of wheels, and as he walked on he was overtaken by a neighbouring farmer in his gig, who drew up as he was passing, and touched his hat.

"Making for home, Mr. Santley?" he asked, as he shook up the cushion on the vacant seat beside him. "I can put you down at your own door, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Henderson; I prefer walking, and I have some business to attend to."

"All right, sir. It's a fine evening for a walk. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

The vicar watched the gig diminish

on the distant road till at length the hedgerows concealed it, with a certain sense of stoical satisfaction. He felt he was not all weakness; there was yet left some power of self-denial, some fortitude to endure self-inflicted chastisement.

It was nearly dark when he arrived again in Omberley. The windows were ruddy with fire and gaslight; there were no children playing in the streets; several of the small shopkeepers who kept open late, were now at last putting up their shutters. There was a genial glow from the red-curtained window of the village inn, and a sound of singing and merriment.

"Why should I not go in and join them?" he thought to himself. "What an effect it would have, if I stepped into the sanded taproom and called for a

pipe and a quart of beer! The vicar smoking a long clay, with his frothing pewter on the deal table beside him! Why not? Has not the vicar his gross appetites as well as you? Why should you be scandalized, friends, if he should indulge in the same merry way as yourselves? Is he not a mere man like you, with the same animal needs and cravings? Fools, who shrink with horror from the humanity of a man because he wears a black coat and talks to you of duty and sacrifice and godliness! How little you know the poor wretch to whom you look for counsel and comfort and mediation with Heaven!"

He was turning away, when the taproom door was flung open, and half a dozen tipsy men, cursing and quarrelling, staggered out into the street.

Among them was a handsome, swarthy girl of two and twenty, gaily dressed in colours, with a coloured handkerchief bound over her black hair, and a guitar in her hand. They were evidently quarrelling about the girl, who was doing her best to make peace among them.

"You does me no good by your fighting and kicking up a row, masters. Decent folks won't let a wench into the house when there's always a fight got up about her. You spoils my market, and gets me an ill name, masters."

"Any way, Jack Haywood shan't lay a finger on thee, Sal!" cried a burly young fellow, deep in his cups, as he clenched his horny fist and shook it at Jack.

"What is't to you what Jack does?" returned the girl, saucily. "Neither

Jack nor thee shall lay a finger on me against my will. I reckon I can take care o' myself, masters."

"Ay, ay, thou canst that!" assented several voices.

The vicar, who had stood to witness this scene, now stepped in among the group. The men recognized him, and, touching their forelocks, slunk away in sheepish silence. He uttered not a word, but his pale face sobered them like a dash of cold water. Only the girl was left, and she stood, red and frightened, while her hands were nervously busied with the guitar.

"You are back again, Sal, and at your old ways," said the vicar, in a low voice. "I see, all good advice and all encouragement are wasted on you."

"I can't help it, sir," said the girl, sullenly. "I was born bad; I'm of a

bad lot. It's no use trying any more. It's in the blood and the bone, and it'll come out, in spite of everything."

"Have you made much to-day?" asked the vicar.

"A shilling."

"Where are you going to stop to-night?"

"At old Mary Henson's, in Barn Street."

"Then, go home at once, Sal," said the vicar, giving her a half-crown. "Will you promise me?"

"Yes."

"And you will speak to no man to-night? You promise?"

"Yes," said the girl, taking the money, with a strange look of inquiry at the vicar.

"And try to say your prayers before you go to sleep."

The girl dropped a curtsy, and went slowly down the street. With a bitter laugh, the vicar pursued his way homeward.

"In the blood and the bone! In the blood and the bone!" he repeated to himself. "You are right, girl; we are born bad—born bad. The bestial madness of ages and æons, the lust and lasciviousness of countless generations, are still in our blood, and our instincts are still the instincts of the beast and the savage. Hypocrite and blasphemer that I am! Whited sepulchre, reeking with corruption! Living lie and mask of holiness! O God, what a wretch am I, who dare to speak of purity and repentance to this woman!"

When he reached the Vicarage, his sister was anxiously awaiting him, and supper was ready.

"Where have you been so long?" she asked, a little impatiently. "I think you might leave word when you expect to be detained beyond your usual time. It is eleven o'clock."

"I could not say how long I should be," replied the vicar, with a weary look, which touched his sister and changed her ill-temper to solicitude.

"You are quite tired out, poor fellow," she said, laying her hand on his shoulder. "Well, come to supper. It is ready."

"I cannot take anything at present," replied Mr. Santley. "I will go and do a little of my sermon."

"Shall I leave something out for you, then?"

"Yes, please. Good night."

He went into the study, lit the gas, and, locking the door, flung himself into an armchair.

"In the blood! in the blood!" he bitterly communed with himself. "And, with all our wild dreams and aspirations, we are but what science says we are, the conqueror of the lascivious ape, the offspring of some common ancestral bestiality, which transmitted to the simian its animalism free and unfettered except by appetite, and to man the germs of a moral law which must be for ever at variance with his sensual instincts. God! we are worse than apes—we the immortals, with our ideals of spirit and purity!"

He rose, and going across the room to the tall, carved oak cupboard, whose contents were a secret to all but himself, he unlocked it and opened the folding doors. The light fell on a large, beautiful statue of the Madonna, with the Infant Christ in her arms. The figure

was in plaster, exquisitely coloured, and of a rare loveliness. He looked at it abstractedly for a long while.

"Mother of God!" he exclaimed at length, with passionate fervour. "Spotless virgin, woman above all women glorified, the solitary boast of our tainted nature—oh, dream and desire of men striving for their lost innocence, how vainly have I worshipped and prayed to thee! How ardently have I believed in thy immaculate motherhood! How yearningly I have cried to thee for thy aid and intercession! And no answer has been granted to my supplications. My feverish exaltation has passed from me, leaving me weak and at the mercy of my senses. Art thou, too, but a poetic myth of a later superstition—an idealization more beautiful, more divine than the frail goddesses of Greece and

Rome? The art and poetry of the world have turned to thee for inspiration, the ascetic has filled the cold cell with the shining vision of thee, altars have been raised to thee over half the globe, the prayers of nations ascend to thee, and art thou but a beautiful conception of the heart, powerless to aid or to hear thy suppliants?"

He paused, as if, indeed, he expected some sign or word in answer to his wild appeal. Then, closing the doors again and locking them, he went towards his desk. On it lay the manuscript of the sermon he had preached on the Unknown God.

"The Unknown God!" he exclaimed. "What if her husband is right! What if, indeed, there be no God, no God for us, no God of whom we shall ever be conscious! All science points that

way. When the man is dead, his soul is dead too. We deny it; but what is our denial worth? It is our interest to deny it. All phenomena contradict our denial. No man has ever risen from the grave to give us assurance of our immortality. Ah, truly, 'if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen; and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain!'"

He paced the room excitedly.

"Why act the knave and the hypocrite longer? Why delude the world with a false hope of a future that can never be? Why preach prayer and sacrifice, and suffering and patience, when this life is all? If Christ is not risen, our preaching is vain, and your faith is also vain."

He again paced the room; and then,

going to a drawer where the keys of the church were kept, he took them, and stole noiselessly out of the house. All was very still outside. The stars were shining, and it was duskily clear. He traversed the churchyard, and reaching the porch he unlocked the door and entered. It was quite dark, except that the tall, narrow windows looked grey against the blackness of the rest of the building, and a little bead of flame burned in the sanctuary lamp. He closed the door after him, and went up the echoing nave to the chancel. Thence he groped his way to the pulpit, and ascending he looked down into the darkness before him.

He stood there in silence, straining his eyes into the gloom, and gradually there came out of the darkness faint, spectral rows of faces, turned up to his

with a horrified and bewildered aspect. He uttered no word, but in his brain he was preaching from the text of Paul, and proving that Christ, indeed, had never risen, and that their faith was vain. This world was all, and there was nothing beyond it. Vice and virtue were but social and physical distinctions, implying that the consequences of the one were destructive of happiness, of the other were conducive to happiness. Sin was a fiction, and the sense of sinfulness a morbid development of the imagination. Every man was a law unto himself, and that law must be obeyed. A man's actions were the outcome of his constitution. He was not morally responsible for them. Indeed, moral responsibility was a philosophical error. In dumb show was that long, phrenzied sermon preached to a phantom congre-

gation. At the close the vicar, omitting the usual form of benediction, descended from the pulpit, staggered across the chancel, and fell in a swoon at the foot of the steps which led to the altar.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE LABORATORY.

THE grey dawn was glimmering through the chancel when Mr. Santley regained consciousness. He looked wonderingly about him, and at first was unable to understand how he came to be in his present position. That physical collapse had been a merciful relief from a state of mental tension which had become intolerable. He felt faint but calm, and the horrible excitement of the last few hours presented itself to his memory as a sort of ghastly nightmare from which he had been providentially awakened.

He rose and went out into the churchyard. The air was moist and cool. A strange white mist lay in fantastic pools and streaks on the bare hayfields. The corn was full of an indistinct white gauzy vapour. So were the trees. There was not much of it in the open air. It had a spectral look, and, like spirits, it seemed to require some material thing to interpenetrate and rest upon. The grass was heavy with dew, and the gravelled walk as dark coloured as though there had been rain. From the corn came the sound of innumerable chirpings and twitterings. The fields seemed to be swarming with sweet, sharp musical notes. In the trees, too, though there was no stir of wings, there was a very tumult of bird-song—not the full, joyous outpouring, but a ceaseless orchestral tuning up and rehearsing as it

were. The familiar graveyard in this unusual misty light, and alive with this strange music, seemed a place in which ne had never been before. The effect was as novel as the first appearance of a well-known landscape buried in snow.

The newness of what was so familiar excited an indefinable interest in him. He felt somehow as though he had passed through the valley of the shadow, and this was the day after death—that death by which we shall not all die, but by which we and all things shall be changed. He lingered in that mental state in which thought expands beyond the bounds of consciousness, and it was not till a low, faint flush of red began to colour the east that he returned to the Vicarage, and, throwing himself on his bed, fell into the deep, dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

It was fortunate for Mr. Santley that he had inherited a magnificent constitution, or the consequences of this wild conflict might have been disastrous. He woke late, but the brief period of rest and unconsciousness had repaired the reckless waste of nervous force. Only a profound sadness remained as a testimony of the terrible nature of the emotion he had endured. The rest of the week passed in a sort of weary, listless stupor and the same heavy sadness. When Sunday came round, he shuddered as he ascended the pulpit at the recollection of that phantasmal audience to which he had last preached; but his intellect was clear and sane, and he kept faithfully to the written discourse spread out before him. He was not surprised that Mrs. Haldane left before he had any opportunity of speaking to her.

He had half expected as much. She regarded him with a cold, haughty contempt—a contempt too passionless to permit her even to avenge the insult he had offered her by exposing him to his parishioners. She knew he loved her—and indeed was not this folly proof of the frantic character of his love?—and she knew that total loss of her would be the greatest chastisement even vindictiveness could wish to inflict upon him. It would have been possible for him, he thought, to bear in silence any punishment from her except this icy contempt and utter indifference. If she had hated him, if she had pursued him with bitter hostility, if she had disgraced him, he could have endured it; it would have been no more than he merited. But that she should simply ignore him, that she should not consider it worth her

while even to be angry, was an intolerable humiliation.

In spite of all, he still loved her! It was useless to seek to delude himself into any belief to the contrary. He loved her, in defiance of honour, goodness; in spite of misery and shame; in spite of divine or human law; in spite of man or God. He loved her with a mad, despairing passion, which he might conceal from all eyes for a little while, but which he could never quell; which he felt would some day break out in a frantic paroxysm that would involve both him and her in a common ruin. Home, position, reputation, this life and the next—he could sacrifice all for her. He could not exist without her. To see her and be never seen by her was a living hell. If he were, indeed, to be for ever doomed to this misery, better that

he should perish at once, and have done for ever with the torture of being.

This alternative presented itself to the vicar not merely as one of those exaggerated expressions of feeling common to many men in moments of unendurable pain or depression, but as a sober reality. An existence in which Mrs. Haldane took no part and shared no interest was literally to him an existence more hateful than self-destruction itself. On the Monday he proceeded to the neighbouring market town, and bought a revolver and a packet of cartridges. He loaded the weapon on the road, and threw the remaining cartridges away. That evening he spent in looking over his papers, a large number of which he burned. He then sat down, and wrote for some time; but when he had finished, he threw

what he had written into the fire. What need was there to put any explanation on record? He then took from the bookcase the great poem of Lucretius, and read till a late hour.

Next morning he arose early, and seemed in better spirits than he had been for some time. He told his sister that he was going to walk over to Foxglove Manor, and was not certain as to when he would return. He left the house, humming a tune, and set out at a brisk pace through the village. The weather was bright and inspiriting. The country never before seemed so full of health and gladness and joyous life. The lark was singing far up in the shining blue sky; butterflies went fluttering across the road; whirring flights of birds along the hedgerows preceded him all the way. He looked at every-

thing and noticed everything—the bright flowers growing among the wayside weeds; the snail which had crept on to the footpath, and whose shell he carefully avoided. He observed too much to think; but one thought, underlying this discursive activity of mind, kept him company all the while—"I have struggled and prayed; I have tried to believe and to trust; I can do no more. If there be a God who is concerned in man, let him now give evidence of His providence."

When he reached the Manor, he was ushered into the reception-room, where he was not kept long waiting. Mrs. Haldane entered the apartment, and received him with a chilling courtesy. She noticed that, though he had advanced eagerly at her entrance, he had not offered her his hand; and now that

she had bowed to him with a certain constrained grace, he stood regarding her hesitatingly.

"I have come," he said at last, in a low, nervous voice, "to throw myself on your mercy, to beg your forgiveness, to ask you once more to restore me your confidence and friendship."

"I freely forgive you, Mr. Santley," she replied at once. "It is better that what has taken place should be forgiven and forgotten as speedily as possible. But my confidence and friendship! How can I trust you any more? And I did trust and esteem you so much. I regarded you—— But I will not even reproach you with having destroyed my idealization of you."

"Reproach me and censure me as you will," he cried earnestly; "but do not cast me away from you, do not be heart-

lessly indifferent to me. It lies in your hands to make my life happy or miserable. It depends on you whether I can live at all."

"That cannot be," replied Mrs. Haldane, shaking her head gravely.

"It is and must be," said the vicar. "All my future, both here and hereafter, hangs on your decision now. I have fought with myself, and prayed to God to be delivered from my bondage; but it is in vain. No answer has been vouchsafed to my supplications; no grace, no strength has been granted in my need. Had I prayed to the deaf impersonal power which your husband believes in, I could not have been more hopelessly unheard or unheeded. The conflict is over. I am the gladiator fallen in the arena, and it rests with you to give the signal of reprieve or destruction."

"I do not understand you, Mr. Santley," she said, feeling alarmed and excited. "What do you ask? What would you have me do?"

"Oh, what would I have you do!" he exclaimed passionately; then, checking himself abruptly, he continued eagerly, "I would have you be as you were before I offended you. I would have you forgive my offence."

"I have promised to forgive and forget it," said Mrs. Haldane.

"No; do not forget it, but pardon it, and try to look upon it as more venial than you now do. Oh, Ellen, had I not loved you beyond all that a man values in this world, would it be possible to have so far fallen in your esteem?"

She frowned, and was about to interrupt him; but he went on hurriedly—

"Do not be angry. I will not speak

to you of love again. I will only answer your question. I would, as I have said, that you should forgive my offence, and be the same to me as though it had never happened. Not only my use in life, my happiness, my honour depend on this, but life itself. I cannot exist without some share in your thoughts, in your interests, in your regard. Life would be intolerable if you were to be wholly taken away from me. Do I ask too much? Answer me quickly, for I am prepared for either alternative. You and God—if, indeed, there be above us a God who sees and cares—must now decide my course."

"You frighten and bewilder me with your passion. I do not know what to answer you. Indeed, I hardly know whether I understand you. I have forgiven you. I bear you no ill will. I

hope, indeed, that you may be happy, and that you may soon find some one who will be worthier of your love than I could have been. I am both sorry and ashamed of what has happened, and I will try to forget it, both for your sake and my own. Have I not said enough?"

"And the future?" he asked, with an anxious look.

"'The future will be a continuation of the past, seeing that all is forgiven and forgotten."

"And you will still allow me to speak to you, to see you? You will not treat me with silence and indifference?"

"I will be as I used to be," said Ellen, with a look of doubt and hesitation.

"And you will *trust* me?"

"Are you to be trusted, Mr. Santley?" she asked in a low voice. "You know how fully I trusted you before."

"And you must trust me again if all is to be the same as it was. Is not that our agreement?"

"I will try to, but the result will entirely depend upon yourself."

"I cannot say how thankful and grateful I am to you," he said, extending his hand.

She took it, and he raised hers to his lips, though she coloured and tried to withdraw it.

"Nay, it is but a token of my gratitude and submission. I am thankful to live, and you do not know how certainly you have enabled me to live."

"My husband is in the laboratory," said Mrs. Haldane, who felt uneasy, and wished to bring this interview to a close. "Shall we join him?"

"Certainly, if you wish it."

They found Mr. Haldane busily en-

gaged in writing, while the sinister-looking attendant, with the dark, startling eyes, was noiselessly occupied in filling a number of flasks with some mysterious decoction intended for immediate experiment.

"Ever busy!" exclaimed the vicar.

"Busier than ever just now," replied Mr. Haldane. "I am preparing a paper which I intend to read on Tuesday next before the scientific congress at Paris."

"Are you going to Paris?" asked Mr. Santley, with surprise, and addressing the question rather to Mrs. Haldane than her husband.

"Mr. Haldane is going, but I remain here."

A look of relief passed over the vicar's face.

"And what is the subject of your

paper, if curiosity be pardonable?" he asked.

"Oh, it is a chapter from the great *opus* on morals. I call it 'The Problem of Suicide.' A singularly fascinating subject to one who has paid any attention to it, I assure you. Does it happen to have fallen in your line of study?"

"I cannot say it has."

"You would find some curious generalizations here, in that case," said Mr. Haldane, pointing to the sheets of paper on his desk. "For instance, I suppose you would be hardly prepared to grant that suicide, which seems a barbarous and unenlightened act, is really an effect of civilization, or that an act which appears more than any other an evidence of individual spontaneity, is in fact the inevitable issue of universal and absolute social law."

"I am certainly not prepared to concede that."

"No; few persons unacquainted with the subject would be. Still, the facts remain. The suicide who imagines he is rebelling against all law and asserting his individual independence, is but illustrating the coercion of the physical and psychical dispensation. Why, you shall not even choose your own weapon of destruction, or select the spot in which you shall die. Law will fix those apparently trivial details for you. If your suicide is an Englishman, for example, he will prefer hanging to cutting and stabbing, cutting and stabbing to drowning, drowning to poison, and poison to fire-arms. With English women the order of preference is modified. A third of the women, and hardly a seventh of the men, seek death by drowning; while a

seventh of the women poison themselves, but only a fifteenth of the men. The ratios hold good from year to year—relatively at least—for suicide is largely on the increase. You should look into the matter for yourself. It is a most attractive social problem."

"Perhaps Mr. Santley would like to look at your paper?" suggested Mrs. Haldane.

"You shall be very welcome to see it when I return," said the philosopher.

"Thank you very much. I have no doubt it will be extremely interesting. And when do you leave?"

"The day after to-morrow. I shall spend a day or two in London, and possibly a week or a fortnight in Paris. Indeed, I have some notion of paying a flying visit to Berlin."

That afternoon, as the vicar returned

home, he paused by a pool in one of the fields that skirted the high-road, and flung his revolver into it.

"Can it be possible," he asked himself, "that man has no volition, no independence of action; that his choice of life or death even is not a choice, but a predetermined issue of mechanical forces?"

He watched the ripples die away on the water, and then resumed his way.

"Are we mere automata, accomplishing not our own wills, but the secret purpose of a subtle agency, of whose control we are unconscious?"

Gradually the problem which perplexed him gave place to another wave of thought. His step became firmer and more elastic, and his face brightened.

The thought which effected this change in his demeanour was Mr. Haldane's departure. What might not

happen in those few days of absence? Was not Mr. Haldane also accomplishing an unknown destiny? Might not this journey be providential? Or say, rather an unanticipated road to the great end? Suppose Mr. Haldane should never return!

The possibilities involved in that reflection!

Then he thought of Mrs. Haldane. For a week, perhaps for a fortnight, she would be alone at the Manor. For a fortnight? Who could foretell—perhaps for ever!

END OF VOL. I.

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