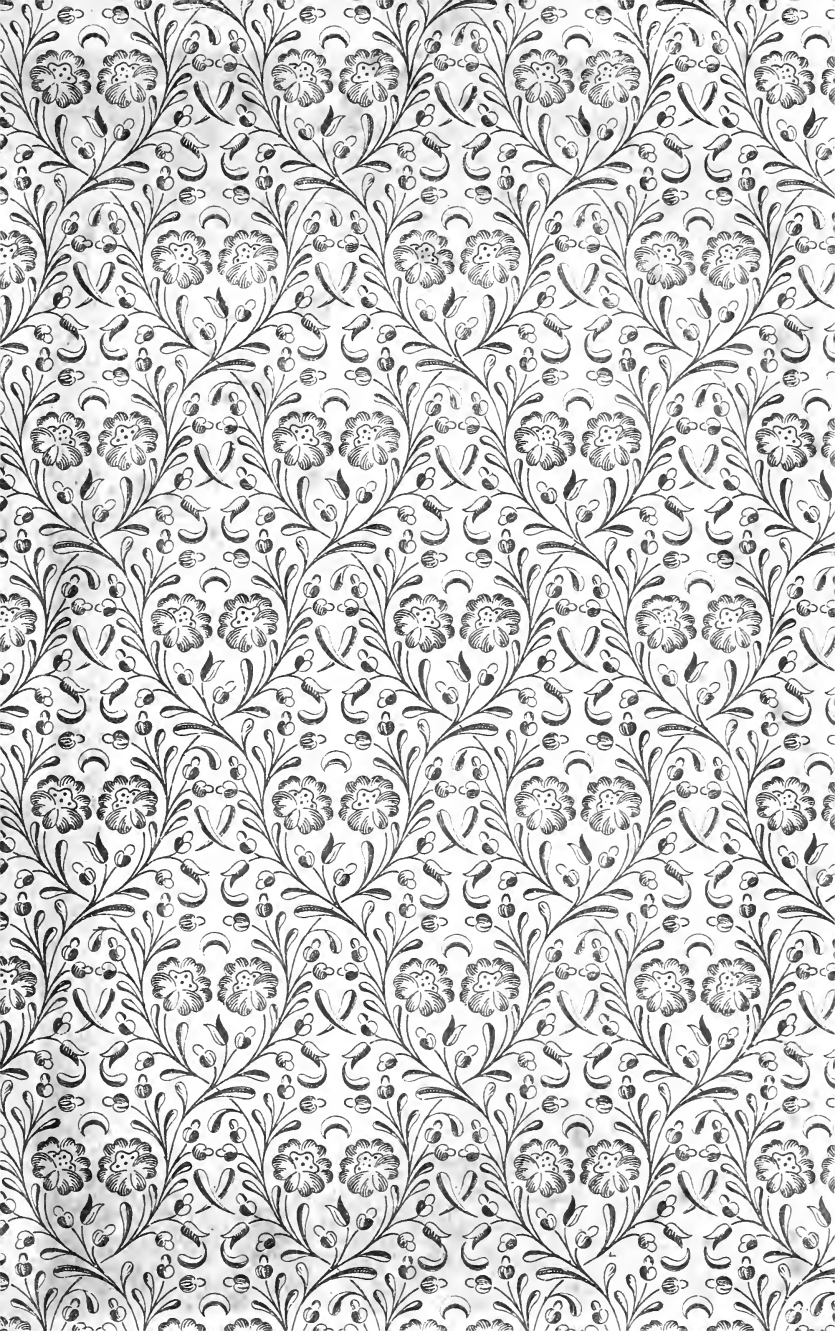






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'They were seated side by side on the couch at the foot of the bed.'

Under which Lord ?

BY

E. LYNN LINTON

AUTHOR OF 'THE WORLD WELL LOST' 'PATRICIA KEMBALL' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

WITH TWELVE ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARTHUR HOPKINS

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1879

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*' Because we have found not yet
Any way for the world to follow
Save only that ancient way ;
Whosoever forsake or forget,
Whose faith soever be hollow,
Whose hope soever grow grey*

Monotones : Songs before Sunrise

1761
V 3
-p 607

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UNDER WHICH LORD?

CHAPTER I.

THE LAST APPEAL.

ALL this disgraceful turmoil about Theresa Molyneux and the Honourable and Reverend Launcelot Lascelles was perhaps more painful to Ringrove Hardisty than to any other. He had the honest Englishman's sensitive pride in the purity of the women who were his friends; and the fair fame of girls whom he had known from their infancy and who were in a manner like his sisters—the only version of sisters that he had—was specially dear to him.

To make it the harder for him now, a few years ago there had been certain tentative little passages between him and Theresa. She had fancied herself in love with him when she came home from school; and she had shown what she felt too clearly to be mistaken. He had

been struck by her prettiness, flattered by her preference, and in consequence had wandered round her for a short time, asking himself if it would do, and was she really his assigned half? Finally he decided that she was not; and that a temperament which gave before being asked to give, was not that which he most desired in his wife. Still, he always had for her that certain tenderness and secret sense of possession which a man feels for a woman of whom he has dreamt; and his indignation was the more bitter now because of that short time of hesitation and virtual ownership, when he had laid a few flowers of thought and fancy on the altar where the vicar had lighted such a consuming fire.

Like everyone else, he understood the true state of things, and how the religion which expressed itself in hysterics and nervous exaltation was simply the passion of love under another name. And also like everyone else not committed to ritualism blindfold, he knew that Theresa had been led into this state of semi-madness by the spiritual philandering with which a celibate priesthood enforces dogmatic teaching, and that Mr. Lascelles had made love to her after his own manner. Whether that manner had been crafty and undeclared, or open and confessed, it had been love-making all the same; and to

Ringrove and some others the vicar stood as the responsible author of all the mischief.

But this was too delicate a thing for him to touch. Women, maternal and other, may take girls to task for their folly ; and fatherly men may say a word in season, of not too direct a kind, against that sleeve-wearing of the heart which attracts the daws ; but what can a young fellow do? especially if the lines are not laid in his own country—if the one implicated is out of his beat both for age and knowledge, so that he cannot drop hints about undesirable habits and knows nothing of any damnatory antecedents, both of which well handled may be made useful as checks and refrigerators? A young man cannot go to a girl of his own age and say : “ My dear, you are making a fool of yourself with the vicar or the curate—the captain or the lieutenant, and all the world is laughing at you.” And even straightforward Ringrove felt this, and knew that it was not possible for him to lecture Theresa or advise her, to reprove or to enlighten her.

But if he could not do this, he could speak to Hermione and Virginia ; and under cover of deprecating their friend’s folly and deploring the scandal that it had occasioned, perhaps he might do them some little good, and open

to the hateful truth, as he saw it, the dear eyes which were so fast shut now.

He saw very little of either mother or daughter in these sad later times ; only at the Sunday morning service. When he called at the Abbey as he still did—often—they were sure to be out or engaged, and he had to content himself with Richard's company only. The two men indeed were discarded with impartial severity by the women to whom fanaticism was dearer than love ; and if Richard was held to be the Man of Sin, Ringrove took rank as his younger brother.

But a man's love bears a tremendous strain when put to it ; and to Ringrove as to Richard, these beloved ones were not so much to be blamed as pitied. It was to both as it would have been had they believed in possession. A grievous thing truly, that those fair bodies should be made the strongholds of fiends ; but it was by no fault that they had been so disastrously invested. It was only a question of relative strength and weakness ; and the Evil One is so strong !

It was just about noon when Ringrove entered the drawing-room of the Abbey, and sent in his name to Mrs. Fullerton and Virginia who were in Virginia's room upstairs.

“Shall we see him?” asked Hermione, looking perplexed and a little frightened.

At this moment they were seated side by side on the couch at the foot of the bed ; watching the maid who was packing a small portmanteau of Virginia’s with linen ; only with linen. No girlish possessions dating from childish times and sacred as the first beginnings of private property were added ; no pretty trinkets nor personal adornments ; no favourite books of poetry, nor photographs of home or friends, nor any vestige of finery:—only linen. The crucifix before which those fervent daily prayers were said with so much holy zeal, so much mistaken application—some books of devotion and that queer collection of sacred rubbish which even her mother must not see nor handle, given her with such pomp of reverence by Father Truscott—this was all that was being packed up in the little portmanteau which her father had given her two years ago ; everything else was renounced and left like the old loves and the old life.

“Yes, mamma,” said Virginia after a short pause : “let us see him. It can do no harm, and I should like to say good-bye to him and to part good friends.”

“Oh ! we must be always good friends with him, in a way—unless we are forbidden ; I hope though that we

shall not be. It makes so much talk in the place when things come to a public breakdown," said Hermione with an unwonted burst of good sense.

"We ought not to mind that," returned Virginia, always on the side of uncompromising sincerity.

"After all, Ringrove is a good fellow!" said Hermione, with a strangely kind accent. "Had he been a good Churchman he would have been a splendid creature!"

"Yes; but it is just that if!" said Virginia with a sigh.

Mother and daughter were in an abnormal state to-day; and both were of softer mood towards outside sinners than their Directors allowed, or they themselves thought right. Though no tears had come to their eyes they were very close with each; and had they not been restrained by the sense of sinfulness and the carnal creature, should they mourn for the joyful event that was now at hand, they would have clung to each other weeping with the illogical sorrow of women who have wilfully undertaken to carry an unnecessary cross by which they give pain to themselves and to others, under the mistaken idea that what is unnatural and disagreeable is right, what is loving and pleasant is wrong.

The maid, less controlled and on a lower level of holiness altogether, was weeping bitterly; and it did not mend matters when Virginia, laying her hand on her shoulder, said in a low sweet voice, while her face was as it were illumined by a kind of inner light:

“Don’t cry, Mary. Why should you? I am going away only for the sake of truth and holiness. There is nothing to make anyone unhappy in this?”

“But the first time as you have left home alone, Miss, and no one to do your hair or see to your things!” said Mary, crying more because of the exhortation. “You will be lost, away by yourself. It seems as if you would never come back again!”

“As for doing things for myself I shall not have much to do, as you know, Mary,” answered Virginia kindly. “And my hair—that is very easily done now!”

“Yes, indeed it is!” sighed Mary ruefully; grudging the conversion which had cost her young mistress all that artistic elaboration which would have made her “look so pretty.” “As you say, there’s not so much to do now, the way you wear it; still, I like to have the handling of it myself.”

“So you will, Mary! Miss Fullerton will be home again in ten days from this,” said Hermione, looking to

her daughter with a smile; but Virginia had turned away at that moment and was arranging something on the table.

“Well! I suppose we must go down and see Ringrove,” then said Hermione. “You know what to do, Mary. Come, Virginia!—it is getting nearly luncheon-time. Shall I ask him to stay, dear? I will do just as you like.”

“Yes,” said Virginia. “It will be better for papa.”

Her lip quivered as she said this; but she mastered herself by that strange power which had come to her of late—the power by which all feeling was controlled, all expression repressed, all thought concealed; and then they went downstairs—to receive as an act of Christian liberality the man who had once been the familiar friend and favourite guest of the house; by the wishes of the parents and the fitness of things appointed to be one day the holder of all, Virginia herself included.

“How glad I am to find you at home!” said Ringrove joyously, going forward to meet them as they came into the room, his face aglow with pleasure and his look and bearing that of old times, rather than belonging to the new order of things. “I have seen so little of you of late!” he added with the loving regret which is such sweet flattery when received by love!

“That is not our fault,” said Hermione gently, but with meaning in her reproach.

“Nor mine,” he answered. “I have called here so often!—but you were never at home.”

“We have so much to do out of doors,” she returned.

“I wish I saw more of you—as I used in old times before I had offended you,” said Ringrove, looking at Virginia.

“Then why do you not?” asked Hermione. “It is your own doing, Ringrove. You have cut yourself off from us. If you had been good and what you ought to have been, there would never have been this separation. And if you had liked us as much as you used to say, you would not have deserted us as you have done. Had your friendship been what I once believed it was, you would have gone with us in our new life, and have become a good Churchman as you ought. It would have given both Virginia and myself so much real happiness to have counted you as one of us. But you had not enough friendship for us even to make the trial!”

“Dear Mrs. Fullerton, this is scarcely just! You know how truly I have always loved both you and Virginia!”

Ringrove spoke with more agitation than he could conceal.

“Then why did you not come over with us?” asked Hermione. “We did not wish you to do anything wrong. We only wanted you to become a good man and lead a religious life, as you ought to do.”

“But how could I make one of a party which I look on as the enemy of national liberty and intellectual progress?” he said. “I could not join the clerical party here, dearest Mrs. Fullerton. All the manly conscience and English feeling that I have are dead against it. I think and always have thought priestly domination the most disastrous of all the tyrannies that the world has ever seen. So how could I, as you say, go over to your side?”

“Conscience!—your pride and want of faith, your self-will and undutiful disobedience, you mean. Call things by their right names, Ringrove. We shall understand each other better then.”

Hermione said this harsh-sounding speech in the sweetest voice and with the tenderest face and accent possible. It was an established formula rather than a personal accusation—something that she had been taught rather than had reasoned out for herself; as when believers say generally that men become sceptics that they may have freer license to do evil—that they may give way to their passions without fear of punishment—

banishing God out of their world because they are afraid of Judgment.

He smiled.

“Not quite so bad as that!” he said lightly; then more gravely: “Do you seriously think, Mrs. Fullerton, that any man who knows the world can give in to a system which produces such results as that of last Sunday?”

“Ah, poor Theresa!” she answered compassionately, but with unmistakable contempt. “We must not judge of things from her. She has always been excitable and hysterical, and lately she has been overworking herself and taxing her strength too heavily. And after all, Ringrove, an hysterical attack even at prayers, lamentable as it is, is not like a sin of intention, and must not be laid to the charge of the Church.”

“No, but it supplies the answer of those who refuse to give in to the new order of things,” he said. “When we see, as we do, these priests as you call them, making women in love with them under the name of religion, you cannot expect that men like myself, for instance, should be desirous to strengthen their hands.”

He spoke boldly, but all the same he knew that he was touching the shallows, skirting perilously close to danger.

Virginia flushed painfully, and a look partly of repulsion, partly of terror, came on her face.

“It is horrible to hear you say such things, Ringrove,” she said. “Because one sick girl is over-excitable, is the whole faith and practice of holiness to be slandered? To speak of these vile things in connexion with the Church and her priests is worse than shameful! Do you give these unholy thoughts and motives to us all? Oh it makes me weary of the world!” she added with strange passion, clasping her hands to her forehead—“this wicked and slanderous world, where even the saints are not respected!”

“I ascribe nothing to *you*, Virginia, but what is perfectly sweet, pure, and holy,” answered Ringrove with indescribable tenderness, but always bold and direct. “But then you are not as other girls. You know that I think this; and you know this too, Mrs. Fullerton,” turning to Hermione; “I have never hidden from you my hope in the future, nor the depth and truth of my love for Virginia.”

“Hush! hush!” cried Virginia. “It is a sin for me to hear this!”

“How can it be a sin?” asked Ringrove. “Why should you not be loved, Virginia, as any other woman,

and told so like any other? The faithful love of an honest man cannot be a sin, nor yet a degradation!"

"You may not care to hear it, dear, but there is no sin in poor Ringrove's love for you. Superior himself did not say there was!" Hermione said this with a flash of her old self—her old sympathy with romance and human passion. She was stirred more than she herself knew by Ringrove's honest fervour, and wished for the moment that Virginia would listen to him. There was no harm in it, and there might be good.

"It is a sin to me," said Virginia with a kind of horror which even her mother did not understand and which to Ringrove was simply like madness.

"Oh! that I could clear your mind of all this terrible hallucination!" he said passionately. "There is no reason in it, Virginia! it is not worthy of your good sense! That you do not love me, and do not care to listen to me, I can understand; that it should be a sin to you my saying how much I love you—that surely is the mere folly, the mere pedantry, of reserve!"

"You do not understand," she said, turning away in a hopeless manner. "No one understands!"

"Perhaps only too well," he answered with a sigh. "But hear me, Virginia. I have loved you too long and

faithfully not to have earned the right to speak, and you need not be afraid of me. What I have borne for all these years I can go on bearing, if it is your absolute will;—for you have been the one central thought of my life for a longer time than you know of. I shall never forget you as I first saw you when I came home from the Continent, coming up the steps while I stood at the door, holding your blue frock back from your feet, your face a little raised—looking at me with pleasure then!—your shining hair like gold about your head—exactly like the little Virgin at Venice! I knew then what a lovely womanhood yours would be; as pure and beautiful as hers!”

Virginia shuddered and hastily crossed herself.

“This is blasphemy!” she said in an awestruck voice.

“Why do you say that, dear? Whatever else your belief makes her, was she not a woman like any other?” he asked. “What blasphemy is there in saying that an innocent little girl reminded me of a picture of her own girlhood, or that a lovely womanhood is of the same type as hers?”

“She was more than woman,” said Virginia in a reverent voice. “She was the Divine Mother, and it is a sin to liken anyone to her.”

“Ah Virginia ! what a world of fanciful sin you make for yourself !” he said with manly pity. “There is no harm in this, at least not in my eyes, or those of anyone not bound and fettered by false reverence. I would not say it if I thought it wrong, but I will not again if it pains you. I want only to tell you now, before your mother, what I have felt and thought for all these years. No ! do not turn from me, Virginia ! Let me speak straight to the point, if for the last time !”

“Let him speak, dear,” said Hermione in a low voice. “He is a good man, Virginia ; and if he does love you so much, you may yet win him over to the Church.”

Virginia mentally repeated a prayer to the Holy Virgin as a safeguard against what she felt to be the sin of the moment, and when she had finished she raised her mild eyes with a half-sad, half-weary look.

“You can say what you like, Ringrove,” she said with the feeling of one performing penance. “I will listen to you patiently. Perhaps, as mamma says, I ought.”

“Thank you !” Ringrove answered tenderly ; not seeing below the surface and only grateful for the opportunity of speaking. Perhaps too—for who can limit the miraculous power of love ?—he might turn her heart to

him by the very force of his own love for her. "What you were as a young girl," he went on to say, "made me believe that when you were older you would be as you are, dear—my ideal of what a true woman should be. I knew that if you were I should love you as I do love you; and I hoped, and at one time believed, that you would learn to love me. I watched you as you grew up, and saw you always the same—gentle, patient, conscientious, truthful, without a particle of vanity or pretence in you, and only desirous to do what was right; and I thought that if I were not good enough for you—what man would be!—I could still make you happy, and be a true and loving husband to you. Your father was on my side, and so at one time was this dear mother; and with two such advocates it did not seem to me that the thing was hopeless. You should have been so happy! I would have lived only for you, and to keep you from all sorrow. I would have loved you so well! And the faithful love of an honest man is worth something to a woman, even though he may not be so good or pure as she," said Ringrove Hardisty with that noble simplicity of self-assertion which belongs to manly men conscious of their power, and which for the most part charms womanly women.

"I would have been glad at the time—very glad," said

Hermione softly ; “and I would be glad now, Ringrove, if you were a good Churchman.”

“I am a Churchman,” said Ringrove ; “what else can you call me ?”

“A Protestant !” murmured Hermione, in a voice of plaintive condemnation.

“Whether good or not, is another question ; but, such as I am, I would have guarded her from every breath of evil as carefully as I would have kept her from all sorrow. She should never have known more of the world’s sins than she knows now, and less of artificial evil. You should have been surrounded by love and honour,” he continued, turning again to Virginia ; “and all that was best in myself should have been my tribute to your purity. I would have been your protector and you should have been my good angel. We should have done the best thing that anyone can do for the world—have made a perfect home and lived a noble life ; and we should have been happy in each other, and would have done more good to our kind than we can fairly compute. You would have been an example to the whole county, a standard of womanly excellence, living the true life of woman in the quiet activities of home. Your influence would have been unbounded ; for who can limit the

influence of a pure woman living the honest natural life of wife and mother? And I should have been a better man than I shall ever be now without you! And all this hope—all this grand life—has been destroyed, for what? If you had been born a Roman Catholic I should not have wondered so much, however sorry I might have been. You would then have been, in all probability, a nun by choice; but, as it is, yours is a lost life”——

“No, no! gained!” murmured Virginia.

“—When it might have been one as beautiful, as perfect, as anything that the noblest poet could imagine!”

Virginia turned pale and red by turns.

“You allow that it would have been my vocation to be a nun had I been a Catholic?” she asked in a strange voice.

“Yes; and as a Catholic I would have respected your choice,” he answered; “though as a Catholic I should have deplored the false view of goodness which takes from active life the purest and finest natures to shut them up in a living tomb where they can do no good to anyone!”

“We are the last in the world to uphold the Romish Church with all its errors of doctrine and superstition,” said Hermione speaking as she had been taught. “But

you must in fairness allow us Anglicans the same vocation."

He shook his head.

"No, I do not," he said gently. "A woman can do better for herself and the world than by incarcerating herself and renouncing all practical usefulness. A mother is of more value than a nun."

For a moment Virginia did not speak; then she turned to Ringrove with a certain kind of decision in her very frankness that was more convincing than her mere words.

"Thank you for all your goodness to me," she said, her voice low and calm without a quiver of faltering in it; "but no man could have ever had my deepest love:—that belongs only to God and my Church. I have always liked you, as you know, but I do not think I could have ever loved you had things even remained as they were; and now we are as far as the poles asunder."

"Virginia, is it quite impossible?" said Hermione, in a moved voice.

"This is your last deliberate word, Virginia? You reject my love and all that it would give you—all that you could do for me and society as my wife—for this pale imitation of Papistry—this playing at Roman

Catholicism?" asked Ringrove, standing like one who expects the death signal.

"Mine is not a pale imitation, nor a mere play," she answered, lowering her eyes.

"How can it be anything else?" he said with his naïve frankness and ignorance of esoteric meanings. "You are not a Roman Catholic, and what else but imitation and mockery is all this assumption of Roman Catholicism by the High Church party?"

"Let that part of it alone," Virginia answered again, speaking more hurriedly than was usual with her. "You were talking of yourself not of me. All I have to say is, I do renounce all that you have offered me, as all that the world could give me anywhere, for the greater gain of my choice."

"For ever, without hope of change, Virginia?"

"For ever, and I can never change!" she returned. She held out her hand. "We part as friends, Ringrove," she said; "but we do part. This is good-bye."

Ringrove did not answer. He took her hand and carried it reverently to his lips; then abruptly left his seat and went to the window, looking out into the garden. A dead silence fell among them all, and Hermione, who was crying, found herself wishing that Virginia had just

one little corner left unconverted—one little corner which Ringrove Hardisty might have possessed.

Soon after this Ringrove left, though Hermione asked him to stay quite affectionately and like her old self, having for the moment forgotten all her artificial displeasure with him, and only sorry that Virginia was so set in her renunciation ; and though Virginia too said : “ Will you not ? ” kindly and as if she really meant it. He felt that the strain would be more than he could well bear, and one which it was of no use to bear ; so he put aside both entreaties, and took his hat from the table where he had laid it.

“ Another day, not now,” he said huskily ; but when he said this Virginia did not look up, though her mother, glancing at her with slight surprise as well as a kind of entreaty to unbend for just this once, smiled in his face and repeated prettily :

“ Yes, another day ; after Virginia is confirmed.”

The luncheon to-day was slightly less miserably dull than was the law with all the meals—that is, the meeting times of the husband and father with his wife and daughter. Certainly Virginia was scarcely able even to pretend to eat, but she was not so deadly cold in her manner to her father, and Hermione, secretly much dis-

turbed in spite of her Director's influence, was more gentle and less reserved to her husband than was usual with her of late. Not much was said however; only the spirit of the hour was different, owing to that certain perturbation which somewhat marred the consciousness of triumph and successful wilfulness—that weak feeling of natural compassion for the sinner for whom the thong had been so cleverly knotted.

“Are you inclined to come with me to Starton? I am riding over; will you come with me?” asked Richard of Virginia. Keenly alive as he was now to every change with these two beloved rebels, he felt the softer mood of the moment; and he was weak enough to think he could profit by it.

Mother and daughter exchanged looks.

“I do not think I can, papa, to-day,” said Virginia, not looking at him.

“I want Virginia to come with me,” said Hermione, also not looking at him.

“I am sorry. It is a fine day, and a ride would do Virginia good,” he said. “You seldom use your horse now,” he added to his daughter. “Seldom?—never, I should say.”

“I do not care for riding,” said Virginia evasively; “and I have to go with mamma.”

“Where are you going?” he asked.

It was not suspicion which prompted this question ; it was only interest.

“We have business that you would scarcely feel any sympathy for,” said Hermione, quite gently and amicably.

He sighed.

“I suppose not,” he said ; “if it is the old thing.”

“When are you going to Starton?” his wife asked, as if she too were merely interested in a friend’s movements.

“In about half an hour’s time. I have first to go to Lane End to see the new cottages, and then I shall ride over to the town. Is there any chance of meeting you and Virginia there?” a little eagerly.

“I do not know yet ; we may,” she answered, while Virginia turned pale and crossed herself faintly.

“Well, I must be off, I suppose,” said Richard, rising reluctantly. This small approach to a new spirit was very precious to him. He did not like to break up a meeting that had more of the flavour of old time about it than had been the case for many weeks now.

“Yes, it is time too that we were going,” said Hermione, looking at the clock, and rising. “Good-bye till we meet again.”

She spoke quite softly, and Richard’s face, which of

late had grown thin and worn and haggard, turned to her with a sudden gladness that almost transformed it.

“Good-bye, my dear,” he said ; “till we meet again. Good-bye, my Virginia.”

“Good-bye, papa,” answered Virginia.

Impulsively he held out his hand to her. He had never been able to reconcile himself to the child’s coldness, almost less than to Hermione’s withdrawal.

Virginia went up to him and put her hand in his.

“Have you come to give me a kiss?” he asked, a little taken out of himself by this sudden surrender. He had lived so long now in such strict excommunication by wife and daughter that their gentleness to-day went near to unman him.

“Yes, papa,” she said, and held up her face as she used when a child.

He caught her to his heart and kissed her forehead tenderly.

“My Ladybird ! my little darling !” he half whispered. “Ah then you have still some love left for your father !”

“And my prayers, papa !” she answered, flinging herself into his arms with a passionate pressure as strange as all the rest.

“Your prayers will do me no harm, my darling,” he said ; “but your love will give me new life !”

“Papa ! say that you value my prayers for your soul !” she pleaded as if for very life.

“As expressions of your love for me? yes, my darling !” he answered.

“No ! no ! as possible means of grace and true enlightenment !” she said.

He smiled a little sadly, and shook his head.

“Your love is all I want, my Virginia—yours and your dear mother’s. That is the best means of grace that you can offer me. Give me back all that you have taken from me—or seemed to have taken from me of late—and you will do more for me than any number of prayers could do !”

“I do love you, papa,” said Virginia with strange solemnity. “But because I love you, I must pray for you !”

At this moment Jones came into the room.

“Please, sir, the horse is at the door, and John Graves is in the study and wants to speak to you for a moment,” he said.

“I will come,” returned Richard quietly ; but he was sorry for the interruption ; and as the men began to clear

the table, no more was to be said or done at that moment.

He turned his mild kind thoughtful face once more to his wife, and from her to their child.

“Till we meet again,” he said smiling.

Virginia did not answer. Had she tried to speak her voice would have failed her ; and Hermione, whose eyes were full of tears, made a little inclination with her head and murmured something that stood for a friendly farewell—till they all should meet again. And then in a short time, John Graves and his business being ended, they watched the poor unconscious victim of coming sorrow mount his horse and ride slowly down the avenue.

“Poor papa! I hope he will not be very angry,” said Hermione compassionately. “I am afraid he will; but it is only for a short time. You will be home in eight days from this.”

“I hope it will not be very sad for you, mamma,” said Virginia, clasping her mother’s hand with a close nervous pressure.

“I will do my best, dear,” said her mother; “and you will be back so soon! It is not worth making a fuss about; but, of course, I shall miss you and the Sister terribly. Still—a week soon passes, does it not?”

“Yes,” said Virginia constrainedly.

“And it was what Superior so much desired,” continued Hermione. “As soon as your confirmation was decided on he had set his heart on your going into Retreat:—and so had Father Truscott.”

“Yes,” said Virginia, still more constrainedly.

“So now let us go upstairs. It is a pity that papa is going to Starton too to-day; but we will take the low road—he always takes the high; and perhaps we shall not see him. It would be awkward if we did.”

“Let us go now! He will not have finished at Lane End yet,” said Virginia. “And perhaps the Sister and Father Truscott are waiting for us.”

“Very well! come!” said Hermione briskly, as if trying to shake off the depression which would cling in spite of herself.

They went upstairs together and dressed themselves quickly. The small portmanteau was already packed, and in a few moments’ time the carriage would come round.

“Superior wished me to say this prayer, dear,” said Hermione, coming into her daughter’s room with a written paper in her hand.

Virginia was already kneeling at her faldstool, praying earnestly, but like one in the very extremity of pain.

Had she been a martyr enduring the worst conceivable agony for the truth's sake, she could not have looked more grievously tortured, more pitifully anguished.

"Don't, Virginia! don't look like that!" cried Hermione, falling into a sudden passion of tears. "It is only for a week, darling!" she repeated. "Think how soon a week will pass! and how much spiritual good you will get at C——."

"Mamma! pray to our Lord to help me!" cried Virginia, clinging to her mother convulsively.

"Yes, let us both ask for help!" was the answer; and in a broken voice Hermione recited the prayer which Mr. Lascelles had sent her, asking the Divine blessing on the step which her daughter was taking—that step of obedience to a Director and disobedience to a father—of adhesion to a creed and deception to her parents, which was assumed worthy of special approbation. Then, the prayer ended, they both rose, and still clinging hand in hand went down the stairs and entered the carriage where the portmanteau was already stowed.

"To the Starton station," said Hermione to the astonished man. "Go by the low road, and drive fast."

Not a word was spoken for the whole five miles. Each had to keep up her courage and to quiet her natural

conscience which would make itself heard only too clearly in spite of the artificial sophistries that had done so much to obscure its native purity. To each, falsehood, deceit, treachery was abhorrent ; yet at this moment both were dealing deceitfully, both were false and treacherous alike. Taught by that fatal school which maintains that the end justifies the means—that the faithful must perfect their work at all cost of morality, of humanity—that infidels and atheists are accursed and to be dealt with as the enemies of God and man alike—that honesty is sinful, while crooked dealing is holiness if that honesty would check superstition and that crooked dealing encourage it—both had become warped from the first uprightness of their lives ; and now when they stood face to face with certain consequences they were sorrowful and secretly ashamed. Hermione was betraying her husband, Virginia was betraying both father and mother ; but the Director of each had assured his penitent that she was doing well, and that God and the Church approved ; and with this assurance each was now striving to quiet her conscience and content her soul—and finding the task hard.

The time passed, and the station was at last reached, without mishap of undesirable meeting by the way ; and

at the station they found Mr. Lascelles and Sister Agnes, Father Truscott and Cuthbert Molyneux waiting to receive them and to ensure the carrying out of the design on hand.

“Just in time!” said the courtly vicar smiling, when the two pale, half-frightened women came on the platform as the train rounded the curve. “But a near thing!”

“Good-bye, dear Virginia!” said her mother, kissing her hastily. She dared not show any feeling before those who were watching her so closely. “In a week’s time, remember! I shall be very dull till you come back!”

“But you do not grudge her?” asked Sister Agnes slowly and with meaning.

“No! no! indeed not! but she must come back in a week’s time!” repeated Hermione, finding comfort in the definiteness of the time allotted.

Virginia kissed her mother, but neither spoke nor wept. The Sister held her cold hand firmly, almost cruelly clasped; and Father Truscott whispered in her ear: “For the Blessed Virgin and her honour!”

After she had, as it seemed, wished her good-bye finally, Virginia turned back to her mother as if to speak to her—to kiss her once again; but the Sister, ever watchful, drew her with a firm hand to the carriage. “No

looking back, child!" she said; while Father Truscott, under guise of help, lifted her bodily from the ground and set her in the carriage. Then the doors were shut, the bell was rung, the whistle sounded, and the train moved out of the station.

"Our Mother's chosen child!" said Sister Agnes with her silky smile.

"Child, you have left the darkness of error and are now going into the light and the truth!" said Father Truscott with more sincerity of fervour; while Virginia, feeling as if her heart would break, carried her sin as a cross and her sorrow as a sin, and asked to be supported through the one and forgiven for the other. It was for the good of souls—her own and others—and for the glory of God that the thing had been done. The Father of Lies was draped in shining garments for the occasion; and the life of deceit through which she had been led for so long now was, according to her instructors, a pious fraud which the wickedness of others had necessitated and the holiness of the end justified.

CHAPTER II.

TO ITS LOGICAL CONCLUSION.

“AND the child—where is Virginia?” asked Richard, as his wife came into the room alone.

Since the new order of things mother and daughter kept always together, with a certain sense of mutual support and countenance against this soul-destroying infidel of theirs, whose influence they feared with the fear of old-time love and indestructible respect ; and to see one without the other was strange.

“She is with Sister Agnes,” said Hermione, trying to speak with indifference.

She was very pale, and her indifference was a little too strongly accentuated to be real.

“I am sorry,” he returned slowly. “Will she be late?”

“I do not know exactly,” answered Hermione from among the music-books where she was making-believe to search for something, so that her face should not be seen, and the nervousness in her voice might be somewhat veiled by distance.

Of course she knew that her husband must be told the truth sooner or later ; but, as she and Mr. Lascelles had agreed, the later the better. If he could be kept quiet for this evening it would give the pious runaways a still longer start should he determine on following them ; for by the time he could reach London Virginia would be safely homed in the House of Retreat at C——, whence she must be taken by main force and the police if taken at all ; and Richard would naturally think twice before he made such a scandal as this.

“Are you sure that Virginia is quite well ?” he asked after a short silence and when Hermione, thinking the times now safe and the subject dropped, had come back from turning over the music-books.

“Dear me, yes !” she answered, still trying to speak with light indifference.

“To my eyes not. She is as changed in body as in mind,” he said with a deep sigh. “Her new friends and their absurd practices, of which I probably know less than half, have had a disastrous influence on her.”

He looked at his wife with some reproach. She did not answer. She was thinking with dread of the time when he would have to know that other half of the truth.

“What is she doing to-night?” he asked. “Any new vagary?”

“Not that I know of,” said Hermione, not resenting the phrase as she would have done had her conscience been clear. But her face betrayed the trouble of her mind, and seemed to show that more was hidden than had been expressed.

With a sudden flash of what was real terror Richard remembered Virginia’s strange emotion, Hermione’s unwonted softness of this afternoon; and now this studied indifference, which of itself confessed embarrassment. What did it all mean? What new disgrace was in store for him? what further sorrowful perversion for them?

“Something is wrong with you and the child,” he said suddenly. “Tell me what it is.”

“There is nothing wrong,” she answered with a deep blush.

“Look at me, Hermione,” he said gravely and sternly.

She raised her eyes and tried to meet his, but she could not. She looked just up to the knot of his cravat.

“How can you be so silly, Richard?” she said with a nervous little laugh, her delicate lips strained and quivering.

Deceitful as she had become through the fatal doctrine of "reserve," she was still candid at heart ; and when closely pressed, as now, her nature asserted itself.

"There is something wrong," said Richard again. "You cannot look in my face, Hermione, and I know yours. Tell me the truth frankly. This double-dealing is so strange in you who were once the very soul of honour and sincerity, I cannot reconcile myself to it. Come, speak to me honestly. What is this about Virginia? Why is she not here to-night?"

"I suppose I had better tell you now at once," returned Hermione, her confusion deepening, and her inability to stand examination overcoming her promise to Superior. "It is all the same whether I tell you now or after," she continued, arguing the matter aloud ; "and really there is nothing so very much to tell. Virginia has only gone away with Sister Agnes for a week's Retreat at C—— ; that is all. Nothing so very formidable, you see."

Again she laughed affectedly, and again her small sweet lips were strained and quivering.

For the first time in his life Richard felt something like contempt for this dearly loved wife of his. Hitherto his love had been of that quiet unobservant kind which

is characteristic of a constant temperament and an occupied mind. He loved her ; and there he stopped. He asked himself why, no more than he asked himself why the sunshine was delightful to him or the flowers were beautiful. She was part of his life, her perfect beauty of mind and body part of the existing order of things ; and not to love her, not to believe in her without further examination, not to imagine her free from fault or blemish, would have been until now impossible. Her worth and moral loveliness were as absolutely settled, as arbitrarily proved in his mind, as the revelations of the spectroscope. It was not a thing to debate about ; it was a question closed and done with. But now at this moment there swept across his mind a bitter kind of disdainful pity for her weakness and duplicity, which at one time would have been as impossible for him to feel as that he should have deliberately injured or publicly insulted her. As he looked at her she seemed to be almost some one else. Was she indeed Hermione, the beloved of his youth, the trusted of his maturity ? She who could not look in his face, who could not even lie bravely and who dared not tell the truth ?—she who had lent herself to this pitiful farce of kindly pretence at the very moment when she knew that she was doing that which would stab him to

the heart? He did not know which was the more painful—his daughter's disobedience or his wife's falsehood.

“So ! this was the meaning of the little comedy played off on me to-day,” he said with a bitter laugh, as strange from him as was Hermione's duplicity from her. “I might have known that it was only a blind for something even worse than had yet been done. I ought to have known ; and yet I was weak enough to hope that you and the child had come back to your better selves, and did really feel something of the tenderness you were pretending. Well ! you have had your laugh against me ; and I bear the sting of the disappointment and the shame of the insult.”

“You have no right to speak like this,” said Hermione half in tears, and as much pained that he should doubt her when she had been sincere as if she had never betrayed him when he had trusted her. “Both Virginia and I were really grieved to be obliged to deceive you, though only for a few hours. But we knew that you would not have given your consent had we asked it, so we thought it better to say nothing about it till it was done.’

“And the knowledge that you were offending me counted for nothing with you? You never stopped to ask yourselves whether you were doing right or wrong in

thus defying as well as deceiving me? You, my wife, had no scruples in helping my child to disobey me?"

Never in her life before had Hermione been spoken to by her husband in this tone and manner. If the sudden revelation of her duplicity had transformed her to him, this bewildering severity did the same for him to her.

"It was for the good of her own soul and in the service of the Church. That makes everything lawful," said Hermione, looking down.

"You are right, Hermione! In the service of a lie, falsehood—in the service of tyranny, cruelty—in the service of superstition, ignorance. You are quite right! I see you understand your formula and can state it with admirable precision. You do credit to your teacher!"

"I do not understand you," said Hermione with a curious mixture of fear and anger.

"How should you?" he answered with the same manner of bitter mockery, of angry scorn. "You understand Mr. Lascelles; and I can scarcely credit you with such catholicity of sympathy as would enable you to compass the two extremes of character. Naturally you do not understand me; you are in too close sympathy with him for that. And if I regret the change in your feelings

I do not regret the apportionment. Whatever else I may be I am at least an honest man, and scarcely desire to run curricula in your esteem with such an incarnate lie as Mr. Lascelles !”

“Richard !” she exclaimed with indignation in her tone, her look, her attitude. But whether it was indignation at hearing Superior spoken of so disrespectfully, or at being told, for her own part, that her husband did not care for her esteem—which with him meant affection—it would have been hard for her to say. She only knew that she was indignant and that Richard was very disagreeable ; how much she wished that she could have added “unjust” as well !

“Where has Virginia gone ?” he then asked suddenly, still cold and contemptuous as well as stern. “Can I trust you to tell me the truth in your answer ? It seems strange to me to have to say this to you, Hermione ! Not so very long ago I would have staked my life on your perfect sincerity ; now I find myself doubting whether you can give as straight an answer to a simple question as might be expected from a Jesuit, or even Mr. Lascelles himself.”

“If you think so ill of me, it is scarcely worth while my answering at all,” returned Hermione, wavering between wrath and tears.

“I think you will answer,” he said sternly. “The child is under age, and I have a right to know where she is and what she is doing!”

“I have told you. She has gone for a week’s Retreat to C—— with Sister Agnes, before her confirmation.”

Hermione tried to speak with offended dignity, but she found it hard. She had never respected her husband so much as when he made her understand that he did not respect her. Though her happiness lay in being made romantic love to—in being courted, flattered, petted, and all the rest of it—she was a woman who needed a master and with whom a certain amount of fear was wholesome.

“Where is this Retreat?” he asked again.

“At C——.”

“Not far from London?”

“No, not far.”

He looked at the clock.

“There is time to catch the up train to-night. I shall bring her home to-morrow.”

“No, Richard, you will do nothing so shameful!” rising too in her agitation. What would Sister Agnes say, what would Superior think, if she let him go on such an

errand ! After she had promised that she would hold him as a blood-hound in leash to have set him so prematurely loose on their traces ! “Why should you make all this horrible fuss and confusion for nothing ? Such a mere trifle as it is ! Virginia has gone only for a week’s quiet prayer and contemplation before the solemn rite of confirmation ; she is quite safe with Sister Agnes, who is also in retreat ; and you cannot go to a house full of holy women and ramp and rave about as if you were searching for a thief ! It will be too disgraceful to make such a scandal !”

“You should have thought of that in time,” he said. “I have been patient and forbearing with you up to a certain point, but now that point is passed and I will bear no more. You have proved yourself an unfit guardian for your daughter. You have sacrificed her to your infatuation, as the mothers of old sacrificed their daughters to Moloch. She has no true friend but me her father, from whom you and your advisers have done your best to separate her ; and it is my duty to snatch her from destruction.”

“To snatch her from salvation, you mean,” put in Hermione, a little below her breath and more as a formal protest than a real opposition. Her soft soul was im-

pressed by her husband's unwonted energy ; and though at all times a godless infidel, yet, after all, he was the recognized head of the house, the rightful controller and manager of things, and to themselves—the husband of the one and the father of the other.

For all answer Richard rang the bell ; and when Jones came in ordered the carriage hastily, peremptorily, in a manner so unlike his own, with such an odd return on the young officer commanding his squad, that the man looked at him curiously as if he too found the general aspect of life changed.

“ Good-bye, Hermione,” he said, not even shaking hands with her—standing at some distance from her.

“ Good-bye, Richard,” she answered humbly. “ Then you are really going ? ”

She made a step towards him. This was their first separation since they married.

“ Yes. I will bring her home to-morrow.”

She made another little step forward.

“ I shall be very lonely till you return,” she said, and looked into his face. She had forgotten Mr. Lascelles for the instant, and wanted her husband to kiss her before he went—if indeed he must go at all.—In her heart she wanted to cajole him to stay.

“ I scarcely think so,” he said; “ I am so little to you now, others are so much !”

“ You are always Richard,” she said with the sweetest air, the tenderest voice.

He caught her to his heart, but put her from him as suddenly as he had taken her.

“ I must save my child,” he said in an altered voice, and turned away abruptly as if he distrusted himself as well as her; and in a short time was on his way to Starton, to just miss the train, the last train that night, which steamed out of the station as he drove up.

Thus the religious runaways had a yet longer start, and premature detection was made so much the more difficult.

Telegraphing to London and to C—— brought no good results. No one answering to the description of any of the four fugitives had got out at either place. To be sure, a Sister had alighted at C——, but she was well known at the Home there, and she was moreover alone; so that her arrival only occupied the telegraph wires for a short time and created a still further delay. Foreseeing all chances, the little party had divided into two couples, and had changed the route. While being looked for in London they were making for Southampton; while the

telegraph was clicking at C—— they were passing the Needles on their way to St. Malo. Everything had been arranged with the most consummate skill ; and Richard was again weaker than his adversaries—craft and cruelty were once more triumphant.

The whole thing remained a mystery to everybody alike. Richard went up to London by the first train in the morning, not returning to the Abbey at all, and the detectives did what they could to help him ; but the scent was lost, and the four had disappeared as completely as if they had vanished into space. No endeavours could hit on their traces, and by the end of five days Hermione's courage and endurance failed. She had never been left alone before, and in spite of Superior's attentions she was too unhappy to bear herself. Solitude and anxiety together broke down her strength, as the snow and hail break the tender twigs of garden shrubs ; and, half in hysterics, she drove over to Starton on the fifth day and telegraphed to her husband to come home at once. She was ill, she said, and wanted him ; so Richard had nothing for it but to leave London and abandon the faint hope of finding Virginia, that he might minister to the wife who was in chief part to blame for all the misery that had befallen them.

It was a curious spasm of reaction that made Hermione send for her husband—unknown to Mr. Lascelles. Not exactly the rekindling of her love, it was yet that imperious craving of habit which comes into marriage—crystallizing the old forms so that even when dead they look like life. She was so accustomed to have Richard as part of her daily life—once the pivot of the whole and now the obstacle which it was part of the play to circumvent—that it felt to her as if a death had taken place and she was surrounded only by ghosts and shadows. Even the greater liberty granted by his absence took away half the charm of her pious naughtiness, because all the secrecy and therefore all the romance. It vulgarized the whole thing; and she felt less elation than disturbance when the vicar came boldly up to the house, now purified by the absence of its agnostic master, and made a new place of master for himself. Then, she did not like to have those lonely mornings, those solitary meals, those long dull evenings; nor to know that she slept alone in the house, with only the servants to trust to in case of danger. If Sister Agnes had been at home it would have been different, she thought. She could have gone to the Vicarage—which she would have liked better than that Superior should come to the Abbey—and at the

Vicarage she always felt homed and happy. But as it was she was miserable ; and poor Richard too must be so wretched in London, alone and in such anxiety ! And then again she thought twenty times in the hour : What on earth has become of Virginia !

She was not afraid of any disaster. She was sure that the child was safe ; four people do not come to grief without some one hearing something about it ;—but where was she ? what had the Sister done with her ? why was the plan changed, and why had they not gone to C—— as arranged from the first ? The mystery of it all perplexed and worried her, and woke up vague and uneasy suspicions as she remembered Virginia's look of pain when she found her kneeling at her faldstool ; her almost passionate farewell to her father ; and again her excess of emotion and distress at leaving home which had been visible all through, though so well controlled. It was a horrible fear that came across her every now and then ; and Superior, to whom she confided it, though he laughed it down for the moment, looked grave afterwards and seemed to be secretly as much disturbed as herself. And then, not able to bear the situation longer, Hermione telegraphed to her husband to come home ; and herself went to the station to meet him.

If only Mr. Lascelles had died then ! But the noble lives that are taken and the worthless ones that are left !—the peace which would come were these gone, the ruin that follows on the loss of those !—the enemies that cling far into old age, the friends that drop off in the early years !—what a tangle it all is, and what a hopeless confusion of circumstance and providential design ! If only Mr. Lascelles had died, the two, now so fearfully estranged, would have gone back to their old places and one victim at the least would have been spared. As it was, nothing was changed. The tremendous power given by the fatal practice of confession made Mr. Lascelles absolute master of the situation all round, because the supreme controller and director of Hermione. Everything was in his hands—her soul and Richard's happiness—her essential virtue and her husband's essential honour. He knew her every thought and regulated, or punished, her every action. If she gave the reins for a moment to her natural affection, and allowed herself to be even compassionate to the man whom the priest had set himself to crush, she was frightened back again to her assigned attitude by all the terrors of wrath and judgment of which he had the irresponsible dispensation. She was his, not Richard's ; and he made her feel this when he set her

that long list of penitential tasks to purge her soul of the sin of disobedience which she had committed in sending for her husband because she wearied for him.

“This man of sin, this accursed infidel!” said Mr. Lascelles, flaming with holy wrath; “and that you, a good Churchwoman, should have *asked* him to come back! Why did you not let him go for ever—and why, when he was once safe away, did you not keep him away!”

But when he said this, Hermione turned so white—was in such deadly terror lest indeed this should be imposed on her as her next act of renunciation and obedience—that Mr. Lascelles, in his turn, was afraid of going too far and too fast. He laughed off his suggestion so pleasantly, so playfully, that he soothed her and made her forget what he had said. But he held her to her penance all the same, and made her feel that she had been both unrighteous and indelicate.

Meanwhile a letter came from Sister Agnes to her brother—enclosing a few words from Virginia to her mother, saying simply: “Do not be uneasy. We are all well, and will write in a few days.” The two letters were identical in the wording, and the postmark was Paris.

This note was something to show to Richard, who

was still keeping Scotland Yard and the telegraph wires busy; and so far was a comfort. For though it brought no help to him on the point which most nearly touched him—the Sister's influence and Virginia's fanaticism—it proved that the child was at least alive and not yet made the victim of ecclesiastical foul play, though she was still that of ecclesiastical superstition. He could not hear more than what these few unsatisfactory words told him; not even what the postmark of the letter had been, nor what the postage-stamp.

“Mr. Lascelles had burnt the envelope,” said Hermione when she was questioned; “and she had not taken any notice of either the stamp or the postmark;” and Richard had to content himself with this in the best way he could, and to wait for the further unrolling of the page whereon this pitiful family history was being written.

It came at last, and then they knew all. In a long letter written by Virginia to her mother the mystery was revealed, the seal of secrecy broken. She had carried out her intention to its honest logical conclusion, and had become in name the Roman Catholic which she had been taught to be in fact. She and Sister Agnes, Cuthbert Molyneux and Father Truscott, had all gone over publicly, and had been received as acknowledged

members of the Church to which they had either gravitated by force of direction from without, or to which, like Father Truscott, they had already for some time secretly belonged, doing its work while seeming to be devoted to a rival cause.

It was a letter full of the stock arguments put forward at such times. Authority and tradition ; the validity of these Orders with the invalidity of those ; historical evidences ; the divine mark of miracles ; the absolute and perfect organization of the Romish communion ; the value of belonging to a Church the dominion of which extended over all the earth and was supreme both in heaven and hell ; the loveliness of the conventual life, and the joy found in following the example of those holy men and women, the cloud of witnesses, who had lived for the truth and died for its glory ; the rest found in unqualified submission to authority and in the total destruction of all independent judgment ;—all the reasonings which had been so craftily instilled into her by Father Truscott were reproduced in her letter ; and she ended by beseeching her mother to reconsider her present position and to make one of the True Church. Anglicanism, she said according to her Director's direction, was a fair kind of gateway to those born worshipping

under its shadow. If more than this, and not made the gateway to the true Temple, then was it a prison-house for the soul. The letter went on to say that she, Virginia, was now with Sister Agnes at the convent of the Prega-trice, where she had entered as a postulant to be received as a member when her novitiate should be ended. She had found her true sphere at last, she said, and had never known so much happiness as she knew now. She was to be one of those perpetual adorers of the Blessed Sacrament whose lives she had vaguely imagined before she knew either the reality or what led up to it ; and she was more than ever grateful to the Sister who had first set her in the right way and then carried her step by step to the end. Then she sent her love to papa, and told him that she would pray for him without ceasing and in full faith that her prayer would be heard and his heart turned, before too late, to God.

The letter was an exact counterpart of the one written by Sister Agnes to her brother, save in the personal paragraphs. For these the Sister substituted a few sharp stinging sarcasms on Theresa's shameless passion and Hermione's sinful infatuation ; on the heat and excitement and individual flavour of all that which was being done at Crossholme, and which revolted her now when she

thought of it as much as at the time. And at the time how much she had suffered! She had sometimes felt as if she must have stood up in the midst of these spiritual odalisques, and have reproached them for their criminal self-deception, their hideous sacrilege in masking their love for a man under the guise of devotion to the Church. And in saying this of them, she wished to add her supreme condemnation of him, her brother, who, instead of putting down this unwholesome excitement among the women, encouraged it and so made himself a party to the sin. She thanked God that she had now reached the haven of absolute purity where man did not enter; and where her soul would be no more vexed with the vanity and frivolity, the passion and the impurity, that had spoilt the work down at Crossholme.

This then was the end of it all, and the downfall of more card-houses than one. To Mr. Lascelles the blow was especially severe. The sum of money which he had hoped to get for the Church from the Molyneux estate was now an impossibility; for Theresa and Aunt Catherine without Cuthbert could do nothing. Virginia's perversion also had destroyed his hope of future restitution from the Abbey; and the cause of Anglicanism, which was his own—the pedestal of his influence and supremacy—had

received a severe shock by the desertion of these two young people, and of his sister and Father Truscott. If this was where an advanced ritual was to land them all—he knew so many would think—the less they had to do with it, and the closer they clung to their barren Protestantism, the better. If indeed ritualism is only a bridge to Romanism, they would say, let us break it down before more have gone over ; and if what seems to be the endeavour to obtain free development for the national Church is only fighting for our old enemy the Pope, then let us force these masked foes to marshal themselves under their proper banner, and let our own flag be distinct—and Lutheran. He knew all these arguments so well ; and felt some of the pain of Sisyphus when he has rolled the stone to the top only to have it fall back again to his feet.

Then again, the solitude in which Hermione was left by the absence of her daughter was bad, inasmuch as by it she would be cast into so much closer communion with her husband ; and the difficulty of his own intercourse with her, through the loss of his sister as the mistress of the Vicarage, was both annoying to him personally and embarrassing to him officially. Take it all round it was a heavy blow to him, and he felt decidedly illtreated ; and

then, more than all this, they had gone into deadly error and left the true for the false.

For nothing is farther from the thoughts of certain of the ritualistic school than to go over to the Church of which they are the mimics—to take service in the army of which they are the irregulars. Romanism is official suicide for the despotic Anglican priest who despises the bishops, breaks the law of the land, flouts the courts, and snaps his fingers at Parliament. The exchange of individual power for the comparative self-effacement of an organization where he is only a subordinate member, under orders like any little curate of his own, does not suit the man whose aim is to be irresponsible ruler, neither paying obedience nor acknowledging superiority; but the honest and sequential do go over before the end of all things, and so far justify their faith. Mr. Lascelles was not one who would ever leave the English Church, where he was everything, for Rome where he would be only a unit. He loved power too well to give it up for the sake of consistency; and he had reasoned himself into the belief that the Anglican position is logically sound and honestly tenable. Hence he was in his right, he thought, to feel sore and illtreated and to hold those recreant four as perverts from the truth and traitors to the cause.

TO ITS LOGICAL CONCLUSION.

The whole neighbourhood felt the news as the shock of a crime; and to Ringrove it was as if Virginia had committed self-murder. Nothing that had ever happened in his life had given him so much pain. He would rather that the girl whom he loved had died than that she had done this thing: and he mourned her as one dead, but dead with a strange obscure stain of sin on her former purity.

To Lady Maine however it was the brightest bit of news that she had heard for many a long day. It was just what it should have been, she said with jubilant condemnation. The cloven hoof had at last shown itself; and if those poor wretches were sinful they were at least self-confessed. It was what she had prophesied all along; and now who was right? and ought not that popish vicar of Crossholme to be drummed out of the parish like the rogue he was? Protestantism, in the person of Lady Maine, had a tremendous lift by this secession; and had anything been wanting to complete "Superior's" annoyance it was this triumph of his loud-voiced enemy, and the *Io pæans* which she shouted over his discomfiture.

If mere friends and acquaintances felt all this, what was the blow to Richard, whom indeed it struck on every side? As a landowner who had hoped to leave this im-

portant estate in proper hands, and to die knowing that his daughter was carrying on the traditions of her mother, and that Ringrove was as faithful a steward, as devoted a husband, and as true a liberal as he himself had been ; as a father, great part of whose happiness had been bound up in his only child; as a philosopher working for the good of his kind, hating imposition and falsehood, and living only to extend knowledge and give minds light and liberty;—on all sides he was wounded to the heart, and—he scarcely acknowledged this to himself—found himself unable to forgive Hermione. Her own defection, horrible to him as it was, maddening, humiliating in every sense, was more specially a personal offence, therefore easier to be borne ; but that she should have proved herself such a bad care-taker of her child was a crime; and he could not pardon her the destruction of the life which it had been her assigned duty to protect.

“It is the logical outcome of all this pitiful mummery in which you have wilfully indulged,” he said bitterly, when Hermione handed him the letter and he read in it Virginia’s painful announcement. “The child is the only honest person among you all !”

“No ! it is a dreadful mistake !” said Hermione. “To go into the Roman Church, so loaded with error, is a sin.”

“What matters a few grains more or less of dust to those who are in the sandstorm?” he said. “You are blinded, choked, destroyed, one as well as the other, and the details are of very little moment. The Pope’s infallibility or Mr. Lascelles’ ! For my own part I should prefer the former if I must have one. The child is dead to us now for all time, and you, her mother, who should have protected her——”

He checked himself, got up and went to the fireplace, where he stood, leaning his face on his arm.

“I am so sorry, Richard,” she said penitently, creeping nearer to him as she spoke ; and indeed she was very sorry and ashamed as well.

He did not answer. He could not comfort her and he did not wish to reproach her.

“I had no idea of what was going on,” she continued after a short pause, wondering at his silence. “I never could have believed that Sister Agnes could have been so deceitful or that Father Truscott was such a hypocrite. You believe me, don’t you, Richard ?”

She laid her hand on his shoulder and intentionally allowed her fingers to touch his hair. She expected that he would turn and take her to him as he had done on the night when he went away. Judging of the present by the

past she thought that he would be overjoyed, penetrated with gratitude, for this slight caress, this half-timid act of familiarity—that he would be responsive even beyond what she would have dared to encourage. But he did not move. His face was turned downwards on his arm, and his hands were clasped in each other.

“Richard,” she said softly, trying to unclasp his hands. “I knew nothing of it all!” she pleaded. “I had no suspicion of what was going on, and would not have believed it if I had been told; nor had Mr. Lascelles. I am so sorry, dear! so grieved! what can I do to help you? I know how much you suffer; and I am so unhappy, too—so lonely! so wretched!”

Here she broke down and burst into tears. She was indeed at this moment most unhappy, and scarcely knew what would give her comfort.

Her husband raised his head, and in his turn laid his hand on her shoulder.

“There is only one thing that you can do,” he said, in an unsteady voice; “renounce all this present folly and come back to your better self and your true duty. We have lost our child, but we can yet piece together our own lives so that they shall be honourable and loving. It depends only on you, Hermione. I am what I was,

and where I was—it is you who have moved from the old ground. Come back to me and right reason, wife, and let us forget this miserable time of estrangement in a new and happier union.”

“ I cannot give up the Church nor make myself an atheist,” said Hermione with a frightened look ; “ I will do anything else for you, Richard, but I must keep to my own religion.”

“ Then you cannot help me,” he said, taking his hand from her shoulder. “ Religion with you means being the subservient creature of Mr. Lascelles ; and while you are that you can be no comfort to me ; you can be no more to me than what you are ; and that is—nothing !”

“ Am I really nothing to you, Richard ? no comfort ? no help ?” she said, lifting her blue eyes to him softly, tenderly, full of reproach as for harshness unmerited. “ Do you say that I am nothing to you now ?” she repeated.

“ What should you be ?” he answered slowly. “ Neither wife nor friend, neither companion nor sympathizer, what are you, Hermione, but the witness of another man’s triumph and my own defeat ?”

“ Do not speak of Superior as a man—he is a priest and my Director !” said Hermione.

He turned his eyes on her with a flash of scorn and indignation.

“Salve over your conscience with such transparent pretence, if you will!” he said contemptuously; “but leave me the bitter and humiliating truth!”

His look and tone made her tremble. She was a woman whom a man’s anger terrified; and like all long-suffering people, Richard’s wrath when roused was terrible. And then, sophisticate as she would, her conscience was inwardly uneasy; for, though Mr. Lascelles was a priest, Richard was her husband; and a husband is, or ought to be, a sacred circumstance in a woman’s life, not to be removed at another man’s bidding. Still, side by side with all this was the tremendous fact of confession, whereby she was indeed made Mr. Lascelles’ creature and slave by her belief in his spiritual power:—and above all, there was Richard’s hideous agnosticism.

“Then you will not give up that mock papist priest for me?” he asked again, after a short silence. “It is one or the other; you must choose between us.”

“It is not Mr. Lascelles whom I will not give up; it is the Church,” exclaimed Hermione.

“Confession—absolute obedience—suffering another man to come between husband and wife—to rob the

parents of their child—giving to another man, call him priest or what you will, the most sacred feelings of your heart, the deepest and strongest of your love—you, a wife, submitting to the indelicacy of inquisitorial questions, to the indignity of regulations—is all this part of the Christian religion, Hermione?—all this necessary to your church life?”

“Confession is necessary,” she said faltering. “Without confession there is no absolution, and without the absolution of the Church no pardon or salvation.”

“My poor child!” he said with sudden softness. “And they have brought you to such pitiful absurdity as this! Can nothing be done for you? Between us both, wretched as you have made me, you are more deserving of compassion.”

“Not for my faith—that is my only consolation,” said Hermione, weeping.

“Then we need say no more,” he returned. “While you cling to your faith as you call it—I your error!—we remain as we were, divided. I do not care to share your love with Mr. Lascelles—such miserable fragments as he allows; and until you can come back to me wholly it is better that you should stand as you do, aloof. Good night. The loss of the child is only the natural conse-

quence of the loss of the wife. But it is your own will—so let it stand. Good night.”

She stood as if irresolute, when he turned to go to his solitary study, the scene of his present anguish as it had once been of his purest pleasures. As he passed through the doorway, she made a few steps forward.

“Richard! come back!” she whispered softly.

But he did not hear her; and when he had fairly gone and the door was shut between them, Hermione gasped, as at a danger safely got over. What would Superior have said had she become reconciled to her infidel husband, and consequently false to him, her spiritual Director? When she thought of the confession which would have had to be made she literally trembled; but when she realized the state into which she had suffered her home to be brought she cried; and between the two irreconcilable opposites felt herself the most miserable woman in the world.

CHAPTER III.

BACKSLIDING.

THE times were hard for Mr. Lascelles, but he kept a firm front through his difficulties and gave the enemy no cause to rejoice by any confession of weakness or even of dismay. His official indignation rose to the height of the occasion, and on the Sunday following the public defection of his sister, his friend, his disciple, and the child of his most important penitent, he preached against the errors of Rome and the sin of perversion to her communion as strongly as if he had been preaching against Richard Fullerton's infidelity and the presumption of scientific inquirers in general. The only one whom he spared was Virginia ; and her he excused under the guise of the innocent young seduced by the false guides in whom they had placed their trust. But for the mature who had known the blessed truth of Anglicanism, and now had gone over to the Romish falsehood, he had no strictures that were too severe.

The personal application of his fiery discourse was of

course easy enough to make ; and it sounded outspoken and sincere ; but it did not reconcile the Protestant part of the community to the existing state of things. As they persisted in seeing in ritualism the first step to Romanism, and the vicar as nothing but a Jesuit in disguise, they could not understand the hostility of the mimic to the original, and doubted the sincerity which sounded so well. The opposition of the more sober-minded men of the parish to the covert papistry of their parson—as they believed it to be—had never threatened to be so severe as now when he was fulminating against the Church to which these three important members of his own community had seceded, and of which he denounced the deadly errors while running his own ecclesiastical lines exactly parallel.

But they could do little or nothing now. Wait till the church should be opened and the services conducted therein according to the new code, and then see what they would all do !

Undoubtedly the times were unpleasant ; and the Honourable and Reverend Launcelot Lascelles needed all his courage to tide him over the discomfort of the hour.

What was his loss the unconverted counted as their gain ; and the Laodiceans of the place—notably the

Nesbitts—thought this a good opportunity for winning back Hermione Fullerton to safety and common sense. Now that she had lost the incitement of Virginia's pure if mistaken intensity, they thought she must have lost the main impulse to her own religious life. They could not believe that she had suffered the influence of Mr. Lascelles to become the mainspring of her actions. Religious fanaticism was bad enough, but personal fascination was worse. The one was a folly but the other was a crime; and they would not charge her with this. So now when she had proved by sad experience whither ritualism logically tended, she would surely be frightened and take refuge from herself and her dangers in the society of her wiser friends. Surely the vicar's spiritual staff was broken, and the beginning of the end at hand!

“It is such a pity, dear! I am so sorry for it all!” said Mrs. Nesbitt with friendly sympathy, when she went to pay her visit of condolence to the bereaved mother, whose case she considered worse than that of one who had lost her child by death.

The words might be trivial enough; but the kind sweet face and softened voice of her who uttered them gave them a charm which redeemed them from their intrinsic poverty.

“ Yes,” said Hermione, her eyes full of tears. “ It is an awful perversion ! ”

“ But what might have been expected,” said Mrs. Nesbitt sighing. “ Sorry as I was to hear it, I cannot say that I was taken by surprise.”

“ I was,” returned Hermione. “ And I knew more of Virginia than anyone else.”

“ But sometimes those who stand nearest see least,” Mrs. Nesbitt said sensibly; “ and to us who do not go all the way with you, that Ritualism should lead to Romanism seems just as natural as that seeds should bring forth flowers. Yours is the seed ; and the Romish Church knows that as well as we do.”

“ If you understood our faith you would not say such a thing as this,” said Hermione. “ We abhor the errors of Rome ; and while we recognize the good that is in her, and the measure of grace which she contains, we hate her perversions and refuse her traditions. *We* have gone back to the truth in its purity, and she has gone aside into superstition and error.”

“ I do not see much difference between you,” persisted Mrs. Nesbitt, with a woman’s pertinacity of assertion and a passing wonder at Hermione’s polemical fluency. “ The great difference is that Rome is consistent

and you are not; and that those who have been born into the Romish Church have excuses for their superstition which you have not. But do not let us talk of all this, dear; we shall never agree, and it is not necessary that we should. What can I do to help you? You and I were young wives and mothers together; and I feel as if you were my sister. If such a thing were to happen to one of my children, I think it would break my heart!"

"It would break mine but for the help that I get through the beloved Church," said Hermione courageously.

She must not let them think her less than dutiful because Virginia had been seduced from the right way. She must still hold fast to the truth and Mr. Lascelles:—was she not his penitent, and had she not given him possession of her very soul?

"I wish I heard you say, dear, that you got help from that dear good husband of yours," was Mrs. Nesbitt's characteristic rejoinder.

"Poor Richard! he can do nothing for me, and nothing for himself, while he thinks as he does," she answered, a certain wifely softness breaking through the hard spiritual superiority of her tone. "If he did not

hold such dreadful opinions as he does perhaps this would never have happened. Virginia would have been able then to have confided in him, when she first began to waver ; and he would have directed her and have saved her."

"She did not confide in you, her mother," said Mrs. Nesbitt.

"I am only a woman," said Hermione simply.

"But now that you are alone at home, and, as Miss Lascelles is not there, you cannot be so much at the Vicarage, I do hope that you will come and see us, and that we may come and see you as in old times," said Mrs. Nesbitt. "Such old friends as we are, we ought to see more of each other than we do, and our friendship should not be allowed to die out as it seems to have done of late. If there had been even a quarrel or a misunderstanding we ought to have made it up, but for a mere difference of opinion to have drifted apart as we have done—it is not neighbourly, not Christian ! And you know, dear, that the coolness has not been on our side."

"Friendship with the world is enmity with God," said Hermione, as Mr. Lascelles had more than once reminded her.

"But I am not the world," returned Mrs. Nesbitt,

smiling. "I am only a quiet, easy-going, home-staying wife and mother—and your old friend. Come, dear! do not let this estrangement go on. It has lasted too long already, and there is not the slightest reason for it. Come to us as you used. Come to dinner with us to-morrow, as in the dear old days—you and your husband. Though we cannot change this awful affliction for you, still we can make a few hours pass less painfully; and, at all events, there is nothing with us to remind you of poor Virginia's dreadful mistake. At the Vicarage now, or with the Molyneux's, you must be reminded at every turn by the things that first gave her this fatal direction."

"You are very, very kind," said Hermione in a hesitating manner.

She knew that Superior would be ill-pleased with her if she went to the Nesbitts'; but at this moment she was so sorely in need of comfort that she did not know how to put this kindly temptation from her.

"Then you will come?" cried Mrs. Nesbitt with friendly warmth. "It will give us all so much pleasure. It will be a real gala day at home!" Seeing that she still hesitated, she added: "If Mr. Lascelles cuts you off like this from your old friends, how can he reconcile it to his

conscience? Christianity is charity with all men, not this Pharisaical exclusiveness."

"Still, we must obey the Church, and we must not question her commands," put in Hermione, and she then added plaintively: "It is not our fault that you will not join us! I wish you would!—it makes everything so difficult!"

"I do not know what you and Mr. Lascelles want," said Mrs. Nesbitt, opening her eyes. "We are all good Christians at Newlands, and what more would you have?"

"That you should be good Church-people," said Hermione, looking, dear soul, as if she believed what she was saying and understood what she meant.

Just then Ringrove Hardisty was announced. It was the first time that he had called at the Abbey since the fatal day when he had unconsciously assisted at Virginia's leave-taking of the world; and he felt like a man who goes into the room where the corpse of his beloved is lying. He was very pale, very sad, very much changed in these last few weeks; for not even Richard himself had grieved more than he had done for that which was substantially the death of Virginia. Though he did not feel it a sin yet he did hold it for shame that Virginia

should have done this thing, and done it with so much duplicity and want of candour. Lost to them for ever as she had become by her act, he would rather that she had died in reality. It would have been less terrible than the knowledge of this living entombment in the heart of superstition—this dreary culmination of falsehood and fanaticism.

“And you will come too, Ringrove?” said Mrs. Nesbitt with intentional abruptness as he came in.

She guessed how things were with him and Hermione, and that this first meeting would be painful.

“Where?” he asked, holding Hermione’s hand but looking at Mrs. Nesbitt.

“To dine with us to-morrow. This darling here and Mr. Fullerton are coming,” was Mrs. Nesbitt’s positive assertion of a vague possibility.

“With pleasure. Mrs. Fullerton knows how much I value her society, and nowhere more than at your house,” said Ringrove, a strange huskiness in his voice as he pressed the soft hand held in his and looked at her with his frank blue eyes, softer and darker than usual.

Hermione turned aside her head.

“You are very good to us,” she said with a little sob. And Mrs. Nesbitt, putting her comfortable arms

about her, more like a mother than a woman not much older than herself, believed that the conquest was assured, and that Mrs. Fullerton was now saved from ritualism and Mr. Lascelles.

By the look of things at home the belief was not quite so wild as might have been thought. For nothing stirs a woman so much as indifference—except it is opposition ; and since Virginia's flight, and that last futile attempt at full reconciliation on his part, Richard had been indifferent—inasmuch as he had made Hermione understand that he accepted their present arrangements as final and would not again attempt to disturb them. Always courteous he had ceased to be loving—always gentle he was never tender. Now that she was alone he made it a matter of duty to be much with her ; to go out with her—when his presence was not too patently displeasing ; to sit with her in the evening ; to talk to her during meals ; but all this was only as a friend. No word, no look betrayed more than the courteous good-breeding of a pleasant acquaintance ; while running through it all was a curious thread of manly dignity, as if what he did was as much for the self-respect of a gentleman in the fulfilment of his duty, as from affection for the woman whom he had once loved better than his

pride or his life. He never touched on any subject that interested him ; spared religion his girds and science his advocacy ; and he never alluded to Virginia nor the past—not because he wished to forget or to banish her, but because her name was a standing reproach against his wife ; and to speak of his daughter was, with him, to condemn her mother. It was the dullest life that could be imagined, and the most unsatisfactory ; but if Richard had studied how best to touch his wife and incline her to him again, he could have hit on no better plan.

Ashamed, sorry, lonely, her life shorn of its former full intensity, and the natural pride of her womanhood piqued now in earnest where formerly much had been made up and more wilfully imagined, she felt the indifference of her discarded husband almost as acutely as if she had never transferred her allegiance from him to Mr. Lascelles, and had never found the excitement of religious romance more satisfying than the monotony of married security. His security had made her discontented and uncomfortable ; his acquiescence in the severance which she herself had decreed, made her long to bring him back to her as of old.

“ I suppose Richard will have no objection,” she said, returning to the question of that dinner to-morrow.

“ Perhaps I had better send to ask him,” she added with her old manner of girlish deference, as in the days when only one will was between them, and that will was his.

“ I will go to him,” said Ringrove, also in his old manner of the son of the house—that place which had ever been his by mutual understanding, and which, curiously enough, founded on Virginia as the original *motif*, was now restored to him by her loss.

“ What a good dear fellow that is !” said Mrs. Nesbitt, as his firm step was heard clanking through the hall.

“ Yes !” said Hermione with a sigh. How ardently she wished at this moment that Virginia had seen with Mrs. Nesbitt’s eyes !

Older, greyer, a little bent in the shoulders, thinner, haggard, the former calm repose of his face changed to a fixed unwavering sadness, the quiet self-restraint of his manner become now the resignation of despair, Richard showed only too plainly how deeply he had been struck—how mortally wounded. Mrs. Nesbitt felt her heart swell and sink with sudden pain when she looked at him, so terribly changed as he was ; and how bitterly she hated Mr. Lascelles and the whole school to which he belonged, for the mischief and misery they had wrought !

“Dine with you to-morrow? no, I thank you,” he said in a weary way. “I am scarcely in tune for a dinner.”

“Only your two selves and Ringrove Hardisty,” urged Mrs. Nesbitt. “It is like your own home, you know, Mr. Fullerton, and you have not been for so long.”

“Will you not go, Richard?” said Hermione, half timidly.

“If you wish it, go by all means,” he said with a slight air of surprise.

“Not without you,” she returned. “I should like to go very much, but only with you,” she added, raising her pretty eyes with a soft and sweet expression that once would have taken the heart out of him.

Ringrove looked at him anxiously; Mrs. Nesbitt full of compassion.

“If you would like it, certainly I will go with you,” he said gravely, after a moment’s pause; but no light came into his face, no love into his eyes; he yielded out of respect for her wishes, but only as a gentleman yields to a lady—not as a loving man to a beloved woman.

Hermione flushed painfully. She felt the difference which both Ringrove and Mrs. Nesbitt divined; and

thought her husband cruel and unkind to be so cold when she would fain have been on more friendly terms. She had all the modern woman's belief that it belongs to her alone to set the lines between herself and the man whose name she bears ; and that hers is the commanding voice while he repeats only the echo. She had discarded him when pressed by Mr. Lascelles to do so ; now, when she would have drawn nearer to him in her loneliness, she was to her own mind an injured wife in that he kept in the place which she had assigned to him.

She gained the day so far however, that they both went to the house of Laodicea as if they had been the friends they were long ago ; and Hermione, carried back to her former self by a sudden sweep of old-time emotions, said when she left that she had not been so happy for years. This was a long pull on the part of the pretty woman ; but it was the truth in substance if beyond the mark in distance.

When Mr. Lascelles heard of this act of virtual, if not literal, disobedience, he showed so much manly pathos of personal sorrow, and he expressed so much righteous indignation at the falling away from grace of one whom he had believed secure, that Hermione was partly softened and partly frightened, and made to feel that she

was a backslider who had to be contrite and penitent if she would be restored to favour and forgiven her offences. Mr. Lascelles fulminated against that dinner as if it had been the unpardonable sin and that quiet moral wholesome English family a mere Sabbath of witches, in whose unholy revels she, a vessel of grace, had participated. He brought her to her knees, as a child asking forgiveness ; and when he had sufficiently humbled her, he held out the olive-branch once more, and put the rod back into its corner. She must do penance for the past as well as promise better things for the future ; and part of that penance, embodied in an Act of Contrition, was to give for the use of the church a cheque for five hundred pounds. This made rather more than a thousand beyond her assigned allowance ; and for this sum she was in debt to the bank.

The effect of that cheque was to make the bank write to her, reminding her that her account was overdrawn by that amount, and desiring a renewal of deposits before further business could be done. At the same time certain accounts which ought to have been settled months ago began now to pour in, and Hermione, who could not add up a day-book correctly, for the first time in her life felt herself in a financial difficulty which she

dared not confess to her husband, and could not face by herself; and wherein Superior was of neither help nor comfort. It was part of his play to get her into this entanglement, that he might have yet an additional hold on her.

This matter of the dinner set Mr. Lascelles thinking. Coupled with the difficulty of private meetings and a certain subtle reserve in confession as well as a certain subtle shrinking from that bitter wholesale condemnation of her husband by which he, as her Director, had done his best to make wifely loyalty appear a sin and mental infidelity a virtue, it made him plan out a new combination. Things could not go on as they were now. She was too weak to be trusted to herself, and would slip from his hands into those of her husband if she were not held by main force. Reconciliation with her infidel would be her newest excitement unless she was well watched and prevented; but by the absence of his sister and Virginia, his own close guardianship was interrupted, and consequently his influence and authority were weakened. This must not be. Punctual still in her religious duties, the inner fire had a little damped down, and she was acquiescing with more Christian resignation than he liked to see in the unavoidable

slackening of their intercourse. Without question the fever-fit had a little subsided, and her heart was wavering back to her husband. He saw it, felt it, knew it, in every line and movement of her body, every look of her eyes, every word of her mouth. The shock of Virginia's defection had set the pendulum swinging to the other side, and he knew that, unless he bestirred himself, his days of power were numbered. Wherefore he drew out his new plan of attack, and laid it on his penitent to accept his scheme.

“A very precious friend of mine,” he said to her one day abruptly after confession; “a good Churchwoman, and I need hardly tell you a most valuable person all through—Mrs. Everett; Edith Everett—wants to come here. I told her that you would receive her at the Abbey. She knows all about your trials and sufferings, and I shall be glad for you to have her. She will be invaluable to you, lonely and needing comfort as you are!”

“Thank you, dear Superior,” said Hermione, with feigned cordiality. In her heart she wished that he had not made this arrangement. She was not so lonely now as she had been at first. She saw a good deal of Mrs. Nesbitt, whom she could not help loving in spite of her

want of soundness, and Ringrove and Bee were almost as often at the Abbey as they used to be a year or more ago. And then she was sure that this Mrs. Everett would not be congenial to Richard. Poor Richard! he had suffered so much already, she really did not like to give him any more pain.

Mr. Lascelles looked at her sharply. He evidently expected her to say more than that mere bald word of thanks, and he seemed to understand her thoughts.

“What is she like?” asked Hermione hurriedly and with a woman’s instinctive jealousy.

“She is beautiful,” replied Mr. Lascelles with fervour.

The pretty woman’s soft pink cheeks flamed into a sudden red, and she held her slender neck a trifle stiffly.

“In mind if not in person,” continued her Director. “Spiritually, she is as near perfection as a sinful mortal can be; and when you know her you will say so and love her as well as I do.”

“I am sure I shall,” she returned in a constrained voice, looking down and feeling that she should hate her instead. And after all, though Superior was—Superior—it was rather a liberty that he had taken, was it not? seeing that now—What?—Seeing that deep down in that foolish heart of hers was the unacknowledged wish to

become reconciled to her husband, and the moral certainty that if left alone she would become thus reconciled. But she did not put this into words. After all that had been between her and Superior—after the holy love which they had mutually confessed : a love so holy as to be without sin or shame—after the authority that he had claimed and the obedience that she had paid—after the assignment to him of her conscience and the gift which she had made him of her wifeness—it was impossible to refuse an arrangement proposed for her benefit ; or to do other than accept it with apparent gratitude and real dismay ; smiling up into his face while saying to herself with ill-suppressed tears : “ How shall I ever be able to break it to Richard ! ”

“ If you will be guided by me,” said Mr. Lascelles, from whom nothing was concealed—“ will you, my child ? ”—he put in smiling, as if he playfully doubted and seriously trusted.

“ Of course, dear Superior,” she answered, also smiling, but with an odd little quiver of affectation in her eagerness.

“ Well, then, take my advice. Say nothing to Mr. Fullerton until the hour of Mrs. Everett’s arrival. Then tell him that she is coming, and that you are going to Starton to meet her—as of course you will do.”

“And you do not think this will be too abrupt?” she asked anxiously.

“Oh! if you wish to spare his feelings so very much you had better ask his consent and abide by his decision,” said Mr. Lascelles with rough contempt. “I thought you had regained enough self-respect by now to be able to ask a lady friend to stay with you for a short time without going on your knees to your husband for his permission. And such a husband!—to whom all things godly and of good repute are abhorrent. But I do not wish to guide you against your inclinations. Do as you think best. I have but one desire—your temporal happiness and spiritual well-being. And when this desire oppresses you I will withdraw my care.”

“No, I do not wish you to withdraw your care. You are my best friend,” said Hermione, humbled to the point where he wished her to be brought. “I will do as you tell me, and say nothing about Mrs. Everett till I go to bring her from the station.”

He smiled and leaned forward to look the better into her eyes.

“Sweet child!” he murmured tenderly; “the world would be a blank to me if, after having known the truth, you were to become a backslider and lapse into error.

But you will keep firm, will you not? You will not give the enemy of souls power over you by any sinful weakness for the infidel to whom the law has given the name of your husband? Remember again what I have said to you before—it is God or man, salvation or eternal destruction, Divine guidance or Satan and your husband. You cannot have the two together any more than you can breathe pure air in a foul pit. You must make your election—as you have; and abide by your decision—as you will.”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “I will always be guided by you.”

He took her hand.

“You vow that on the Cross?” he said, at once sternly and eagerly. “You will always be guided by me?”

“Yes,” she answered, trembling.

“I will soon put you to the test,” he said, letting her hand fall suddenly. “When I do, remember your oath, your vow of obedience sworn on the Cross!”

CHAPTER IV.

HER GUIDE AND FRIEND.

“A LADY is coming to stay with me for a few weeks. I am just going to the station to meet her.”

Hermione made this announcement with an attempt at ease that was undeniably a failure, her eyes looking just about her husband's scarf-pin and her voice husky for all its artificial carelessness.

Richard looked at her with surprise. What was the meaning of this announcement? Why was the coming of this stranger so suddenly sprung on him?

“Who is she? Where have you met her?” he asked.

“She is Mrs. Everett and I have not seen her yet,” was the answer.

“Her name tells me nothing. Who and what is this Mrs. Everett?—and why is she coming here?” he returned.

“She is a friend of the vicar's, and wants to come to Crossholme to see the work,” said Hermione. “As she

could not go to the Vicarage now, unfortunately!"—sighing—"I offered to take her in here"—with a characteristic little fib to save Superior and appearances.

"I hope she will approve of the work and like her quarters," said Richard, a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"You do not object to her coming, do you?" she asked, tempting Providence.

She was one of those women who are not satisfied with having their own way, but demand also that others should approve as well as acquiesce.

"That has nothing to do with it," he answered.

"Yes, it has. I should be very sorry to displease you," said Hermione impulsively.

"I fear you went beyond your record there," was his grave rejoinder. "Unhappily, sorrow for my displeasure has long ceased to be a restraining influence over you, Hermione."

Tears of genuine feeling came to her eyes.

"You misjudge me cruelly," she said; and at the moment she honestly believed in her own words.

"No, I am not cruel," he said quietly; "I am only on my guard. I do not care to fall into another mistake."

“And perhaps you are more mistaken now than you were before,” said Hermione, holding out her hand and looking up at him with sudden softness.

He took her hand and held it without speaking. What indeed could he say? He knew that all this was only a passing mood, not a vital change of feeling; and that to-day in one form, to-morrow she would be in another, according as the influence of Mr. Lascelles or her own natural instinct had the upper hand. These passing moods, these fleeting, flitting changes, were not to be trusted; and even that evident desire to draw a little closer to him, which she had shown since Virginia's departure, was as fallacious as the rest. It was no real reconciliation that was offered. There was but one way for this;—to renounce Ritualism and Mr. Lascelles and return to her wifeness in the perfect love and obedience of the past—that love which made obedience unity. Failing this, her half-hearted efforts at a partial peace were in vain. They were due rather to weariness of herself than to any true reawakening of love for him, he thought with the straightforward courage of a man who prefers pain to self-deception—because she was lonely, not because she was repentant.

“Of course,” Hermione went on to say, womanlike,

giving reasons that should exonerate her when she had not been accused ;—"Of course it is very lonely for me now ; and it will be nice to have a companion. I feel that."

Richard sighed heavily. By whose fault and folly was it that she had lost the best companion a woman can have, in her own child, and was now forced to seek the association of a stranger to relieve her desolation ?

"I hope we shall like her. I dare say we shall," she continued, speaking rapidly, for her husband's face was not encouraging and she was nervous and uncomfortable. "Mr. Lascelles knows her very well, and says that she is charming ; and beautiful as well. That will make it pleasant for you, Richard !" she added, attempting a playfulness that failed as much as her composure had failed a short time since.

"If you are satisfied, that is sufficient," he said.

"But you must be satisfied too," she persisted, sincere at the moment and piqued by his quietness.

"I have no part in the matter," he said. "It is idle to talk of me in connexion with your actions, Hermione !"

"How unkind you are !" she said, raising her big blue eyes reproachfully.

He turned away. It was all too painful to him. He would rather have her honestly estranged because of false principles sincerely held, than humiliated to what was substantially coquetry. It jarred on every feeling of truth and self-respect that he had, and distressed him more than her petulance and ill-temper had ever done.

“Well!” said Hermione, sighing, and feeling deeply ill-used; “I hope that you will not dislike her, Richard, and that she may make you a little happier than you have been of late.”

“The presence of a stranger cannot possibly make me happier,” he said. “She cannot give me back my lost child nor my wife’s love.”

“It is very hard on me—you are always vexed and irritated with me now!” cried Hermione with a look of angry sorrow. “The more I try to please you the less I succeed.”

“I am never vexed nor irritated with you, Hermione,” said Richard; “I have only learnt a new reading of you; and the lesson is painful. But that is not the present question. The thing before you to-day is the reception of Mrs. Everett; and it is time you were setting out.”

“You are horribly cruel!” cried Hermione, who

longed to fling herself into his arms, and felt as if she had done so and been repulsed.

He made no answer, but with a little farewell movement of his hand left her to herself and the half-dreaded task of welcoming the strange lady whom Mr. Lascelles had pronounced perfect.

A tall and graceful woman, with a clever face but not in the least handsome, got out of the train at Starton, set all the officials astir in their attendance on her, and looked about her curiously. She was a woman of a singularly unembarrassed manner, but as gentle as she was composed ; a woman who bore her womanhood as at once a weapon and a shield, and who held herself as a kind of sacred creature whom the world was honoured in respecting. She had light, almost flaxen hair, without the faintest tinge of gold or red to redeem it from insipidity ; her eyes were a greenish hazel ; her skin was of exquisite colour and clearness ; her nose was short, blunt and kid-like. Her address was good ; as artificial in its own way as had been that of Sister Agnes, but less sanctimonious. She was evidently a woman of the world who had added religion as an extra ornament ; a Ritualist on the outside of her and a woman of the world all through. She was also one who, while

appearing to be frank, held all her real self in absolute reserve, and while soft and supple and caressing in her ways, had a will of iron and a grasp of steel. The velvet glove was never more fully exemplified than with Mrs. Edith Everett; and the current verdict of those who knew her only superficially was: "What a sweet woman she is!"—but her children feared her, and her servants never stayed beyond the conventional year.

Forewarned, she took Hermione from the first as one to be compassionated, coerced, scourged, encouraged and praised all in one. Backsliding to the extent of making even the hollowest kind of peace with her infidel husband was a sin of which the possibility was not to be contemplated; and Mrs. Fullerton was to be made to feel that in Mrs. Edith Everett she had a jailor of godliness who would stand no paltering with evil, however craftily disguised as conjugal affection or womanly tenderness. The renunciation which had been ordained and carried out so far was not to be repented of; and in the drive home Mrs. Everett touched without disguise on the sorrow which so faithful a daughter of the Church must endure through the companionship of a godless and depraved husband like Mr. Fullerton. It was public property in the sect to which both belonged,

and there was no indelicacy in speaking of it—so at least her manner seemed to say.

“Superior has told me all about you, and explained how I can best comfort you and be of use to you,” she said, at once ranging herself with Hermione as joint allies against a common foe. “He has told me of your heavy trial, and how nobly you bear it.”

“I do my best,” answered Hermione confusedly.

“Yes ; Superior says you are grand—and understand so wisely how impossible it is in your case to be both a good Churchwoman and a fond wife ! It is hard on you, poor lady ; but you cannot serve God and the devil, and you must make your choice.”

“My husband is good in everything but his opinions,” faltered Hermione, shrinking at the uncompromising condemnation of her husband, for whom since the loss of Virginia she had felt so much more kindly, and with whom she had been trying to establish a little line of closer relationship. It was painful enough sometimes to hear poor Richard so harshly judged by Superior ; but by this stranger, Superior’s perfect woman, it was unendurable !

Mrs. Everett smiled. What a babe in the world of truth the pretty creature was after all !

“Why! that is just the heart of everything,” she said. “What is anything without right doctrine? Superior would tell you the same, I know;—is it not so?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, like a catechized child.

“I have often heard Superior preach on that very subject,” continued Mrs. Everett;—“‘The nothingness of natural virtue and the absolute necessity of right doctrine.’ I do not think Superior holds anything more necessary to salvation than this belief. It opens a wide door else, dear Mrs. Fullerton—the door which leads to eternal perdition! Is this your place?” suddenly changing her voice as they drove through the lodge gates. “How pretty it is! What a paradise! and,” sighing, as she added a little below her breath but quite audibly, “with the serpent here as well as in Eden!”

Her introduction to the serpent, which took place just before dinner, was rather awkward in more than one direction. Hermione, conscious that she had brought into his house an enemy to her husband as declared as Mr. Lascelles himself, and sorry that she had been forced to do so, was neither natural nor at ease. Mrs. Everett, faithful to her programme, was cold and scarcely courteous to this confessed son of perdition; and the

master of the house himself, catching the tone of the moment, offered the mere skeleton of hospitality—no more. When introduced to Mr. Fullerton, Mrs. Everett made a cold bow, and, afflicted with sudden myopy, did not see the hand held out in conventional welcome. When dinner was announced, she refused Richard's arm, saying with a smile as she took Hermione's hand : " You and I will go together, and then there will be no distinction ;" and all through dinner she kept to the same *rôle*. She never let the talk flag for a moment ; but she spoke exclusively to Hermione, and when Richard put in his word, answered him only through his wife. She never looked at him save when he was not looking at her, and then by stealth as it were ; scanning him with the same kind of curiosity as she would have had in looking at some monster. From him she turned her eyes slowly to Hermione ; and then she changed from the curiosity of horror to pity and tenderness. And Hermione saw all this facial byplay, as it was intended she should. Whatever Richard said Edith Everett contradicted and persistently turned the conversation on theology and the Church. She spoke of themselves—the Anglicans or Catholics—as persecuted by such as Richard—"the strong ones of the earth"—whose

wickedness they must endure for a while to triumph with the saints in the end. To hear her one would have imagined that fire and faggot, the thumbscrew and the scavenger's daughter, were still in active use, and that she and hers went in daily fear of their lives from Richard and the law. Their steadfastness to the truth was, according to her, a service of peril for which they suffered gladly ; while infidelity had all the good things of life and was the tyrant who ruled the land and did despitefully to the faithful. She candidly acknowledged this tremendous power of evil, and did not soften the iniquity of the present visible wielder of the diabolical flail, sitting there at the head of the Abbey table; but her manner, taken by itself, was free from active insolence. She was like a calm superior being recognizing, but not fearing, the might of the Evil One, as embodied in this his living emissary. Her frank and unconditional condemnation made Hermione wince ; but Richard, refusing the challenges flung one after the other into his face, let all pass without debate or comment. Spiritually crucified as he was, did it signify to him if a casual passer by railed at him? Neither did he care to argue as to the wood of which his cross was made, nor on the name of the forge where the nails which held him were made. But

the quiet constancy with which he refused to be roused did not tend to make Mrs. Everett more his friend or less his appointed and willing enemy.

For her own part, Hermione soon found that it would not do to defend her agnostic husband when she and her new friend were alone. She tried it once when Superior's perfect woman was more than ordinarily severe and unjust ; but Mrs. Everett, looking at her with her clear penetrating eyes—eyes that neither flashed nor melted, neither drooped nor dilated, but that simply—looked—looked—as if they would read and dominate her very soul—answered in her soft and rather monotonous voice :

“ You must not make excuses for him, dear Mrs. Fullerton, else I shall think Superior's fear is justified.”

“ What does Superior fear ? ” asked Hermione with a half-frightened look.

“ That because of your almost criminal love for your husband, you should fall from grace and become a cast-away,” said Mrs. Everett, as quietly as if she were speaking of an old gown to be discarded.

“ I hope not that,” said Hermione with a superstitious shiver.

“ Then do not tempt Providence by defending such

a dreadful man. You might as well defend Judas Iscariot," was the calm rejoinder.

"I do not defend his opinions. No one can condemn these more than I. I only say that he is not bad all through," replied Hermione with the courage of irritation.

"My poor soul! not bad all through!" said Mrs. Everett sweetly. "How can an infidel be anything but bad all through? You might as well say that a man dying of cancer is not diseased all through! Mr. Fullerton's infidelity is the cancer that taints every part of him, and you make yourself one with his sin when you defend him or even apologize for him. I grant you it is natural," she went on to say with a generous concession to human weakness. "Considering the regrettable amount of love that you have for him, I can understand your wanting to put him in the fairest light possible. But it is not right. There are times when even the love of a wife for her husband is unholy: and in your case, dear, yours is undoubtedly unholy, and at all costs must be subdued. It is a terrible trial to you; but you must suffer and resist."

This was the tone taken by Mrs. Everett, under direction. She assumed on the part of Hermione an

all-devouring passion for her husband which brought the blood into the pretty woman's face for shame, and made her afraid to show the smallest kindness to this infidel whom the Church had given her and now wanted to take from her. Whenever she spoke to him Edith Everett's clear hazel eyes fixed themselves on her steadily until she had ended; and she was made to feel unrighteous if she spoke to him gently or when not absolutely obliged. He was the outcast, and she the rebel against divine authority when she recognized that he had human claims. But her chances of backsliding were carefully curtailed. Wherever she went, Mrs. Everett was by her side—whatever she said or did, Mrs. Everett was there as auditor, witness and judge. Her life gradually passed from her own control; and one by one, quietly, stealthily, craftily—never offering the point where Hermione could resist nor the moment when she could refuse—this soft-mannered guest took into her own hands all sorts of little duties and activities, which made the mistress of the house daily more dependent on her and daily under closer control. And above all, she brought her into constant communication with Superior, and made all things as possible and proper as in the days of Sister Agnes and a free Vicarage. She was the occasion, the

duenna, if need be the scapegoat ; and Hermione had no more chance against her than the fly has against the spider when once caught in the net.

Yet for all this Hermione was unhappy. Flattering her in speech, protecting her in appearance, coercing her in reality, Mrs. Everett seemed somehow to stand between her and Superior on the one hand, and between her and her husband on the other ; that husband with whom, now that she was prevented, she longed secretly to make peace. She was too much her interpreter ; and Hermione would rather have been allowed to interpret for herself. She did not like to hear her thoughts and feelings and desires explained to Superior, and her soul made as it were into a set of copybook headings which Mrs. Everett wrote out and she had only to sign. But she was powerless. Mr. Lascelles had established a spiritual "mousetrap," after the manner of the great spy ; and Hermione was not only watched and reported on, but was made to feel that Mrs. Everett was but another name for Superior, while Superior himself was the consecrated interpreter of the Mind of God. Between the two the soft, weak soul had not the thinnest fibre of independence left her, and was bent hither and thither just as they most desired. If that strong hand which held

her with so firm a grasp was the crutch for her weakness, it was also the band and buckle of restraint, the lash and the goad that coerced ; and nothing but the superstitious dread of offending Superior, and, through him, Eternal Justice, kept her in the state of moral thralldom from which one word to Richard would have relieved her. But that one word ! It was just that which she dared not say. For would it not have been calling on Satan to deliver her from the holy hands of the Church ?

And all this while both Mr. Lascelles and Mrs. Everett despised the weakness of which they made their account and to Hermione herself extolled as grace.

A clever woman with a keen sense of the ridiculous and a strong love of power—also with very clear and decided views as to what she wanted out of life and meant that it should give her—Mrs. Everett found much in the state of things at Crossholme to laugh at and more to condemn. The feminine worship paid to Superior revolted her for more reasons than one ; and she satirized it so unsparingly that Mr. Lascelles himself became ashamed, and thought that perhaps it was after all a little in excess of his rightful spiritual due. To those whose love for the man ran into their reverence for the priest she was as bitter as she was unscrupulous

in her denunciations; and she did not even spare Theresa, dying as she was. Miss Pryor and all the humbler sisterhood who fed on Superior's words and looks as the hungry Chosen fed on manna, were never so sharply rallied as by this tall, smiling, blunt-nosed woman with the soft voice and the keen wit, who said the cruellest things in the blandest manner, and made them all cry in secret and blush in public. What her own feelings were for this man who stood as the target for so many feminine arrows no one could divine. Surely, said some, she was too clever to imagine that he would marry her—a widow without beauty or fortune—though she had all those social qualities by which a wife gets her husband on in the world. Yet she was evidently a power with him, and had more influence over him than anyone else. She had the oddest way possible of laying down the law on matters; when she would look over to Mr. Lascelles and say: "Superior, I am sure that you see it as I do;" and Superior would invariably see it as she did, and say so. In any controversy or dispute that might be on hand between her and anyone else, he "gave her reason" though she had none; and said she was right when she was manifestly wrong. People talked of it, as of course. In

small communities where there is but one masculine sun of any account and a great many feminine satellites, a few rays of benevolence more or less are jealously weighed and measured; and what is no one's business becomes everyone's, like a riddle given to the public to guess. But whatever Mrs. Everett's own thoughts might be, or wherever Superior's inclinations tended, the work undertaken by the one after the design of the other was plain and clear enough—the absolute prevention of anything like relapse in Hermione's relations with her husband, and the separation between them widened, not narrowed. Richard was an infidel to be crushed; and his wife should be made to crush him. It was infamous that an atheist should hold this large property which was not his own; a scandal to justice and Christianity both, that he should apply to the spread of infidelity funds rightfully belonging to the Church; and it must be put an end to now as speedily as might be. Though the great hope of permanent restitution had been frustrated through Virginia's perversion, pretty pickings might still be gathered from the liberal table of the present proprietor if only that wretched obstructive could be removed.

This, then, was the ultimate point—Richard must be

ousted from his place of power and Hermione must take on herself the administration of her own affairs. The train had been well laid ; now was the time for prudent firing.

Mrs. Everett smiled as she listened to Superior declaiming with such scathing irony on the weakness of women and the folly of love, while trading on the one and living by the breath of the other. But she understood her lesson and practised it faithfully. From the day on which she entered the Abbey Richard had no recognized status in his own house ; and, in spite of his evident displeasure, Mrs. Everett's conversation alternated between religion and the Abbey estate.

" *Your house, your fields, your farms,*" she used to say with emphasis to Hermione, of whom she asked questions concerning this and that, to which the pretty woman could give no reply save in a helpless appeal to her husband.

" Do not you know your own affairs?" asked Mrs. Everett one day. " How dreadful ! "

" Why?" said Richard gravely. " What more is needed than that the husband should act for the wife?"

" You hear what Mr. Fullerton says," returned Mrs. Everett, still speaking to Hermione. She never addressed

Richard directly. "Do you too, think that marriage merges a woman's individuality so entirely as to make her no longer responsible for what may be done in her name with her means? I confess I do not; and the doctrine seems to me as dangerous as the practice is indelicate. We are all directly responsible for the use or abuse of our powers and privileges; and to say, 'My husband did this or that,' 'My husband forbade this or commanded that,' will not exonerate us if things are done which tell against the glory of God and the influence of the Church."

Hermione coloured and looked down. Richard turned from one to the other, his sad face set into a certain proud sternness which, once an expression entirely strange to him, was now becoming only too mournfully familiar.

"My wife's principles were different from yours," he said quietly. "When we married our wills, our hearts, our interests were the same, and one interpreter was sufficient."

"Shifting one's responsibilities does not lessen the guilt of misused power," said Mrs. Everett, adjusting her tucker. "Don't you think so, dear?" to Hermione. "You are not afraid to speak openly, are you?" in a low, sympathetic voice.

“No, she has no reason to be afraid,” said Richard ; and ; “No, I am not afraid,” said Hermione, both together in a breath.

“Then, do you really think that a woman, because she is married, has no direct responsibilities?” asked Mrs. Everett, pursuing the theme. The opportunity for striking a few nails into the coffin of conjugal affection was too good to be lost.

“No, I do not think that,” Hermione answered.

“Yet you act on what you do not believe?”

Hermione laughed nervously.

“We all do that at times, I fancy,” she said with affected levity.

Mrs. Everett smiled.

“That will be but a poor excuse at the Last Day,” was the reply made with perfect urbanity. “Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh will have a bad time of it, I fear, if the one bone has taken service under Satan, and the other lets itself be dragged into the same ranks—knowing better.”

“Your Last Day must be a ruthless kind of spiritual butchery, if a poor soul is punished for not having learnt, when in the body, what farms belonging to her were let, and for how much and to whom,” said Richard. “How

you Christians can imagine such a Divine Being as He whom you worship I cannot conceive. Your God of Love is more cruel than Moloch—your Divine Reason more insensate than Juggernaut !”

“Richard ! don’t !” cried Hermione in despair.

Why would he say such dreadful things at the very time when she was doing her best to defend him against Mrs. Everett, and honestly trying to think a little less ill of him than she had done of late !

“I do not wonder at your husband’s sentiments, detestable as they are,” said Mrs. Everett, still addressing Hermione. “If I held one part of his vile opinions, I should hold the other. Naughty children always think the chastising parent cruel and the punishment hard. And so it is with sinners.”

“If I had compared the action of your God to that of a man, you would have called it blasphemous,” said Richard, who was determined to have it out with her.

Mrs. Everett turned on him.

“And so it would have been,” she said passionately. “What can a blasphemer be but blasphemous ! It is a sin to discuss such subjects with you !” she added, rising in an agitation that was partly real and partly feigned. Then, as if she had recovered her serenity by an effort,

she turned back from the window where she had gone as if for refuge, and said to Hermione amiably: "I am going out now, dear, though it is raining. Shall I tell Superior that you were afraid of the weather?"

"No," said Hermione, rising also in agitation. "I will go with you. I am not afraid of the weather."

"I wish you would not go out, Hermione. It is not fit for you to-day," said Richard, coming up to where she stood and laying his hand on her shoulder.

Mrs. Everett averted her eyes as from something unholy; Hermione dropped hers, and her lips quivered with nervous shyness. What a frightful position! It would have been so pleasant to have done as Richard wished; but there was Mrs. Everett—and then Superior! She dared not anger them; and to please him would be to anger them.

"I can take any message that you like to send to Superior," said Edith Everett in a cold voice and with an unpleasant smile. "I can tell him that Mr. Fullerton would not allow you to come, and that you were too good a wife to disobey. He expects you, I know; but that is no matter. He will live over his disappointment."

"How silly it all is!" said Hermione nervously.

“Of course I will go ; I am not made of sugar, Richard”—to her husband with false playfulness ; “and,” to Edith Everett, “I always keep my engagements when I can.”

“Do not be angry with me, dear, for speaking as I did just now,” said Mrs. Everett when they were alone. “I was carried out of myself for the moment ; but I ought to have remembered your feelings, and for your sake should have spared the blasphemer. It is so hard to me to realize that you, Hermione Fullerton, love a man whom every good Christian should abhor, and who in the Ages of Faith would have been excommunicated and burnt. You so good and earnest—I cannot understand this indifference to the Church and the truth !”

“I see my husband’s faults as clearly as anyone can, and suffer from them more,” said poor weak Hermione faltering.

“Yet you go on living with him—go on putting all the power into his hands ! You give your whole fortune to him, and he uses half of it to make men infidels and destroy in them the blessed hope of salvation and the belief of immortality;—and then you say you see his faults and are a loyal daughter of the Church !”

She spoke severely ; Hermione’s spiritual state was

evidently one of grievous peril to her mind. Even Superior himself, inimical to Richard as he was, had less harshness towards this wifely weakness which kept the conjugal tie, though strained, not wholly broken.

“ My position is difficult,” said Hermione.

Edith Everett smiled.

“ ‘ He who would save his life shall lose it,’ ” she said ; “ and you know, my dear, we cannot carry our darling sins on our backs if we would enter in at the strait gate. Your husband is your darling sin and you will not free yourself from him ; but I am afraid—I am afraid—that strait gate is terribly narrow ! ”

“ What ought I to do ? ” asked Hermione, with a kind of desperate courage.

Mrs. Everett came close to her and took her two hands in hers.

“ Shall I tell you ? ” she said in a clear metallic voice. “ Take back the management of your own affairs ; forbid him to use your money as he does for the spread of infidelity ; make him an allowance and have a deed of separation. You will never be a true Christian or a good churchwoman, Hermione, until you do all this ; and Superior knows this as well as I do.”



'You do not know what you are saying.'



“No, I cannot do all this. Poor Richard!” said Hermione.

Mrs. Everett let her hands fall.

“Then you can never hope to go to heaven,” she said. “You prefer the creature to the Creator, and sensual passion to holiness and faith. Your love for your husband is simply sensuality and a shameful sin, call it what you will.”

“You do not know what you are saying,” cried Hermione, strongly agitated.

“I think I do,” said Mrs. Everett in a superior kind of way. “It is you, poor thing, who do not know what you feel! Neither I nor Superior will ever think differently until you take your courage in both hands and do as I say—and as he says too:—rid the place of this infamous atheism which your husband teaches, and free yourself from the declared enemy of the Church and your priest. There is no second way. It is this, or consenting with sinners and making yourself responsible for their sin. There! don’t cry! Tears do no good unless they are tears of repentance; and you are only crying because you are weak and worried and cannot make up your mind to do bravely what is right.”

She went to her and kissed the grieving woman as if she had been a child.

“I have said enough for the present,” she thought, watching her. “Things must go gently.”

After a moment she spoke again.

“You poor darling!” she said; “I am so sorry to make you unhappy. But I must, until I make you good. Don’t fret any more just now. Put on your bonnet and come with me to see dear Superior. He will comfort you and tell you that I am right.”

“I don’t see how that will comfort me,” said Hermione irritably.

At this moment Mrs. Everett was the most hateful person in all creation to her whom she had been appointed to guide and befriend.

CHAPTER V.

THE TERRORS OF JUDGMENT.

MR. LASCELLES and Mrs. Edith Everett stood by the parting of the ways, she to return to the tedium of her duennaship at the Abbey, he to the discomfort of his bereaved Vicarage ; both a little rasped by the unpleasant conditions of the present moment, but drawn closer together by the common need of sympathy rather than driven apart into unfriendliness because of irritated nerves and ruffled temper. They had been talking of many things connected with the parish, and had touched at last on the relations of Hermione with her husband, and how far she might be counted on in the final struggle which Mr. Lascelles was preparing to make. Both knew that she was profoundly impressed with faith and fear—that she believed in the truth of Christianity and was afraid of the power of the Church ; but both knew also that her love for her husband was not dead, and that since Virginia's defection it had undergone an undeniable revival ; and both were anxiously watching

the alternate rise and fall of these two antagonistic forces, and speculating as to which would finally overcome.

“Do you think she will be permanently influenced for good?—you see so much more of her than I do!” said Mr. Lascelles, careful not to show too much personal interest in Hermione.

“Well, you see, she is so weak!” replied the pretty woman’s friend and guide, speaking with tranquil contempt. “There is no certainty with weak people; and as for her, you never know where to have her. You think you have brought her to a right view of things one day, and the next she has taken a new start and is as far off as ever. She is terribly fatiguing. I hope she is worth all the trouble taken about her!”

“She is very impressionable,” said Mr. Lascelles, steering between praise and blame.

“That is a meek way of putting it, Superior. I should call her miserably feeble-minded,” returned Mrs. Everett, still with that same calm, mocking contempt. It was her method of asserting her own superiority.

“Her will has been crushed so long. It is the paralysis of disuse,” said the vicar, wishing to be charitable as well as just, yet not caring to champion Hermione Fullerton too warmly to Mrs. Everett. Those hazel eyes

of hers were not pleasant to meet when they looked as if they were reading the secret writing of the soul ;—and somewhat despising the literature.

“She need not have been crushed. She need not have given in to that vile husband of hers if she had not liked it,” she said. “Really, no excuses are to be made for her, Superior ! She is just a child with nice manners and a pretty face and nothing whatever in her. When you have said that she is kind-hearted you have said all for her that you can. Of mind she has not a trace.”

“You, at least, will not strain the truth for charity. I honour your uncompromising spirit,” said Mr. Lascelles, with a courtly smile.

“No,” she answered, ignoring the sting and accepting the blandishment. “It is never my way to strain the truth for false charity. I like to see things as they are, and to speak of them as I see them.”

“Yet submissiveness has its uses, my dear friend,” he said pleasantly.

“I am not clever enough to see them in the case of Mrs. Fullerton,” she answered. “Jelly-fish and that dreadful protoplasm have their uses too, I suppose ; but I confess I do not know what they are.”

“As an agent inspired by others,” said Mr. Lascelles. “The docility which has made Mrs. Fullerton submit so readily to her husband will make her as obedient to the Church.”

Mrs. Everett looked into vacancy and put on, as she could do at will, a perfectly stolid, stupid, mindless look.

“She believes—that is the great thing gained,” continued Mr. Lascelles; and then waited for an answer.

“But she is one of those emotional people who require so much personal influence!” she said. “It is not as if she had any intellect, any will, any force that could be trusted to. She has to be always held in hand—always guided.”

“She has that influence in Direction,” replied Hermione’s confessor demurely.

“To forget everything that she has promised as soon as she is at home!” retorted Mrs. Everett cruelly. “She must be an enormous trouble to you, Superior, if she is honest.”

“I allow that. She does give me infinitely more trouble than some others whom I could name—some others who are at once stronger and yet more submissive.”

The vicar smiled as he said this, his smile giving his words their application and meaning.

Mrs. Everett smiled too, and adjusted her bonnet-strings with the automatic coquetry of a woman who, though she knows that she is not beautiful, also knows herself admired. Truly she had no cause to fear Hermione ! There was no rivalry here that should make her afraid. Blunt nose ; small, greenish, hazel eyes ; a face that had not one redeeming feature save its transparent skin, on the one side—on the other loveliness as fresh and fragrant now as at eighteen ; but still no rivalry that should make her afraid ! For had she not brains by which she was enabled to be a clever man's still cleverer manipulator as well as coadjutor?—while Hermione was but a child to be petted and cared for—loved if you will and admired—but neither trusted to in moments of difficulty nor confided in when clear counsel was needed—a mere doll-wife, dainty, sweet, caressing, loving;—and that was all ! With such a man as Superior brains would count for more than beauty, and sweetness was less necessary than sense. He wanted some one by his side who had intelligence enough to understand his own mind and act with independent accord—strengthening his hands while freeing him from the trouble of direction ; not a mere machine, however pretty, to work when guided but sure to fall into disorder if left to itself.

No ; Mrs. Everett saw nothing to be afraid of and much to hope for. But she must not let Superior understand her too clearly, and she must manage things in her own way ; which was not exactly that in vogue at Crossholme.

“Some men like troublesome women,” she said.

“Do they?” asked Mr. Lascelles with affected innocence of inquiry.

“Yes ; pretty little creatures whose inferiority is a perpetual witness of their own supremacy,” she said. “It gratifies their self-love to feel themselves always on a pedestal, and to see the relative silliness of the dear little things !”

“So ! And who are these men ?” he asked, still with that innocent air as of one wanting to know.

“Well, I do not think that you are one, Superior !” said Mrs. Everett with frank confession. “You are too wise to like the dangerous honour of being the head-centre of an association of pretty simpletons. You would feel more in your right place if surrounded by those who understood and could help you as interpreters of your mind, rather than by mere dummies acting only according to minute orders ; is it not so ?”

“Surely !” said Mr. Lascelles with a peculiar smile. “But where are such to be found ? So few women

understand the deeper thoughts of men! Some supplement us," he added courteously; "but it is given to very few to really understand us."

"I know that, being one of the few," she said carelessly. "I do most thoroughly understand them and society too. Had I been born a man I should have gone into diplomacy. And I would have made a name. As it is I shall make my son's, when he is old enough. My husband died just as I had laid the train of his success," she went on to say. "Had he lived he would have been distinguished. I know that he would have been made a bishop. The whole thing was ripening when he was taken."

"I know you are invaluable," said Mr. Lascelles with earnestness that was more flattering than passion. "But in the matter of your husband, now—I, who uphold the celibacy of the clergy as a necessity of Church discipline, can scarcely be expected to feel entirely satisfied."

He lowered his eyes as he said this, and put on an official look.

"Yes, as a principle, their celibacy is best," returned Mrs. Everett. "But when we have so much to work against any help is valuable. And a wife may be looked upon as a lay worker—like a district visitor, for instance.

I think the thing would be lawful if her own heart was in the right place, and she could be really of use to the Church by the social advancement of her husband. Women have power, Superior !”

“ You have,” he said.

“ Yes ; I know that I can be of use where I am trusted,” she answered. “ As I hope you will find in this matter of Mrs. Fullerton,” lightly, as if to put the other aspect of the subject from her.

“ And you really think she will be induced to take the estate out of her husband’s hands ?” he asked, also anxious to drop that slight discussion on the value of diplomatic wives to ambitious ritualistic priests.

“ I think so,” said Mrs. Everett ; “ and would say ‘ yes ’ without hesitation if she had the smallest pretence to a moral backbone. But one can never be quite sure of such a fluid creature as she is.”

“ The scandal of the present state of things is unbearable,” said the vicar angrily.

“ My only wonder is how you have not put an end to it before this,” returned Mrs. Everett. “ I think I should have found the way had I been here. Your sister ought to have managed it ; for this is just one of those

cases where a woman's aid is required, and where no man can act satisfactorily by himself."

"I count on you now," said the vicar with emphasis.

"I will do my best," she answered. "Poor Superior!" she added with a sympathetic little smile. "What a dreadful set you have fallen into! Hermione Fullerton—Theresa Molyneux—your sister who deceived and deserted you—all these silly gaping creatures setting their caps at you and each hoping to be the Honourable Mrs. Lascelles, while not one has the smallest qualification for the place. You are to be pitied!" She shrugged her shapely shoulders and laughed.

"But with Edith Everett to put all straight—" he said.

"You are to be congratulated in having one serviceable head among the dummies!" she answered quickly; bidding him farewell and leaving him to digest what she had already said. It was enough for one day.

By this time the cottages in Lane End were almost finished, and the men had been told by Richard that they might take possession when it suited them. Naturally the news got abroad; as indeed why should it not? An open check to the vicar, there was no secrecy in the matter from first to last; and neither Richard nor the men cared who knew it.

They were charming little cottages, built with all modern appliances and conveniences, and each standing in its own pleasant plot of garden ground; and they were architecturally ornamental and made a pretty feature in the landscape. They were not set at a fancy price either up or down in the scale; but the rent was calculated on a just basis, as a fair and equitable interest on the capital expended. Thus, no eleemosynary character tainted the benefit which they undoubtedly would be to the tenants; and a few architectural flourishes were not reckoned as of exorbitant value because pleasing to the eye. They were dwellings built with humane thought and generous intention, but with the common sense of a good business man as well. Parcelled out among the men from the first, they had been all along looked on as their certain homes; and each assigned occupier had made this and that suggestion for his own fancy or convenience while his house was in course of erection, and had determined where this and that should go, and what he would do here and there. They were all highly delighted with their prospective dwellings, and looked forward to taking possession with pleasure and eagerness. If there was one thing more than another that might be considered

certain in this shifty life of ours, it was that Richard Fullerton's new cottages would be inhabited by the men for whom they were designed. Failing the sudden death of the intended tenant, there was surely nothing that could step in between—earthquakes and tornadoes not being things of ordinary occurrence in England.

This then was the moment for which Mr. Lascelles had been waiting. When most secure the blow that shatters all comes with greatest force; and if he could strike that blow now he should have accomplished the larger half of his great endeavour. Could he? Would Hermione do as directed? Though her mind, never strong nor self-reliant, had become weakened through superstitious belief, yet her affections were not dead. Had she been an intelligence only, with no interrupting emotions, the thing would have been easy; but side by side with her superstitious belief in the power of the priesthood—in the sinfulness of reason—in the lost condition of that soul which dares to doubt and hesitates to obey—was the strength of her natural affectionateness, her hatred of giving pain, her indestructible respect for her husband;—that respect which still lived beneath the superincumbent mass of reprobation that had been heaped over it;—and her sense of injustice in offering

him this unmerited affront. Step by step she had been led up to this, the final blow; and now when she was commanded to give it, she quailed and refused.

When the vicar told her what he wanted her to do, she cried and shrank within herself, saying No! she could not! indeed, indeed, she could not! Richard had had so much sorrow of late; she dared not give him any more! It would kill him if she did, and she would be his murderess. She besought Superior to spare her this trial; to be merciful as he was powerful; to be gentle to her and humane to her husband. He might have been a God before whom she knelt, so abject was she, so humble, so passionate in her pleading; and she might as well have sued to the tempest, sought to soften the rock by her tears, as pray thus passionately to him! The vicar was not the man to defer his triumph for a woman's tears; and when crosses had to be carried he objected to too great an outcry.

“It is your bounden duty, your obligation to God and man,” he said sternly. “You are the real owner of the property, and to allow your husband, your agent, to openly affront me and offend the Church by harbouring these men who are my enemies and the Church's rebels, is to make yourself one with his sin. And what is this

ostentatious harbourage of men whom I have driven out but an act of direct hostility to me—of open defiance of my authority? And you uphold this—make yourself one with it—you my chosen friend and dearest daughter !”

“ He has always managed the estate, and he promised to befriend those men,” she faltered weakly.

“ A nest of infidels !—You wish them fostered here in this parish where we of the true faith are giving our very lives to establish religion and sound doctrine?—where I am straining every nerve, and submitting myself to every indignity to recall these lost sheep ; and where you are all-powerful for good or evil, as you choose to make yourself? At present you are all-powerful for evil ; but you might be my bravest, best, most valuable assistant, if you would shake yourself free from this sinful subservience to your infidel husband—this infamous obedience to the enemy of the Church !”

One strong irresistible wave of feeling swept over Hermione. The vicar’s brutality, nicely calculated as it was, stirred her loyalty rather than shamed her love. Her heart turned back to the husband of her youth, to the man of her girlish passion, and she forgot all that level tract of dull content which lay between. He was her husband, the father of her child, the one true guide

and centre of her life. The Church and the Revelation which he had so systematically outraged and denied faded away into the dim distance of her consciousness, and only feeling, affection and old-time loyalty remained.

“He is my husband,” she said, lifting her eyes and speaking, though still gently, with a certain warmth that smote on the vicar’s ear as if she had uttered blasphemy.

He almost gasped. It was the traditional worm turning against his heel—the legendary dove roused to self-defence—the return-blow of a slave thought to be subdued to passive non-resistance for life; and for a moment astonishment checked his speech. But only for a moment. Looking at her as if she had been some curious insect:

“My dear child, I thought I had explained away your superstitious regard for the mere words of a promise which Satan has broken and defiled,” he said with compassionate contempt. “You cannot be a true daughter of the Church and an obedient wife; and if you hold by your husband, you must of necessity abjure your Saviour. Must I go over the whole ground again?”

“I know all that you would say, but I cannot act up to it,” said Hermione with a certain helpless patience

that would have touched anyone but Mr. Lascelles. "Sometimes you seem to be right ; but when you want me to do such a thing as this, I do not think you are—and I cannot !"

She covered her face with her hands. He took them away, not too gently.

"No ; you shall look at me," he said sternly. "Your defiance shall at least be open and confessed !"

"It is not defiance, Superior," she pleaded, lifting up her soft eyes to his yet not giving way—keeping to her point through all her gentleness. Was this really Hermione Fullerton—the plastic creature whom he had manipulated with so much trouble, whose divorce he had managed so easily, and whose very soul he had won, as he once believed, so thoroughly? Was this really Hermione Fullerton? He could hardly believe it.

"No?" he sneered. "It is not defiance? By what euphemism then, would you call it?"

"My duty as a wife," she said humbly.

"No ! no ! A thousand times no !" he answered, in a low, concentrated, hissing kind of voice. "It is not duty ; it is *lâcheté* ; it is base and craven cowardice ; it is shameful self-indulgent sloth of soul—more shameful self-indulgent passion for a man whom you should

regard as an emissary of Satan, a Judas re-incarnate. Go back to your husband in all the infamy of your former love ; go back in open infidelity to Christ ! Do not dignify your sin by fine words, Mrs. Fullerton ! Confess it for what it is, and take your part with the enemies of God and the Church ; range yourself with Satan and his agents with something like whole-heartedness ! Leave the Church ! leave me to my arduous fight against the devil, whose visible power your husband strengthens by your means ! Go back to the practical atheism of your former state ; but do not stand here neither in the pale nor out of it, neither a true daughter of the Church nor an open foe, confessing Christ with your lips and dishonouring Him by your deeds ! Lukewarm adherents like you do us more harm than declared enemies ; and were you twenty times Mrs. Fullerton of the Abbey, I would excommunicate you from among us ;—and will—if you are not obedient to Direction.”

She crouched like one who has been struck, kneeling on the floor.

“ You frighten me ! ” she said with a little cry.

“ Because I shame you ! ” he answered. “ It is your conscience which makes you afraid, not I. I am but the mirror in which you see the hideousness of your guilty soul.”

“Superior ! Superior ! have mercy !” she cried.

A crucifix was standing on the table by which he sat. For the second time he took her hands from before her face, and made her look at the sacred emblem of her faith and the divine source of his power.

“You swore on this to obey me when I commanded,” he said. “What was the value of your oath then? Where will it land you if you break it now?”

Hermione did not speak ; she could not. This was the concentration of all the anguish that life could give. The spiritual insolence and harshness of the priest in place of the high-bred courtesy and soft philandering to which she was accustomed, at once terrified and revolted her. The pride of her womanhood, of her gentle ladyhood, was outraged ; her personal delight in this handsome Director was wounded ; her submission, which had already cost her so dear at home, was returned with ingratitude. She thought of Richard, of his patient tenderness, of his very dulness by reason of loyal security—and now this tyranny ! this insolence ! She made a movement as if to rise from her knees, swung by the impulse to go back to Richard and shake all this from her as too degrading to be borne.

As she moved, half raising herself, Mr. Lascelles took her hand and placed it on the crucifix.

“Take this,” he said in a deep voice. “Honour it or renounce it. Obey me, the appointed interpreter of Him who died for you, or crucify Him afresh by your misdeeds. You shall do one or the other before you leave this place. You shall be cast out from our midst or you shall be faithful and obedient. Will you swear to do as I command and refuse to harbour these men on your estate?”

“Superior!” she cried.

“Will you? One word—yes or no?”

“How can I say this to my husband! Have pity on me, Superior!”

She clung to him, grasping his coat; but he tore away her hands with contemptuous passion.

“Do not touch me!” he said. “You are perjured and accursed. You have denied your Lord; and until you repent and obey, you are excommunicate from the Church!”

He turned away abruptly and left her still kneeling on the floor; that accusing crucifix before her on the table, and “excommunicate from the Church” ringing in her ears.

CHAPTER VI.

'TWIXT HAMMER AND ANVIL.

THE day passed, and yet nothing was done. Hermione, in disgrace with the vicar and denied absolution, was still further exercised by Mrs. Everett, who made her understand that she considered her more sinful than even her atheist husband, in that, having put her hand to the plough, she had turned back from the work—having made one of the household of faith, she had gone over to the service of Satan. She spoke of the spiritual peril of such a state as hers, and what would come to her after death if she died in her sins, with the commonplace conviction of one who affirms that dynamite will explode if sharply struck, or that a ship will sink if scuttled. She told her in plain words without gloss or circumlocution that she was cast out by the God whom she had practically denied, and in the grasp of the Evil One whose work she was doing—as she had done for so many years now! But with this difference, to her shame, that whereas formerly

she was unawakened and unconscious, now she knew the full heinousness of her guilt. Were she to die at this moment—and whose life is safe even for an hour?—she would go headlong to perdition ; down, down to that eternal pit, as surely as a stone flung into the water sinks to the bottom. She was doomed. So long as she maintained her present attitude of rebellion to the divine authority of the Church, there was no hope for her in heaven, no peace for her on earth.

All this was said again and again, now with indignation at her wickedness, now with wonder at her weakness, and again with pity for her tragical fate ; but it was said incessantly ; and Hermione felt girt round with fire turn which way she would, whether she resolved to obey Superior or protect Richard, all the same doomed to suffer.

And it must be remembered that she believed implicitly in all this fuliginous theology. It was no vain image to her when the awful condition of lost souls was painted in words of fire and flame ; Satan was no turnip-headed bogie dressed up to frighten the ignorant, but a very real and actual presence, acknowledged now to be known by visual demonstration hereafter ; heaven and hell were tangible realities, the one in the eternal light of

the sky, the other somewhere in the dark ; and according to our actions we were carried up into the ineffable glory of the one or dashed down into the unfathomable misery of the other. When Edith Everett reminded her of all these fearful perils which she was braving because of her cowardice—"for what else is it but cowardice?" asked her guide and friend scornfully—she trembled as if she were already in the grasp of that hairy-handed fiend to whom she had given herself by her sin. Her Christianity had none of that robust eclecticism which chooses the sunny places where the soul may dwell in comfort and leaves the shady corners as unpleasant lodgments ; which eats its fill of sweet fruits and leaves the bitter herbs to rot in the ground which brought them forth. She accepted all legends, all fables, without a glossary or index expurgatorius ; and the power of the Church was the coping-stone of the building. Hence, judging herself by her creed, she knew that she was at this moment, as Edith Everett said, accursed because unabsolved—in the power of Satan because in disgrace with the vicar. She realized the sinfulness as well as the danger of her disobedience to her Director in this weak return to wifely deference and wifely pity, as clearly as she realized the fact of the antipodes ; but she was

unable to nerve herself to the self-crucifixion demanded by the Church. And even when exhorted to pray for strength so that she might be able to perform this act of immolation, she wept instead, in her heart not wishing to be so strengthened.

So the day passed, and nothing was done.

In the evening Mr. Lascelles sent up a note to Edith Everett, telling her to say to Mrs. Fullerton that he begged she would not present herself at Early Celebration to-morrow, as he should feel himself compelled to refuse her ; and that in the existing state of things he would rather she did not come to the services at all. It would be painful to him and an increase of condemnation to herself ; and in very tenderness for her he must deny her false consolation. He was determined to make her excommunication complete until her unqualified and entire return to submission. He was not a man of half-measures, and this was a case wherein apparent harshness was the truest kindness.

This note, written for Hermione to see, was handed to her so soon as read ; and as she gave it to her Mrs. Everett realized the joy which a woman feels when her rival is humiliated. But she expressed herself as deeply, sincerely grieved ; grieved that things should be

as they were ; but, being as they were, Superior was in the right, and she, poor sinful weak-hearted Hermione, was wrong ! Did not the Service itself say that the impenitent eat and drink their own damnation ? And until she had repented of her obstinacy and turned again to the right way of obedience and sincerity, Superior had nothing for it but to cut her off from the body of the faithful, lest worse should befall her. Would she then do as she ought ? Would she forbid those infidel men the use of *her* cottages ? Might she, Mrs. Everett, write and tell Superior that she had come at last into a proper frame of mind, and that she was penitent and obedient ?

To which poor Hermione answered despairingly :

“Not yet ! not yet ! Give me a little more time to make up my mind !”

“To dally with sin, you mean,” said Mrs. Everett severely. “Remember, Hermione ! each hour’s delay strengthens Satan by so much extra power, and makes your return to grace so much the more difficult.”

“I must think of it. I cannot to-night. Richard looks so pale and ill. I think another blow would almost kill him ; and this will be such a blow !” said Hermione, turning her eyes wistfully to the door.

“If he is the man of sense he passes for, he will not let it be a blow or a surprise to him in any way,” said Mrs. Everett. “He must know, if he reflects at all, that it is impossible things can go on like this. When you were unconverted and as careless of God as he himself, you did not trouble yourself as to what was done with your money and in your name. But now, when you have become a faithful Churchwoman—are you a faithful Churchwoman after all?—it is monstrous to suppose that you will allow your fortune to go in propagating infidelity and making scandalous favourites of notorious infidels. Mr. Fullerton must see it all as clearly as we do; and if he is really liberal, he must allow you to act according to your conscience.”

“But this will not make the pain any the less,” said Hermione.

“And until he is pained your soul is in deadly peril, and the consolations of religion are denied you,” returned Mrs. Everett. “For my own part, I would do anything in the world rather than stand in your present position. The marvel to me is how you can bear it for an hour, when you yourself can put an end to it, now this very instant if you will. Excommunicate! You! Denied the holy Eucharist—even forbidden to attend the

public offices of the Church ! And you suffer all this that you may not wound the self-love, the base human pride, of the most notorious soul-destroying atheist in the country ! What a farce to call yourself either a Church-woman or a Christian !”

“ I am both—but I am a wife as well,” said Hermione, too sharply stung for patience.

Edith Everett’s long upper lip curled contemptuously.

“ Do you call such a union as yours ‘ marriage ’ ? ” she said. “ To us of the true faith it is legalized sin, and a shame that you should speak of it ! Do not shelter yourself behind that poor little pretence ! There is no marriage where there is no blessing by the true Church. And you know that the Church neither could nor does sanction such a union as this ! To sacrifice the Church to Mr. Fullerton on the plea of his being your husband is simply to add to your sin, because bringing into it one guilt the more.”

“ I am very, very unhappy ! ” said Hermione, letting her hands fall on her lap.

“ Yes,” replied Mrs. Everett; “ of course you are ! We are always unhappy when we are doing wrong. Then I am not to tell Superior that you submit ? ”

“No, I will tell him myself—when I do,” said Hermione, turning wearily away.

The next day, Sunday, all things were as Mr. Lascelles had decreed. The Lady of the Manor was for the time excommunicate, and her place among the worshippers was kept conspicuously vacant. For though the theory was that all places were free alike, the practice was different; and the great ladies of Crossholme were never incommoded by the jostling of the little people. Everyone looked and wondered at this strange vacancy of Mrs. Fullerton's accustomed chair; and when service was over everyone crowded round Mrs. Everett, and asked: Was Mrs. Fullerton ill? what was amiss? why had she not come? had she had bad news of Virginia? was Mr. Fullerton laid up, and she at home nursing him? what was it that had kept her away? what did it mean?

To which questions Mrs. Everett gave cautious, yet in a manner suggestive, answers. Mrs. Fullerton was not ill in body, she said, with a slight emphasis that pointed the alternative so obviously as to set the congregation wondering what ailed her mind—and had she gone out of it? as more than one scoffer had prophesied she would.

But her guide and friend having said this, said no more; and always smiling, took her way back through the park and so to the Abbey—calculating her chances

as she went. Not handsome, without money, and the mother of four children—could it be done? If he believed in her capacity to help him on in his work and with the world, yes. And the first test of this capacity would be to succeed where he had failed; to influence to the point of unqualified submission that tender soul, which he, with all his powers of fascination and authority combined, had not quite controlled. If she could do this, he might then perhaps be brought to credit her ability to make him a bishop, if she were his wife. And as a bishop how much wider would be his sphere of action, how much more impressive his authority and more effective his influence! As for his principles on the celibacy of the clergy—other men who held the same views have found their better part in matrimony when the thing came to them rightly presented, so why should not he? The question had been asked before at Crossholme, with as yet no satisfactory reply; but then Edith Everetts were scarce; and it would take one as clever as she to win such a man as Mr. Lascelles.

This dead, dry, soulless Sunday passed like all other uncomfortable times, and Monday came in its course. No action had yet been taken, and the men were preparing to move in; John Graves was already in possession, and Dick Stern's wife had promised him his

new home by night. Hermione stood at the fork, still hesitating—not brave enough to go resolutely on either road ; temporizing, doubting, fearing, hoping against hope and vaguely looking for a miracle which should save her from her trial and Richard from his pain, yet put things square with the vicar's desire. She sent messages and notes of abject humility, beseeching Superior to pardon her, but not promising obedience ; but as he could not bend her he would not forgive her ; and each hour that passed only deepened her sin and added to his demands. At first he had ordered her merely to refuse the men possession of the new cottages built for them at Lane End ; but now, raising the price of his forgiveness, like that of the Sibylline Books of old, he demanded that she should not only do this but also take the Institution out of her husband's hands ; and then, not only the Institution but the whole management of the estate. On these terms only would he receive her back into the Church as a penitent absolved from her sin. It was this or excommunication, both from his friendship and the sweet consolations of the Church.

It was a bold stroke that he played ; for all or nothing ; but the moment was ripe. If he let this occasion slip he might never have another so favourable.

And now the final struggle had come. Love or religion—her husband's control or her Director's authority—the obligations of marriage or the ordinances of the Church—which would win? Under which Lord would she finally elect to serve?

To add to her present personal perplexity, the bills which she had incurred for the restoration of the church, and other things connected with the parish and Mr. Lascelles, were sent in to her in a mass, and instant payment was peremptorily demanded of some; and to add yet more to the pressure put on her on all sides, dear Superior fell ill, and sent for Edith Everett in terms which would have suited a dying man sending for his best friend to receive his last wishes.

“Let me go with you!” pleaded Hermione, when her guest told her the news.

“I am sorry, but it is impossible,” she answered; and showed her a little postscript, wherein Mr. Lascelles had written in a very unsteady hand: “On no account allow Mrs. Fullerton to accompany you, unless she has repented of her sin and is prepared to obey.”

“How can I do it! how can I!” murmured Hermione, hiding her face in despair.

“You must answer that to the Eternal Judge at the

Last Day," said Mrs. Everett coldly. "There will be no half-measures then, and no plea of 'how can I?' allowed."

On which she turned away and went down to the Vicarage, where she sat for about two hours with Superior, who had really a slight attack of feverish cold, and whose notes she wrote, and all his other business transacted, with the most delightful assumption of necessary assistance as well as with charming facility and help.

"She is an uncommonly clever woman!" thought the vicar as he lay back in his easy-chair, watching the long lissome fingers moving so swiftly over the paper. "And though she is not handsome at first sight, it is a face that satisfies one more on acquaintance than many others of perfect beauty. She has mind and character; and is such a thorough woman as well!"

If Mrs. Everett could have read the vicar's mind, would she have called this an advance in her secret project?

When she returned to the Abbey after her two hours of tranquil business-like assistance, she went into the drawing-room with deep melancholy, unspeakable dejection imprinted on every feature, expressed in every

gesture. Dear Superior was very ill indeed, she said; his distress of mind at Hermione's lost condition and strange recalcitration was such that he could not sleep nor eat—he could only pray with tears for the recovery of the dear lost soul now given over to Satan.

“He is sick for your sin,” said Edith Everett with mournful solemnity. “If he dies you will be the cause. He is in a high fever and is really very ill,” she added, falling into commonplace almost without knowing.

“May I not go down and see him?” asked Hermione anxiously.

“No,” Mrs. Everett answered. “He begged me to forbid any such attempt on your part. Even Theresa Molyneux has to be given up, though this is her day; and you know how punctual he is in his parochial duties; so that I am sure he is not able to see *you*.”

“But I am so much more his friend than Theresa has ever been!” said Hermione jealously.

“And for that very reason your visit would be so painful as to be impossible,” she returned. “You know how many hopes he built on you, and what a holy joy it was to him to think that he had been privileged to save you from perdition—and now, to see you so utterly a

castaway ! It would be more than he could bear in his critical condition !”

Tears came up into those clever eyes and overflowed the lids with a decent kind of passion. Hermione turned away in trouble that she could neither control nor conceal. It touched her soft heart to think that Superior should be so sorry for her as this ; it pricked her conscience that she should be so undutiful to the Church ; it probed her pride that her visit should be refused—she who had been supreme up to now, to be set aside while Edith Everett was exalted in her stead ! Her whole moral being was disturbed ; and beyond and above all was that abject fear of the Judgment to come, which both Mrs. Everett and Superior said she had provoked and which her own conscience, as informed by Church teaching, told her she deserved.

“What can I do ?” she cried, wringing her hands.

“Do as you are commanded,” said her guide and friend. “Take the management of your affairs into your own hands and out of those of your infidel husband ; refuse to allow your money to be any longer used for the spread of atheism and the ruin of immortal souls ; and refuse to allow your land to be turned to the use of infidels who spend their lives in trying to destroy the

Church. It is childish to ask what you are to do ! Your duty is plain before you, and until you do it you can have no peace."

"I shall have no peace any way, do what I will," said poor Hermione, speaking sincerely in her sorrow.

"No peace in doing the will of God? Are you too an infidel?" asked Mrs. Everett severely.

"The flesh may be weak, however willing the spirit," said Hermione.

"If your spirit were really willing you would soon find strength for your duty," returned her friend. "How you can think of your present state, and keep in it, I cannot understand!" she continued. "It would send me mad! I would do anything in the world to get out of it—cut off my hand, pluck out my eye!"

"I believe you would; but then you do not feel giving pain so much as I do," returned Hermione.

Mrs. Everett turned herself square to her friend and faced her angrily.

"I do not feel giving pain so much as you do?" she said. "To a sinful man who has brought countless souls to perdition, perhaps not; and I thank God for it! But I feel more than you do the crime of giving pain to my Director, of causing scandal to the Church, of

crucifying Christ afresh by my sin. If I were in your horrible position I certainly should not mind giving pain to the man who had done so much to hurt our Mother ; and if you were a true Churchwoman you would not have two thoughts on the subject."

"I am a true Churchwoman, and I have a great many thoughts," said Hermione petulantly.

Mrs. Everett looked at her with undisguised contempt.

"You are a mere child !" she said. "I shall never take your part with Superior again. He may think of you what he likes, and I shall not trouble myself to defend you."

"Superior has no right to speak against me. I have been his best friend here, and have helped him to the utmost of my power," said Hermione with spirit.

"You have—granted ; but what are you doing now? You were a help to him, but now you are a broken reed and have pierced his hand when he most leant on you ! I think Superior is quite right in all he says ; and I will do what I can too to help him to make an exchange. Crossholme is not a fit place for him. He is lost here, and would be far better off elsewhere ; and better appreciated too !"

Hermione started and looked at Edith Everett with a sudden spasm of fear on her face.

“He told me to-day,” continued the widow carelessly, “that he could not bear the strain here any longer. And I can understand it. A conscientious priest has difficulties enough when he is helped on all sides. The sins of unregenerate humanity are hard enough in themselves to cope with; but when it comes to a person in your position helping infidelity, giving confessed atheism all the influence of your money, all the prestige of your position, then the thing becomes impossible! And Superior is quite right to shake the dust off his feet and leave you all to yourselves and destruction. Perhaps the next vicar will be a Protestant”—contemptuously—“or a cloaked infidel calling himself a Broad Churchman; or one of those heretics who pride themselves on being Evangelical”—still more contemptuously. “I hope so. He will be better fitted for the congregation, so far as I can judge, than a devoted priest like Superior, with his faithful band of followers and helpers.”

“Does he talk seriously of going?” asked Hermione in dismay.

“Certainly he does,” Mrs. Everett answered as calmly as if she had been telling the truth. “He told me

to-day that if you continued impenitent he would give up the living. After the shameful disgrace in which your daughter took such a prominent part, I must say, Mrs. Fullerton, I think you owe him more consideration than you show."

"That is just what I feel about my husband," she returned. "His distress about Virginia is so great; and, after all, she was the youngest of them, and entirely under the influence of Sister Agnes."

"How blind and mad you are!" cried Mrs. Everett with temper. "As if her father's awful infidelity was not the primary cause of your daughter's perversion! You speak as if he was to be pitied, when it is by him alone, in the first instance, that this awful crime was committed! I look on him as the ruin of your child, not in any sense as the sufferer. As Superior says, that man is the direct agent of Satan, and all his natural good qualities, which we do not deny"—"We!" thought Hermione jealously—"are so many more snares set by the enemy of mankind for the destruction of souls. You know all this as well as I do, and yet you uphold him, and do your utmost to strengthen his hands. Never call yourself a Christian, still less a good daughter of the Church, again! You are the comforter and abettor of infidels; and I only hope

that Superior will leave Crossholme and carry his precious ministrations where they will be better appreciated and do more good."

"Don't!" cried Hermione, covering her face.

"Then repent of your sin and do your duty as you ought," said Mrs. Everett, going back to her point with the cold insistence of an automaton.

'Twixt hammer and anvil in truth, and no one able to save her! Faithless to the Church or cruel to her husband, on no side could she find comfort or get rid of that awful difficulty—opposing duties! Here called by natural feeling, there commanded by ecclesiastical authority—she scarcely knew which voice to obey since it was impossible to reconcile the two. If only her duty to the Church could have been harmonized with humanity to her husband!—if only Superior would absolve and bless her once more, yet poor Richard be saved from further suffering! What could she do? What could she do? She must not let Superior leave the place, abandon his work, his congregation, his mission, because of her. That would be a sin for which she could never hope to be pardoned. And just now too, when the church, in the restoration of which he had taken so much pride and pleasure, was so nearly finished and

ready for reopening ! And then he was ill, on account of her ; and in such deep mental distress because of her sin ! Things could not go on in their present state ; and yet she had not the heart to free herself from her difficulties by dealing so hardly with her husband. And yet again, if she did not, she must confess all that mass of debt to him, and what she had undertaken to do for the church ! There was no way of escape for her, turn where she would. Girt round with fire—'twixt hammer and anvil—there was nothing for her but pain and penance, and the anguish, as it was to her, of making others suffer.

In the midst of her desperate trouble Richard came into the drawing-room where she and Mrs. Everett sat—the one writhing, the other torturing.

“Could I have a word with you, Hermione?” he asked.

His manner was as quiet, his face as calm and sad as ever, but he did not look more than usually disturbed.

“Yes,” said Hermione in an embarrassed voice. “What do you want with me, Richard?”

“It is to look at the leases of the new cottages at Lane End,” he answered. “They are ready for your signature.”

“Now is the moment. Be firm to the Church, or by your own deed expel Superior from the parish. If the men get those houses he will not stay; it all depends on you,” said Mrs. Everett in a low tone of voice, preparing to leave the room, but bending over Hermione before going.

“Perhaps it will be more convenient to you to come into my study? I do not wish to disturb Mrs. Everett,” said Richard.

“It will not disturb me to go upstairs for an hour,” said Mrs. Everett, answering Richard through Hermione, as was her wont.

“I would rather go into the study,” said Hermione, trembling.

She felt as if the sight of those iniquitous skulls of Esquimaux and Andaman Islanders, those atheistic casts of brains and blasphemous anatomical plates, those soul-destroying microscopes which, with the photographs of the moon and a chart of Fraunhofer's lines, were the visible witnesses of Richard's infidelity—she felt as if all these things would strengthen her in dealing the blow, if it had to be given, as she feared must needs be! She must not sign those leases; she must not let Superior leave the place and imperil the eternal salvation of

her own soul and all the parish because of her weakness in the face of pain. And yet, poor Richard ! Poor Richard was so good in spite of everything ! And at one time how much she loved him ; and would now, were it not a sin !

“ Remember, Hermione ! God sees you, and Superior will have to be told,” were Edith Everett’s last words, spoken in a whisper as the miserable Lady of the Manor walked slowly away.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DIE CAST.

THE country was looking its best to-day. A morning shower had washed the air and brought out the full fragrance and colour of the flowers in the garden, of the trees and turf in the park, of the beanfield to the right, of the tangled thorns and resinous pines in the woods to the left. By the afternoon, as it was now, the clouds had lifted and the sun was shining ; so that the Abbey and the grounds, lying full to the south, were literally flooded with light, and the whole place looked as if newly minted to-day. From every voice and circumstance of nature stole out that subtle hope, that sense of possibility in the future, which fills the heart with undefined pleasure ; as if our sorrow had passed with the winter weather and we were left free to love and enjoy. It was a day when the owners of lands and the dwellers in fair places feel doubly the delight of life and the graciousness of fortune ; and Richard, for all his pain, recognized the influences of the moment as keenly as of old.

He looked out with the pride of the owner, mixed with the loving understanding of the naturalist and the deeper thoughts of the philosopher, as he and Hermione passed the open window to the table beyond. What a grand day for the land, he thought; and how well he knew those thousand sounds and scents which were ever to him like the voices of friends whom he could trust! How glorious was this thing which man calls Nature!—what a mine of truth and knowledge! And then he sighed, and looked again on the papers in his hand and Hermione by his side.

Her husband's study was a strangely unfamiliar place to Hermione. For the last five or six years now—since first that vague dissatisfaction with his pursuits which had grown of late to such overpowering height had begun to germinate in her mind—she had not much affected it, and had always sniffed a little disdainfully at the uncongenial things which lay about. But now those uncongenial things were actively sinful to her eyes; the place was infected throughout; and had she come here when not absolutely compelled, she would have felt like a second Naaman bowing in the house of Rimmon—but a Naaman without a dispensation. She had not been here since that fatal Christmas night when her husband and Ringrove

had represented to her and Virginia all imaginable personal coarseness and spiritual darkness ; and, as she had rightly judged, the renewal of the impression was useful, on Superior's side, by shocking her sense of intellectual propriety and making her realize yet more keenly the gulf between her and that infidel whose name she bore—though she bore it set so far in the shadow of her own. Still, though the skulls and bones, the flints and fossils, the maps of the moon and spectroscopic diagrams that were about were so many accusers, setting forth Richard's scientific presumption and abominable atheism, she was agonized by what she had to do. The fresh sweet time had softened her even beyond her wont—of the kind as she was to be softened through her senses, delicately touched. For some time now her heart had wavered back to her husband, and nothing but the tremendous power which Mr. Lascelles had over her by confession kept her steady to the point to which she had been brought ; nothing but her fear of eternal damnation, should he refuse to absolve her, held her to the stake where she was to undergo torture and inflict what she endured. What a dreadful moment it was for her !—she who knew what was to come, and poor dear Richard who knew nothing ! She was quite unlike herself as she crossed the

room with him in a tumult of conflicting feelings, hating his atheism and her own action about equally ; loving and condemning him ; fearing Mr. Lascelles yet fascinated by him ; and unable to see her way clear before her, save in unqualified submission.

Richard drew the chair to the table and laid the paper before her, courteous and tender as he always was, and to-day something more. He dipped the pen in the ink and held it ready for her use.

“These are the leases of the Lane End cottages,” he said. “They only want your signature.”

Though he had supreme authority in the management of the estate, according to the terms of the power of attorney given to him at Mr. Fullerton's death, he had always kept up this little formality of joint signature when leases were granted. He had begun it in the early days of their happiness, not as an act of homage to the Lady of the Manor and the recognition of her rights so much as a declaration of unity between husband and wife and the association of her privileges with his duties ; and he had continued it ever since. But Hermione, indolent and satisfied, had neither asked nor cared to know any particulars of the papers she signed ; and more than once had stopped his mouth with a kiss when he wanted

to explain. What did she know about business!—she used to say with a pretty laugh—he knew and she did not; but she liked to see her name bracketed together with his. To-day however when she sat down she did not take the pen as usual, but, looking at the endorsement, asked: “What leases did you say?” with an affectation of interest as well as ignorance that was as new as her Ritualism—and his pain.

“For the houses at Lane End,” he repeated.

“Are these the men who were turned out by Cuthbert Molyneux?” she asked again, fluttering the leaves and making believe to read what she saw.

“Yes,” said Richard.

She glanced at the door. It was open by about an inch, and she distinctly saw the outline of a face and the gleam of eyes watching her.

“They ought not to have these houses,” she then said in a faint voice and trembling.

“No!—why?”

He had been leaning over her up to this moment, pointing out with one hand the place where she was to sign—the pen in his other hand. Now he laid down the pen, took his finger from the paper, and straightened himself.

“They are infidels,” said Hermione.

“Is that a reason why they should be homeless?” he asked, still quite quietly.

“It is a reason why they should not have houses on *my* estate,” she answered after a pause, her manner by no means so decided as her words.

He was silent, feeling the ground before him.

“I have pledged myself to them,” he then said rather slowly. “These cottages were built expressly for them and have been assigned from the foundation-stone. Some of the men indeed are already in possession. John Graves, for one, moved in on Friday; and others are moving to-day. They trusted to my word in the matter of the leases, which came from Starton only to-day.”

“I am sorry, of course; I do not like to distress you or to disturb them. I hate interfering in things; but they ought not to have these houses; I ought not to harbour them.”

Hermione spoke in short interrupted phrases, her breath often failing her, her colour coming and going, her whole being in disorder.

“It is my doing, not yours,” he answered, watching her.

“I am responsible to God—it is my estate,” she returned with difficulty, again glancing at the door.

“Why does your responsibility to God make you refuse these men as tenants?” he asked. “They are industrious, sober, well-conducted; they stand at a fair rent, and are sure to pay punctually. You could not have more desirable tenants.”

“They are the enemies of the Church,” she answered.

“I also,” said Richard, with emphasis.

Again she trembled, but she did not speak. She only sighed, and her lips began to quiver. It was a heavy burden laid on her, and she felt as if Superior had been needlessly cruel. After all, what did it signify? Even infidels must live somewhere; and then she checked herself as in the commission of a sin, and remembered her primary duty of Obedience.

“I cast in my own lot with theirs,” then said her husband, after another slight pause, still keeping his eyes on her, studying her every movement, her every look and change of colour.

“How can you do that? You have not built a cottage for yourself,” she answered simply, not taking his meaning.

“No, but I have given my word and must keep it—or fall with it,” he said.

She made no answer; still fluttering over those

fatal leaves where she seemed to read all but knew nothing.

“Surely this is a mere passing fancy!” then said Richard. “Are you serious, Hermione? Do you really mean to use your moral rights—my legal powers would count for nothing against your will—and forbid these houses to my friends?”

“What an extraordinary thing to say, Richard! As if a gentleman can make friends of blacksmiths and tailors!” was her childishly disdainful comment, glad of an escape into another question, like one in pain shifting the position for a moment’s ease.

“My wife! The Man whom you have deified made His friends of publicans and sinners, of lepers and castaways,” said Richard, with one of his old tender but half-playful smiles—the sign of remonstrance usual with him when Hermione was wont to be more than commonly illogical and wide of the mark. “If the teaching of Jesus means anything at all it means democracy carried to its ultimate limits, and far beyond my standpoint. His democracy was out-and-out socialism traversed by class enmity to the rich and respectable—*quâ* rich and respectable—and mine is only the recognition of human worth wherever found, independent of social condition.”

“We leave the Church to explain all that,” she said

hastily and with a freer manner. Argument was not so painful as action. "Of course Protestants who go to the Bible for themselves fall into error and make what was given us for our salvation their destruction instead. But we who are good Church people are better taught."

"Taught the value of class exclusiveness?—of strict caste?"

"Of ordained degrees of dignity and obedience to authority," she answered, using the vicar's own words spoken for her guidance not so long ago.

Her husband looked at her with a smile, this time of infinite sadness.

"Yes, you have been well taught enough!" he said with a sigh. "I scarcely recognize your mind as the same sweet simple intellect it used to be, as innocent of dialectics as of evil. You are now as clever in casuistry as one would expect the pupil of—Mr. Lascelles—to be."

She blushed and looked uneasy.

"I have had to be taught everything," she answered. "My mind was a blank sheet of paper when Superior—Mr. Lascelles—first came."

"Across which he has written, in bolder characters than I care to see, words which are of all others the most painful to me," he said. "But," rousing himself,

“we are wandering from the subject on hand, and this matter of the leases must be settled. What do you really mean to do? Will you sign, or refuse to grant them?”

She was silent for what seemed an eternity to her, tossed as she was from side to side, and coward as she naturally was to pain. She held the leaves between her fingers, and the dead silence which had fallen between her and her husband seemed to have reached out into the world beyond. She heard nothing but the beating of her own heart and the half-checked breathing which a little more would turn to tearless sobs; then the figure behind the door rustled audibly and the schoolroom bell rang out for prayers.

“I cannot sign them,” she said in a low voice and with effort, letting her hands fall nervelessly on the desk.

Richard caught his breath, and a slight quiver stirred his lips. The blow had fallen, and so far reality was better than suspense. But he did not give up the contest yet. It was not for himself, but for those whom he called his friends, that he was striving—and not against Hermione but against Mr. Lascelles.

“You do not see the cruelty of this refusal?” he asked, after a pause. “You do not see that it is essentially an act of persecution, and as unjust as it is—what shall I

say?—tyrannical? I, your husband, hold and teach the doctrines for which you punish these men, yet I possess your estate, enjoy your fortune, live in your house, and you forbid them to be even your tenants?”

“It is not by my wish nor with my consent that you do teach these awful doctrines,” she said half timidly. Again there was a slight movement at the door, and the schoolroom bell seemed to ring out yet more imperatively, more loudly:—“and I am wrong to allow it,” she added, her colour coming again, and her breath almost as much disturbed as if she had been running.

He looked at her narrowly.

“I always must teach them,” he said slowly. “I shall teach them to the last hour of my life, and only death shall stop my mouth. Christianity represents to me darkness and falsehood, science and Agnosticism light and reason; and under all penalties I must remain true to the faith that is in me.”

Now was the crucial moment. All that Superior had said, and all that he had done by right of his office—his exhortations, his commands, his anger, and that awful prohibition!—all that Edith Everett had urged, and all that she herself believed, came in one huge wave of spiritual terror over her mind. It was her final moment

of choice, her unalterable decision between a love which they had taught her to regard as unblessed and shameful, and the Lord who had died for her and whom she would crucify afresh if she did not sacrifice her husband; between the Holy Catholic Church, whose priest held the keys of heaven and hell, and the infidel who, himself eternally doomed, would drag her along with him to the place of everlasting torment; between Mr. Lascelles and Richard—the rights given by confession or the duties owing to marriage. Which was it to be?—with the bell sounding for prayers and Edith Everett watching through the half-opened door, seeming to repeat her last warning words: “Remember! God sees you, and Superior will have to be told.”

“No,” then said Hermione in a low voice, scarcely able to articulate.

“What do you mean, dear? ‘No’ to what?—in what sense?” he asked.

“Your infidel doctrines—you must not go on teaching them—not here—not in the Institution,” she faltered.

“I built the Institution for that very purpose,” he said.

“You must not any longer,” was all that she could say; and the woman behind the door smiled.

“Be explicit, my wife,” he said, for the second time going back to the old phrase of the past, which he had given up ever since that terrible day when she had withdrawn herself from him. He took a chair and sat down by her, speaking with intense tenderness and the very pathos of patient dignity. “I do not want you to give yourself more pain than is necessary,” he said, laying his hand on hers as it rested on the table. “I only want to have your meaning clear. Have your friends counselled you to take the administration of the estate out of my hands?—and do you mean to take their advice?”

“You must not preach blasphemy in the Institution,” she said evasively.

“But that amounts to a prohibition; and prohibition means that you dispossess me. Speak plainly, dear—you have never found me a harsh husband, and will not now. I only want to have your real wishes, so that we may not make a mistake.”

He laid his other hand gently on her shoulder.

“You are an infidel,” said Hermione. “You use your power here against the Church.”

Then she covered her face in her hands, too broken and bewildered even to pray.

“And if I do not conform to the creed in which I do

not believe, you take the power of administration from me? Say it all out now—yes or no!”

“Yes,” said Hermione, almost in a whisper.

Surely now the sacrifice was complete!

Richard passed his hand over his forehead and cleared his eyes. Then he rose from his seat and went to the window, leaning against the frame, looking out on the view before him. But it was as if a veil had been drawn between him and all that he looked at—as if nature, so long his friend, had suddenly shut herself away from him, and was now indifferent and silent.

“Your will is my law,” he then said quietly, coming back to her side. “I will not press you further. Poor child! I know what it has cost you to come to this!”

“Oh, yes! it has! it has!” she said eagerly, grateful that he should believe her less cruel than she seemed to be, and glad that he should recognize her suffering rather than blame her for his pain.

“Things have gone too far now to be patched up,” he continued, “and I have nothing for it but to yield.” He was silent for a moment. “Morse knows all that you have to do and can keep things straight for you,” he then went on to say, speaking in a more composed, more business-like tone. “You will find the books and

accounts quite clear and intelligible. The whole of your affairs are in perfect order ; no outstanding debts beyond the necessary current expenses ; nothing confused or obscure anywhere. And you can always write to me if you want further information."

At the words, "write to me," Hermione looked up with a start ; as at the words, "no outstanding debts," she had thought with a pang of her own entanglements which she would be so much ashamed to confess, yet which she did not know how to arrange unaided ; but notwithstanding her sudden terror she did not speak. She laid, instead, her hand on her mouth to stifle her sobs and repress the recantation of all that she had just now professed and ordained.

"I do not think I have anything to tell you more than this," he continued. "It has been an easy property to manage, and everything is in perfect order."

She turned to him suddenly and raised her blue eyes to his. It was the impulse of a caress ; but she remembered herself in time and fell back to her former drooping attitude and tortured air.

"Good-bye, old love," he went on to say, pitying her pain and for her sake wishing to get it all over now at once. "You have made me the happiest of men

for all our lives together until now when you have suffered these strange influences to come between us and take you from me. But I do not forget the past because of the present; and though I pity you I do not condemn you; not for anything, sweet wife—except for the loss of our child.”

His voice changed as he said this, and again he turned away to the window, where he stood leaning against the frame.

Hermione rose from her place and went up to him.

“Why do you speak as if you were going away?” she asked, her natural weakness conquering her unnatural strength. “You are not going to leave me, Richard?”

“Can you expect anything else, dear?” he asked, always gentle, always patient, but with dignity as well as tenderness. “Can you even wish that I should stay here to bear witness to my enemy’s triumph? You have preferred Mr. Lascelles to me, and I have no choice left me.”

“Not Mr. Lascelles to you, but my Director,” she stammered.

“Man or Director, it is all one to me,” he answered. “I make no difference between the two. But in any case, ask yourself whether the position to which you have reduced me is one which the man whom you once

loved, and who is the father of your child, ought to hold. I cannot believe that you wish to humiliate me to the point of keeping me here as a kind of footstool for Mr. Lascelles to buffet at his pleasure."

"You are only asked to give up your lectures, and not use my money to spread infidelity and befriend atheists," she answered wildly, preaching peace where there was none. She wrung her hands as she spoke, and looked round the room as if trapped and scared.

"Do not try to salve over hard facts by soft words," he said. "That is unworthy of us both."

"No! it is only that!" she cried.

"Ah! my wife, do not lay flattering unctions to your soul," he said. "You have dispossessed me simply in obedience to Mr. Lascelles. Had it not been for him I might have taught what I liked to the end of time. Well—so be it. You have the power and I have no remedy. There is nothing for me but to submit, and leave you. The law is on your side; on mine only the love which has at last failed to touch you."

"But what shall I do alone? You cannot go! I cannot live alone!" she said.

"If you want me you can send for me," he answered. "You will always find me where you left me. Nothing

will ever change with me; and when you have flung off this hallucination, with all its crookedness and want of truthfulness, you have only to call me to your side again, and I will come—you know how gladly.”

“Richard, you must not go!” she cried hysterically, clinging to his arm.

“It is this or your own full and unconditional return to me,” he answered. “There is no alternative. If you are sincere in not wishing to separate, you will come with me and leave all this pain and horror till you have got beyond its danger. Will you come, Hermione? Shall we go back to the old happiness and union? Speak, my wife, old dear love—say, shall we?”

He drew her closer to him, and kissed her forehead.

What was that small sound which came through the half-opened door? Richard heard nothing, but to Hermione it was audible and intelligible enough.

“Oh, why are you an infidel?” she cried, with a terrified look, freeing herself from his arms with a gesture of despair.

“It is too late to ask that now,” he answered, again passing his hand over his face and clearing his eyes. “It is too late all round! Good-bye, old love! It is useless

to give you or myself more sorrow. The die has been cast. I recognize my fate. Good-bye !”

He turned for the last time, and was half-way through the room, when she called him with a cry as if she were in fearful pain.

“Richard !” she cried, her face convulsed with anguish.

He stopped.

She made a sudden rush forward.

“You must not go !” she exclaimed. “Richard ! my husband ! my beloved !”

The door opened abruptly, and Edith Everett came quickly into the room.

“I am afraid I am intruding,” she said, with a cold, sarcastic smile. “But the bell is ringing, Hermione, and we shall be late for evensong.”

Hermione shrank back as if she had been detected in a crime. Richard stood his ground quietly.

“With whom do you elect to go, Hermione ?” he asked ; “with Mrs. Everett or myself ?”

“I can answer that,” said Edith, taking the poor, weak, unresisting hand and drawing it within her arm. “You will come with me, Hermione ; because if you do not, you will deny our Lord, defy the Church, and sink

your soul to the lowest depths of hell. You are bound to obey as the Church has ordained."

"Is this your deliberate choice, my wife—with all that depends on it? Will you forsake me for these cruel destroyers of happiness and love? Oh, Hermione! shake off this hideous nightmare once for all! Come with me—with your husband, your friend—and leave these heartless fanatics to themselves! Come! come, wife!"

He laid one hand tenderly on her head, and passed the other round her soft, fair shoulders.

Mrs. Everett shuddered.

"These sinful familiarities!" she said. "My sister, how can you, a pure-hearted woman, endure them? The caresses of the devil, and you a child of our Mother!"

Hermione hid her face on her friend's shoulder.

"Speak, my wife! speak, old love!" said Richard, with inexpressible tenderness. "Will you come with me, or go with her?"

"The Church commands you to come with me," said Mrs. Everett. "If you do not, you worship Satan, not our Lord."

"I cannot disobey the Church," said Hermione, in a suffocated voice.

“Now you are answered!” said Mrs. Everett triumphantly. “She has saved her soul alive, and the gates of hell have not prevailed. You have done well,” she whispered to Hermione caressingly. “Our Lord and His Blessed Mother are looking down on you from on high, and the Church will give you absolution and blessing!”

Then, half carrying her, she bore her away from the room, leaving Richard alone, conquered, humiliated and dispossessed.

The victory gained with so much effort was not endangered by negligent holding. All that day Hermione was kept at the Vicarage in a state of spiritual intoxication which prevented her from feeling or thinking. Superior received her back into the bosom of the Church as joyfully as if she had been the traditional prodigal who had repented of her sins and returned into the way of grace from that of destruction. He received her confession, and gave her absolution with a fulness of assurance that made her feel as if already accepted into heaven. He drew vivid pictures of the beaming satisfaction felt by Divine Personages, and the joy passed round among the angels on account of her recall. He painted with a generous palette and a juicy brush the pains of that place of eternal torment which she had

escaped ; and made her thrill with terror as she seemed almost to hear the gnashing of teeth and the cries of unclean and impotent despair from which she had just escaped. It was like the loud music and strong drugs, the intoxicating perfumes and delightful finery with which a Hindù woman is surrounded on her sacrifice, reconciled to her loss and assured of her gain. Her conscience drugged and her vanity excited—her superstition roused to the highest point, here of hope, there of fear—her affections turned from their natural course and poisoned at the source—her very weakness made a fulcrum for the strength of those who had overcome her—she was helpless in their hands. They were crafty, and she was simple ; they were clever, and she was credulous ; they were cruel, and she was timid ; and, above all, they believed in themselves and their doctrines, and so had the extra leverage of sincerity against her.

All day long and far into the evening they kept up this spiritual music and incense, these drugs, this finery, by which their victim and widow was cajoled into completing the sacrifice already begun—prevented from leaping off the funeral pyre which they had laid for her best womanhood, her highest fidelity, her purest love. They intoxicated her as thoroughly as if they had given her

strong wine to drink or Indian hemp to smoke; and made her as incapable of clear thought or honest reflection as if she had been physically insensible. She was in the spiritual ecstasy of the spiritually drunk, and knew nothing beyond the devout joys of holy imagination. She was one of the Accepted; and her unresisting obedience to Superior was the price which she had paid for the assurance of that acceptance. She had no sense of morality, no conscience beyond obedience, and was in that state wherein women have sacrificed their children to Moloch, flung their darlings to the lions when commanded by the high priest, who to them was the voice of their god. The victory was absolute, as complete in all its circumstances as the warmest advocate of lay submission could desire; and when the two women left the Vicarage, Edith Everett said in a hurried tone to Mr. Lascelles, as he handed her into the carriage:—

“Did I not promise that I would bring her to reason? Now will you trust me again?”

“The cleverest woman I know anywhere!” he answered warmly, looking right into her eyes. “And one of the most faithful daughters of the Holy Mother,” he added in a prim voice, dropping his own demurely.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CONQUERED AND THE CONQUERORS.

THE Institution chanced to be more than usually crowded to-night, for the subject of the lecture was attractive. It was to be a rapid survey of salient points showing the homogeneity of our planetary system as proved by the spectroscope, and of life on the earth as proved by evolution. And certain of the Laodiceans among the congregation, who subscribed neither to Ritualism nor to the upsetting theories of science, but who liked to keep well with their parson and to learn exciting facts when they could, had agreed among themselves to turn a deaf ear to the anti-scriptural applications so sure to be made, and go to the lecture to hear what Mr. Fullerton had to say about the unfinished condition of Jupiter and the telluric analogies of Mars—the development of man from an ascidian and the close chain of likeness running through the whole race of the vertebrates.

It would be rare fun too, said some, to hear how all these data would be found to prove one thing in his

hands when they had just been made to prove another in those of an orthodox popularizer of science whom Mr. Lascelles had lately had down at Crossholme to refute the local Apollyon and hoist him with his own scientific petard. Yes, it would be rare fun, said those who were lazily indifferent to the contradictions between fact and faith; rare fun, said the presumptuous ignorant who think it fine to sneer at the know-nothingness of philosophers, because, while they all acknowledge the same facts, they all make irreconcilable deductions. They and some others promised themselves a fine treat; wherefore the room was fuller than it had been of late, since Mr. Lascelles had christened it the Devil's Shop, and made abstention therefrom a *sine quâ non* of Church acceptance and a share in the good things dealt out to the faithful; and, with the contradictiousness of fate, on the very night when Richard would have been glad to have met only his handful of sympathetic friends, to whom he could speak freely and without pain, he was encountered by a host of the curious, the indifferent, the semi-inimical—and one active enemy in the person of Adam Bell, the vicar's colly-dog and spy.

Mild and quiet as ever, but as pale as if his veins had not a drop of red blood left in them, Richard gave his

lecture in his old manner and with his old care. The bold word said in the calm voice, so peculiarly his characteristic; the richness of illustration to fix attention; the choiceness and yet simplicity of language to raise the literary taste and insure the self-respect of his hearers, so that they should not feel themselves spoken down to, and yet should perfectly well understand all that was said to them and be in no wise addressed over their heads; all the tact and thoroughness, the delicacy and thoughtfulness, which made him such a consummate lecturer for working-men, were as evident to-night, during his agony, as they had ever been at his best and freest moments. Nothing could have shown more clearly the nature of the man whom his wife had been induced to repudiate as an emissary of the Evil One; nothing could have proved more conclusively his conscientiousness, his patience, his self-control, his high idea of duty and what each member owes to the community of which he forms a part. It was only when all the facts came to be known that the men who listened to him now with pleasure, remembered him as he was to-night with reverence. Even Adam Bell confessed, in that small cynical "mind-cell" which other men call their souls, that Humanity in its highest development is a thing rightly worshipped; and that

Mr. Fullerton was a man who made one somehow believe pretty clearly in a God.

When the illustrative and physical part of his lecture was finished, Richard went back on his old argument—the untrustworthiness of the Bible wherever it can be tested, and the consequent untenable pretensions of the priesthood whose fundamental claim is based on scriptural infallibility. It was all false throughout, he said ; and the chain of reasoning, however logical in itself, which gives spiritual power and insight to the clergy, falls to pieces when we examine the starting-point—like those conjuror's chains which can only be undone by pulling out the first link. But that first link had been pulled out—some generations ago now. So soon, he said, as it was proved that the sun is the centre of our system and the earth only one of many planets revolving round it ; so soon as it was proved that we and all these other worlds were of the same identical substance as the sun, and that this was only one of many systems like our own ; so soon too as the doctrine of evolution in nature became established as a scientific fact, true in substance if in parts faulty in detail—so soon did the Bible become a simply human record of puerile fables mixed up with lofty thought—interesting as an historical study, but a dead letter as

Revelation. They could judge of its infallibility by the difference between proved cosmic facts and the explanation of things given in its pages. They could judge whether the importance assigned by it to man, and all that followed on that importance, was likely in view of his relative position in the universe ; and if the groundwork thus failed them, what became of the superstructure ? —if the Bible was proved untrustworthy in its facts, where did they stand, those ecclesiastics who offered themselves as its divinely inspired interpreters ? Of those ecclesiastics, he said, he must again and again warn his hearers to beware. Men who thought it within the range of their duty to take the children from the parents, to sever husband and wife and destroy the peace of families, were not of the kind to be welcomed into English homes or encouraged as the leaders and guides of society. No human affection was sacred to them if it stood in the way of ecclesiastical aggrandisement ; no morality was of value if in opposition to their dogma. They cared only to consolidate their power and deepen the influence which superstition had allowed them to gain over the lives and minds of men. And with their confessed principle of the end justifying the means, they knew neither remorse nor fear in the methods adopted to secure that end.

He besought them to lay to heart all that he had said to them for some years now ; and to understand clearly that they were at this moment in the thick of the fight between knowledge and superstition, tyranny and freedom. The new vicar had resolved to carry Crossholme, and he had spared no pains to insure the victory. He gave them fine sights and good music in the services to charm their senses, and he would do more in this way when the church should be reopened ; he sought to terrify them with old wives' fables of eternal damnation for being what they were born to be, unless they would go to him and the Church for safety ; he roused their imagination, subjugated their intelligence, damped their energies, soothed their sorrows—yes, he soothed their sorrows ! and got his tightest hold when they were weakest !—by promises of a heaven where they should be compensated for the sufferings and shortcomings of their lives on earth ; and he attacked them still more closely by charities which degraded them to accept. The whole thing was a net closely woven and craftily cast, and meant in all its circumstances, simply and solely, power to the Church ; which in its turn meant loss of liberty to the laity. Let them beware of all that was now offered to them, and be brave to bear loss, if that should

be included in steadfastness to their birthright of mental freedom and manly independence. This was his last word to them—at least for the present. He was leaving Crossholme to-morrow, and it would probably be long before he should see them again, if ever. The Institution was to be shut against the old members, and would pass into other hands, and be used for other purposes; (his pale face flushed when he said this, and his lips twitched visibly beneath his moustache); and this was the last lecture which he should give them here from this place. And so he bade them all heartily farewell and trusted that he had not been their fellow-worker—their fellow-seeker after truth—for so many years in vain.

His voice a little failed him, when he thus bade them farewell; but he recovered himself before he had betrayed his emotion too plainly, and bore himself through his trial as manfully as he had borne himself with Hermione—accepting with the patience of strength the pain from which neither energy nor courage could free him.

As he came down from the desk to the floor of the room, the more intimate of his friends gathered round him.

“What is that you say, sir?” asked John Graves anxiously—“you are leaving us? and the Institution is to be given up?”

Tears stood in the man's eyes. He had had many a hard fall in life, but this was one of the worst. This touched more than himself—it wounded truth, the progress of thought, and the good of humanity, which were more to him than even his own private affections; for he had learnt his lesson of “altruism” well, and was the fitting lieutenant of such a captain as Richard.

“Come aside with me, my friends,” said Mr. Fullerton, turning to those to whom had been promised the cottages—about ten men in all.

He indicated Ringrove Hardisty as well, but when the sharp face of the little chandler pressed in behind Tom Moorhead's brawny shoulders, he said quietly:—

“No, not you, Adam—you are out of it!”

“Hope it's nothing good, sir!” said the former pedlar, sniggering; “I don't care to be out of the swim when there's fine fish afloat.”

“So it seems,” said Richard; “but your net is cast in other waters, and you have no business now in ours. Here, Dick Stern! do you come up here—I have a word to say to you. And I have something painful to say to you all,” he continued, when he had collected them in a group, standing about him amazed and a little breathless, as men knowing that a shock was to come and that they

were in some unknown danger. "The leases of your cottages are refused, my friends. Mr. Lascelles has induced Mrs. Fullerton to reject you as tenants on her estate. You know, of course, that this is her property. I have been merely her steward; though sometimes I believed I was master where, when it comes to the pinch, I have to remember that I have only been the agent, to be dispossessed of my power at pleasure. Now she wishes to manage things on her own account, and we must not think hardly of what is done by her. She has become a warm convert to Ritualism—this is no news to anyone; consequently she does as she is directed by the vicar, who advises her not to give tenements to men not in accord with the Church. I am grieved to have this to say to you. I know that you have counted on my word as if it had been a lease duly signed and sealed; you John, above all, are on my heart. You can understand, all of you, what it has cost me to give this lecture and to tell you this bad bit of news. And you know for yourselves what it includes. But it had to be done."

"And you were never greater than now, sir," said John Graves with a tender kind of respect that had in it all the essence of loyalty to the fallen—the respect of a disciple who would not deny his master, but who stood

firm to share in his martyrdom, whatever form that martyrdom might take. "I know what you must be suffering just now—we all can realize that ; but Mr. Fullerton, sir, a brave man like you stands above humiliation. The man in you is a deal sight higher than anything that can happen to you ; and you can't be brought down, you can't be humiliated, let them try their worst !"

"There's nought for us, then, but to leave the old place," said Dick Stern. He was the naturalist of the little band, and for years had found his highest pleasure in noting the various dates :—when the first primrose was to be seen, the first ashleaf, the first ear of wheat ; when the first cuckoo was heard and the first swallow appeared, and so on ;—which dates he then sent to a local paper, and, humble as it was, felt that he had done something for knowledge by contributing this little brick to be set in the great temple. "I thought to have lived all my days here," he continued, "but it seems that's not to be. As the master says—it has to be done ; worse luck !"

"Yes, worse luck, indeed !" said Allen Rose. "It's hard lines to make a new place and find new friends at the age of most of us ; when we've rooted, so to say, and have nothing beyond the old home."

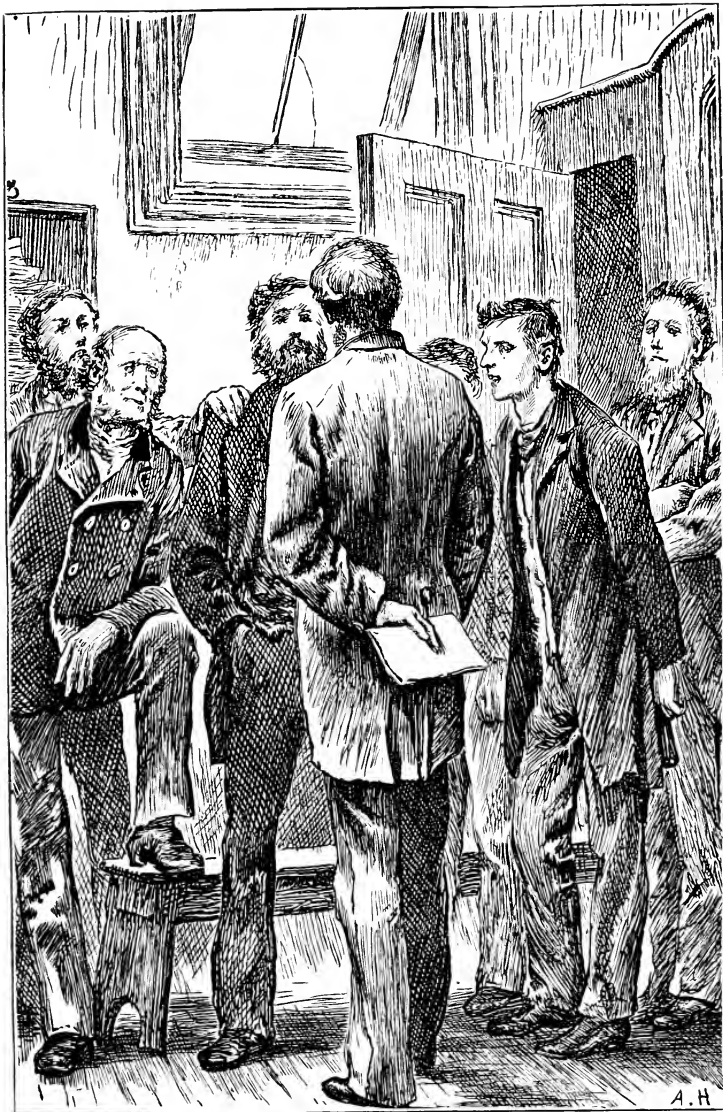
“It’s enough to rouse the country side!” cried Tom Moorhead’s thundering voice. “If any brave lad would put an ounce of lead into that”—objurgation—“parson’s skull he’d be doing a good day’s work, though he swung for it! It wouldn’t be so bad as shooting a dog fox!”

“Softly, Tom! softly!” said Richard. “We have nothing to do with bullets and the gallows here! We are quiet, law-abiding, truth-loving men, who want to know the best kind of life that we may follow it ourselves and teach it to others. We are not assassins or felons!”

“Mr. Fullerton, sir, you are too soft!” cried Tom passionately. “You are too good for the like of them, and they just prey on you—that’s where it is, sir! If you had kicked that priest there out of your house the first moment he set foot in it, and forbidden anyone as belonged to you to follow after him, it would have been a precious sight better for us all! You’d have been master to the end, and we’d not have been the laughing-stock of the country.”

“Silence, Tom!” said Allen Rose angrily. “Another word of the same sort and I’ll kick *you* out of the place!”

“Hold your noise, you big mooncalf!” said Dick Stern, shoving the blacksmith aside. “As if things were



A.H

'We'll have no words among ourselves to-night.'



not bad enough without your bellowing to make them worse !”

“Come, my friends ! no wrangling among yourselves,” said Richard. “We all know Tom—a good heart and a fiery temper which is apt to run away with him before he knows where he is. But we’ll have no words among ourselves to-night. That would, indeed, be a triumph to the other side !”

“And look here, my men,” cried Ringrove, in a loud voice, so that all in the room, who had gathered nearer by degrees and had already heard Tom’s views of things, were fully aware of what was going on, “you shall stand at no loss by this. I am sure I am doing what my friend here would have approved, had I consulted with him on this subject before speaking, when I say that I will give you each what Mr. Fullerton would have done—that is, a roomy house and a plot of garden ground, man for man of you. I will put the plans in hand to-morrow. Hold on till the houses are ready. While I am alive, no priest shall have it all his own way here in Crossholme ; and for the sake of my friend, Mr. Fullerton, I will befriend all of you whom he has stood by.”

“Thank you, sir.”—“Thank you, Mr. Hardisty.”—
“A chip of the old block.”—“Mr. Fullerton’s second

self.”—“Things won’t go far amiss while we’ve got such a man at the head of them.”—“The vicar ’ll have his match, I’ll go bail ;”—dropped from the men, and culminated in a ringing cheer “for the master of Monkshall,” while Richard grasped the young fellow’s hand warmly, and said :—

“Thank you, my boy, you are what I always knew you to be.”

“Thanks, Mr. Hardisty, to the example set you by Mr. Fullerton here,” said John Graves, faithful to the old flag and turning still to the setting sun.

But even with this break in the clouds there was sorrow enough about at this moment—specially that sorrow of the parting. Many of the men wept like children as they shook hands for the last time with him who had been their guide, their friend, their teacher and example. Tears stood in Richard’s eyes too, and his good-bye to John Graves was like the parting from a brother. But all these things were simply details. The great grief and origin of all lay behind ; and these were only so many turns of the knife in the wound through which his life-blood was slowly flowing. They were painful enough ; but they were secondary pains—the counting up of individual relics gone down in the shipwreck in which had been lost wife, child, and fortune.

It came to an end however at last, and Richard and Ringrove were left alone. Then the strength which had borne him up so well failed the dispossessed master of the Abbey. He sat down on one of the chairs, and bent his face on his crossed arms, hiding his anguish even from his friend.

After a time he controlled himself so that he could look up.

“Give me a bed to-night, my boy,” he said. “I shall leave by the first train to-morrow morning, but I could not sleep in the Abbey to-night. It would be only an unnecessary pain. You understand it, do not you? My life is over there, and my wife will be best left alone.”

“Yes, yes ; I see it all !” said Ringrove excitedly. “I cannot talk of it ! I should say what I should regret after. Yes, come home with me. My house is yours—my purse is yours ; you are my friend, my elder brother, and I have nothing which is not yours, if you like to have it.”

“Thank you, my boy,” Richard answered simply. “I knew what you were. All that I want from you however is a bed to-night, and that you will be my agent when I am gone. Befriend my men and give a look now and then to *her*. And do not judge her harshly,

Ringrove. She has not done me this wrong of her own will. She has been overcome."

His words came abruptly to an end, and he got up and walked to the fireplace. For the moment he had forgotten Virginia and his bitter cause of grief against her mother, and remembered only Hermione—his wife, the woman whom he had loved with such calm intensity of trust, such fondness of faithful affection, and whom he had lost, in truth he scarcely knew how!

After a while he turned back.

"Now let us go," he said. "This is simply losing strength."

"Let me only say that you may trust me as you would yourself," said Ringrove in a low voice. "I love her too well and believe in her real goodness too thoroughly not to treat her with deference and respect, as much for her sake as for yours; and I may perhaps do a little good," he added.

"You will do no good," said Richard. "Things have gone too far, and she believes too much."

"Tom Moorhead was right, brutal as he is—that man is good only for killing!" said Ringrove passionately.

"Better kill the superstitious ignorance whence he

draws his power. The people who mislead are as much to be pitied as those who are misled. They believe what they teach," was Richard's characteristic answer, wishing to be just even to Mr. Lascelles.

Then they passed out into the soft, sweet, fragrant evening air, and drove home by the highway to Monks-hall—the Abbey left for ever.

That night Hermione woke with a start from a confused and troubled dream. As she woke up more thoroughly she felt that someone was in the room, and, half dreaming as she was, she thought it was her husband—old habit stronger than new conditions.

"Richard, dear!" she said in a tender sleepy voice.

Only semi-conscious, the excitement of her spiritual suttee had passed away, and she had come back to her living natural self.

"Richard, darling!" she said again in that sleepy, warm, caressing voice.

The curtain of the bed drew slowly back, and Edith Everett stood white and tall by her side.

"My poor sister, you are dreaming!" she said in her smooth tones, through which penetrated the cold smile that made that smoothness glacial. "Wake up, Hermione! Satan has inspired this vision. Shake off this horrible possession."

“Give me my husband! give me back Richard!” cried Hermione with an hysterical cry, spreading out her arms and flinging her head wildly on the pillow.

Edith took the soft round dimpled arm in her strong and nervous grasp. She forced the frightened woman back to her former position, and laid the crucifix, which she snatched from the little table by the side, as a kind of exorcistic charm on the heaving breast.

“Do you want to become a castaway?” she said in a low stern voice. “Your love for your atheistic husband is a crime, a sin against your womanhood! You shall not go back to him. I will keep you sacred to our Lord even against your will!”

“You frighten me! you hurt me!” cried Hermione, half rising and trying to struggle herself free. “Richard! Richard!”

“Fool!” said Mrs. Everett, flinging her back roughly and holding her down as harshly. “You are too contemptible! But you *shall* submit! You shall not have your own will!”

It was the old story—the whip of Mr. Lascelles and the scorpions of Edith Everett—tyranny, contempt, and cruelty, when the end had been attained and there was no longer need of flattery and cajolery!

The next morning when the gong sounded for breakfast no one appeared save Mrs. Everett ; Hermione was in bed with headache and fever, and Richard was already on his way to London, finally conquered and driven out. The fight had been fought out to the end—if indeed that can be called a fight which had been active on one side only, on the other the mere passive resistance of one whose hands had been tied and his weapons of defence taken from him from the first. Such as it had been however it was now over, and the way was cleared of all obstruction. The new brooms might sweep where they would—"the besom of destruction," said Mr. Lascelles, smiling with that saintly waggishness of his kind when they base their humour on the Old Testament, for which they have at the best but a problematical kind of respect. And the besom of destruction set to work pretty sharply—grass growing under the horses' hoofs not being to the liking of Mr. Lascelles.

On the receipt of a note from Edith Everett the vicar came up to the Abbey by ten o'clock, ostensibly to comfort Hermione in this undeserved affliction of her husband's cruel desertion.

"Had he been really the unselfish creature he passed

for, he would have kept by you to help you in your new duties," said Mr. Lascelles. "He knew how helpless he had made you for his own purpose; and now to leave you in the midst of your difficulties!—It is too cruel!"

"The dear little woman need not fret about that," said Edith's calm smooth voice. "You and I, Superior, have both good business heads, and we can help her. Would you like us to look at the things to-day, dear?" to poor, flushed, feverish Hermione. "If we do, we shall be ready for you to-morrow. And something must be done legally about those leases. The men already in possession—there are two, I think you said, Superior?—must have their notice to quit properly given. You must be careful to be on the right side of the law. Shall we see to all this for you?"

"Yes," said Hermione, too ill and unhappy to care much what she said or what was done.

"Then we will leave you, dear, to get a little sleep," answered Edith, with a look at Mr. Lascelles. "Shall we go down at once, Superior, while you have the time to give?"

"It will be best," said the vicar, unconsciously falling into the second place while appearing to hold

the first—acting as was suggested while seeming to keep the command. “I have an hour free for this painful but necessary duty. Our friend here must not feel herself deserted or without help. Now sleep, and be at rest!” he added, making the sign of benediction over her while he repeated the words. “Sleep! knowing that the Church holds you as her dearest daughter, and that Our Lord is well pleased with you!”

But, for all that, her husband was banished, and she knew in her own heart that she had broken his.

Then the two, going downstairs, went into the study, and began their work of inquisition. Such and such a thing in this infidel collection of natural science Mr. Lascelles resolved to take down to the Vicarage, for his own purposes. Turned to atheistic uses as they had been—to the proving of “ontogenetic evolution,” the demonstration of “mind-cells,” and all the other soul-destroying principles to which Richard had devoted himself—in his hands, and in that very Institution which hitherto had been the Temple of Satan, he would make them evidences of Divine Intelligence and the mystery of creation. He would transfer the furniture and transpose the image so that what had hitherto been dedicated to blasphemy and idolatry should now become

aids to the Church and true religion. Such, and such, and such, he said ; and Edith Everett, looking over his shoulder, said : “Yes, do take them, Superior;” but nevertheless she resolved that she herself would have a close study of them all before they went. She was a clever woman and had the curiosity of her sex.

When this preliminary survey was made they then turned to the books and private accounts ; and before noonday came they had so far mastered the details of the Abbey estate, that Mr. Lascelles could judge for how much Hermione, now her own mistress, might be held good in the way of tribute :—“loans lent to the Lord,” said the vicar with the euphemistic hypocrisy of his calling, when the laity are called on for funds wherewith to build their own intellectual prisons and forge their own mental chains :—“loans lent to the Lord,” and so much left for her own uses. “If she has a thousand a year she may think herself well off,” he thought, smiling as he reckoned up his future funds.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DAY OF TRIUMPH.

CONDEMNED as a soft, foolish thing not fit for her place nor worthy of the good stuff she had, by the men who loved her husband and who regarded Hermione's choice much as Hamlet held his mother's :—Indignantly wondered at by Mrs. Nesbitt, who failed to recognize her old friend in this new presentation, and who refused to accept any other alternative but "mad or bad :"—By virtue of his manhood more tenderly judged by Ringrove, who not only saw Virginia in her mother and Richard in his wife, but who honestly loved Hermione for herself—and yet, though he loved her well and judged her tenderly, he could do nothing stronger for her than apologize and throw the blame of the "first hand" on the vicar :—The object of confused displeasure on the part of Lady Maine, who, jubilant at the atheist's overthrow, yet thinking the papist who had dismounted him every whit as abominable, was unwilling that Mr. Fullerton, infamous as he was, should be scourged by those who

themselves deserved the lash:—Held by Mr. Lascelles as his creature and his conquest, ranked as so much pecuniary gain to the Church, to be quietly let drop when exhausted:—Despised by Edith Everett for her weakness—as if feminine weakness has not been the universal pabulum of spiritual dominators in all times and all climes!—and her Ritualism laughed at for all that she herself, clear and far-sighted, had joined the extreme section of the party; but then Edith Everett knew what she was about, and Hermione did not:—Compassionated only by Theresa who once had feared her, but who now, with the keen *flair* of the dying, knew that since the clever widow had come to Crossholme that beloved priest of theirs had ceased to care for either of his favourite penitents as he used formerly, and that she in her own person, destroyed by obedience, burnt up by love, was now only a trouble and an embarrassment:—Held by all as criminally attached to Mr. Lascelles and therefore insincere in her conversion and infinitely blameworthy all round;—this was the network of commentary and condemnation that Hermione had woven about her name by what was, after all, only the righteous logic of her principles. Granting those principles true, neither she nor Mr. Lascelles nor yet

Edith Everett was to blame for what had been done. As the egg so the chick ; and the chick is not in fault. An eagle chips his shell here, a vulture struggles into light there, and kites are hatched by brooding mothers as well as doves and nightingales. It is by the direct action of that brooding mother what kind of creature is added to the forces of life ; but it all depends on man what kind of egg he chooses shall be hatched. If he has a fancy for kites and vultures, he cannot expect to save his lambs and ducklings.

On one point however Mr. Lascelles was sedulously careful :—Hermione must not be allowed to feel the chill breath of public disfavour. She must be surrounded too closely by the clerical chorus bound to sing her praises, for a discordant note to be heard above their louder melodies. The rapping of the tom-tom and the intoxication of drugs and incense must go on till that voluntary suttee was completed and the wealthy victim—widow of love!—had no more to give. Until that hour should come she was not to be given time to think ; and he carried out his design. The Abbey was like a Roman seminary for all the priests and brothers and fathers who swarmed there at all hours, like locusts fluttering down on a green cornfield ; and even at night no dangerous

solitude was allowed. Edith Everett slept in her room, under pretence of kindly guardianship, and read her to sleep every night out of ecstatic books wherein the Church was always spoken of as the Great Mother in whose arms all sins and sorrows were abandoned, and in whose service no crime could be committed when the action was of holy intent. Her debts too, which were really the most important matters in Hermione's present life, were not suffered to press on her. Mr. Lascelles undertook to settle them, if dear Mrs. Fullerton would be guided by him; and dear Mrs. Fullerton, naturally enough, was guided by him. She was unable to cope with difficulties of any kind; but pecuniary difficulties were so many algebraic problems which no amount of figures set down on paper could make clear to her. So the vicar, who was anxious to be able to say in his discourse on the day of the opening of the church that not a fraction of debt encumbered the building, put the affair into the hands of his own lawyer, raised a considerable sum of money in a hocus-pocus kind of way that was almost like a conjuror's trick, paid off what was owing to the last farthing, and then told Hermione that she had so much to the good in the bank.

It was a piece of charming legerdemain to the pretty

woman who could not calculate—something like that mysterious fructification of old time, when an item had been put down twice over and the pounds had multiplied to that extent ; and she expressed her gratitude as warmly as if the pious juggler had made her a present of the whole sum. To her mind indeed he had.

Edith Everett too praised dear Superior for what he had done so warmly and incessantly that Hermione was almost bankrupt in gratitude, and could not be sufficiently sweet and humble.

“So kind ! so generous !” she said twenty times a day ; and the clever widow now led and now echoed her.

Meanwhile the two pious confederates had no scruple in thus misleading their dupe. It was not for themselves but for the Church ; and for Her even exploitation and *escroquerie* were lawful.

The opening of the church was close at hand now ; but before the day really came the vicar had one or two things to do. For one, he had to scatter the band, if he could, now that the leader had been discomfited. Acting on the information given him by Adam Bell, and by nature one of those who never forgive, he had Tom Moorhead up before the magistrates at Starton to answer to the charge of using threatening language and inciting

to a breach of the peace. By a refinement of cruelty, all the men of Richard's special following were made to give evidence against their comrade, and Tom, whose personal recognizances were refused, and who on his part declined to let his friends go bail for him, was marched off to the lock-up as a dangerous character best out of the way.

From that moment the blacksmith was a ruined man, in conduct, character, and estate; and Adam Bell's chances with pretty Janet were not so desperate as they had been. He had calculated on this temporary removal of her father as a powerful agent in his favour; and his calculations were not so far out. This too was another instance of the unseen influences which govern life and action, the personal motives by which we are stirred when seeming to be acting only on the broad principles common to society. If it had not been for Janet, and because he was angry at her father's opposition, Adam Bell would in all likelihood not have "split" on Tom; and Tom would not have been sent to the lock-up, to come out a reckless, ranting demagogue, fearing no man and honouring no law, ungoverned by reason and to be kept in bounds solely by the brute strength of the majority.

The vicar did his best to spoil the lives of the other men as he had spoilt Tom Moorhead's, honestly believing

that he was doing God service in thus showing of what flimsy stuff their virtue was made ; but here Ringrove stepped in, and took such as would come to him into Monkshall itself, until their own houses were ready. Both John Graves and Dick Stern went up to the house, but some of the rest either declined the further fight and shifted into Starton or migrated farther away still to London or America. Those who were left however Mr. Lascelles sought to starve out ; and to have employed one of these excommunicated sinners would have cost the members of his own party more than any among them chose to pay. He was in the saddle now ; and they should learn the strength of the hand which held the reins.

He took the Institution for his own purposes, and, as he said, made the place which had so often echoed with Mr. Fullerton's blasphemies resound now with true Church doctrine. Some of the most objectionable books he burnt ; the rest he sold, and got what he called sound literature with the proceeds. He made Adam Bell custodian and librarian, partly because it is politic to reward rattling, and partly because he was a sharp spy and a valuable reporter ; and the vicar believed that a government is best carried on when there is no opposition, or when what there is is muzzled.

But by all this he roused Ringrove who kept a firm front and helped the remnant of the beaten band where he could. The master of Monkshall did not go so far as Richard in speculative opinions certainly, but all this high-handed tyranny drove him in that direction, and alienated him from the Church. He was as strong as Richard had been in urging the men to remain free and self-reliant, and even more passionate in his denunciations of priestly domination, because with him it became mixed up with that element of jealousy which was one of his sins and was not one of Richard's. He spent a good deal of money on Secularism, as he called it; and Mr. Lascelles had done so far good in his life in thus making the master of Monkshall decidedly public-spirited, and preventing his sinking into the mere country gentleman of pleasure. And with all Ringrove's good qualities this possibility had been on the cards. He often went to see Hermione, painful as those visits were. But he thought it right to her in her spiritual bondage, giving her the chance as it were of freeing herself when she would—and it was his duty to Richard, to whom he wrote two or three times in the week telling him how things stood both at the Abbey and elsewhere. He had little to tell that was comforting to the poor exile. Hermione

never mentioned him; she had been forbidden to do so by Superior, and Edith Everett never left her alone to make disobedience possible. Richard had written once, saying in his letter that if she did not answer he would understand her silence as meaning her desire not to hold any communication with him; and Hermione had not answered. The reason was simple: she had not received the letter, which had somehow found its way to the Vicarage, and from the hands of Mr. Lascelles to the fire. She fretted a good deal at this complete abandonment—so unlike Richard, she used to think—but she had no chance of learning the truth, and perhaps in the mental thralldom in which she was held it would have changed nothing if she had learnt it.

Ringrove often went to see the Nesbitts too. He thought pretty dark-eyed Bee the sweetest girl of her kind to be found within the four seas, and that kind, if not so lofty, not so ideal as Virginia's, yet infinitely beautiful, infinitely restful to a man like himself—good, generous, manly, but a little high-handed and more than a little prone to jealousy. He knew what would come—not just yet, but presently; and he knew that when that moment did come, soft, gentle-hearted Bee would look up into his face with tears of sweet surprise in her large, deep,

humid eyes, and would learn in one swift moment what she did not know now, how that she loved him, and had loved him for long months, unacknowledged to herself if seen and rejoiced in by him. He would never suffer her or her mother to say a slighting word of either Hermione or Virginia ; and by his own steadfast honesty performed that difficult task of keeping well with common friends who have split asunder and gone into opposing camps.

The most miserable man in the place at this time was George Pearce. "Traitor and coward" Tom Moorhead called him, and yah'd at him like a gorilla when the young carpenter passed his forge on his way to morning prayer. Sometimes he called himself the same, if at others he knew that he had sacrificed what was dearest and easiest to give that "sort of a something" a chance, and to bear witness to the truth as it had slowly manifested itself to him. Nevertheless he was always downcast and forlorn, and with the sense of dishonour and exile about him. His father-in-law was ever the same to him ; but when these darker days came all but John turned still more wrathfully against him ; and even Dick Stern, moderately mild as he was by nature, spoke for his benefit the parable of the cuckoo and how the rats leave the sinking ship.

Nanny was miserable too. Her father's misfortunes preyed on her heart ; her husband's incurable sadness made their well-ordered little home no better than a place of wailing, and neutralized the happiness that love and prosperity and virtuous living would else have given them ; the baby was weakly and kept her always in a state of restless anxiety ; this in its turn hurt her health which had never been sound, and made the melancholy of her home deeper and more pronounced. When the little creature slipped through her hands, in spite of all her care, and died just at that time of dawning intelligence which most endears a child to its mother, then poor Nanny felt as if her cup was indeed full, and life too truly a valley of tears without sunshine now or joy to come. To be sure Mr. Lascelles and all the clerical body told her that she ought to rejoice, not weep ; for that her little one had been taken up straight into heaven where it was one of the blessed angels ever singing the praises and glory of God. It was far better off, they assured her, than if it had lived to grow up a prince ; but the mother's heart bled if the Christian's faith was assured, and she shed as many tears, poor woman, as if her babe had gone to the Bottomless Pit :—As it would have done, said the vicar, laying down the chart of

the Unseen with a firm hand and a broad brush, had it died unbaptized.

So things went on till the day came of ecclesiastical triumph in the reopening of the church—the culmination of all things for the present moment.

Restored and beautified, this church of St. Michael and All Angels was like a cathedral of small dimensions, and was fitted with every kind of ornament, lawful and unlawful. It had painted windows, saints in niches, carved stalls for the choir, a reredos and a rood screen, a magnificent organ, a superb lectern, an irremovable crucifix on the altar, lighted candles, and a lamp ever burning in honour of the Real Presence. It had open benches, and no seats assigned to anyone, though so many “seats in the parish church” went with the leases of all lands and houses; a finely carved confessional stood at the north-east side; the altar was adorned with flowers, recalling that Day of Thanksgiving now, to judge by events, so long ago; and it seemed as if Mr. Lascelles had determined to try the question with his parishioners and understand now at once what they would bear and how far he could go.

The bishop of the diocese, being Moderate, had not been asked to honour this reopening. Mr. Lascelles,

preaching unqualified submission to the laity, paid neither obedience nor respect to his own superiors unless they carried the same flag as himself; and he had in especial horror this diocesan of his, who, he maintained, had been wrongfully appointed and was unfit to be the Church's ruler, because he was a Protestant, an Erastian, and a loyal citizen as well as a cleric. Hence there was no kind of check on the day's demonstrations. Processions and banners, genuflexions and incense, vestments and candles—everything was there; and the travesty of Romanism was complete. The party sent its chief men as sympathisers and representatives, and the clerical array which they made was both imposing and important. The organist who came down to open the organ was the best man in London; the Sisters who had suddenly found it necessary to visit the Convalescent Home were among the richest members of the most extreme Orders. Every possible ritualistic adjunct had been made use of, every available wandering light had been got hold of; and since Crossholme had been a parish at all it had never seen so gorgeous a display of ecclesiastical finery or of clerical magnificence.

Whatever, in the way of splendid sensuousness of ritual, the service had been on the Day of Thanksgiving

for the Harvest, this, on the reopening of the restored church, surpassed it as much as the sea surpasses a mountain lake. There were no temporary bazaar-like print and calico substitutes for the real thing to-day; no young ladies' offerings of perishable prettiness and questionable ecclesiastical taste—all in use for this opening service was solid, enduring, costly; and the needlework alone represented a small fortune. Banners and vestments, altarcloths, eucharistic linen, offertory bags, were of the finest material and the most elaborate embroidery; the chalice and paten were of gold set round with precious stones; the crucifix of the fairest ivory on the closest-grained ebony was a superb work of art. No expense had been spared to make the display supreme; and whatever objection might be raised by certain heretical Protestants, Mr. Lascelles took care that for this day at least he would display his power and suffer no stint of splendour in ritual or appointments.

The whole parish had assembled to take part in the ceremony, and among the rest the Nesbitts and Ringrove Hardisty—the churchwarden on the side of the parish. This was not a sectarian matter, they argued, and it was parochial; and their presence there—the most notorious objectors to the new order of things as they were—

betokened assertion of their rights rather than deference to the vicar or acceptance of his programme. But Virginia and Sister Agnes, with that poor foolish mediæval ape, Cuthbert Molyneux, were absent; and both to Ringrove and the Nesbitts it seemed as if the want of that fair, sweet girl who had knelt beside her mother at the Harvest Festival, made all the rest cold and poor.

They looked at Hermione to see whether any memory of what she had lost flitted across her face, but they could read nothing there save the bewilderment of spiritual intoxication, the stupor of a drugged conscience, the feverish delirium of the widow voluntarily performing suttee. She had been presented to all these wandering ecclesiastical lights as the most shining beacon of the day. It was she who had done this, she who had done that; she who had emptied these jewels into the treasury of the Lord, and who was an example to her generation for faithfulness and devotion. She had had to go through trials and persecutions of all kinds, but she had stood firm to the Church and true to her baptismal vows; and now she had conquered and was at peace. Satan had left her to the Lord who had supported her, and her day of triumph had come.

At which all the clerical sympathizers had congr-

tulated her, while flinging holy stones at Apollyon's head ; and the loud blare of their trumpets had for the moment drowned the still small voice which yet they could not wholly stifle. Small chance then that—kneeling there as a kind of ecclesiastical Queen, the Eldest Daughter of the Church, spoken of by name in the vicar's sermon, conscious all through that she was the great lady of the day, and that her name would be handed about from one to the other as that of a sincere Churchwoman who had done these good deeds for the party in the face of persecution and contumely—small chance that, through all this glittering haze of vanity and self-deception, ugly thoughts and sad memories would intrude, haunting her soul like ghosts in the moonlight. No—she remembered nothing ; she was what she had been made—bewildered, drugged and intoxicated.

When the service was about to begin, and just as the organ had sounded the note which announced the arrival of the procession, a slight bustle at the side-door turned all heads to see what it was. It was poor Theresa, carried in on the couch which she had discarded now for some time for her bed. The vicar had never dreamed of forbidding her to come to this Church festival, because he had never dreamed of her attempting what was

apparently impossible—practically suicide ; but, borne up by that strange flickering fever of the last days, she had determined on making the one supreme effort, and now was carried in, hoping that if she had to die she might die now and here.

Aunt Catherine, whose face had become rounder and sleeker and more fatuous than before, walked by her side, smiling serenely. She had made no opposition to the girl's proposal. On the contrary, she had approved of it ; sure, as she said, that the saints would support her and give her strength for the exertion ; had she not prayed to them and promised them public honours if they would ? And the serenity on her mindless face was perhaps the most shocking thing in the whole tragedy.

A thrill of horror passed through the congregation as the girl was brought in, lying there on her couch like a dying devotee before the shrine of Siva—the god who had been her destroyer ; but no one felt the pain of the situation more than Mr. Lascelles. He had not seen much of Theresa of late. She had ceased to be his tender care, and had become only a “ case ” which it was part of his pastoral duty to attend—he or another priest ; and, for the most part, that other. But he him-

self had gone past her, as he would have said had he discussed his state of feeling ; and she had fulfilled her purpose. She had given him all that he had desired—a study of feminine nature, an example of implicit obedience, a handsome window for the church, and as much money as he could squeeze out of her ; and now she was of no more use than an orange that has been sucked dry. She might depart and be at peace when she would ; why should life be prolonged when all that made up its practical value is done for ? To Mr. Lascelles, the devoted priest, men and women were circumstances rather than individualities, and valuable only so far as they were useful to the Church. Nevertheless, he felt it keenly, like a loud reproach or a blow in the face, when he saw the wasted, ghastly face of the poor girl lying there in the church where she could see the altar and him, and gaze up into his face during his sermon. It was not pleasant to look at her and know that this was his work ; but he had had to meet the like unpleasantnesses before now ; and was he not protected as well as sanctioned by his sacred office ? If women would be fools, and take him as a man when he offered himself as a priest, on their heads be the sin, the shame, and the punishment ! His, surrounded by the halo of his office, was clear.

This was his rapid thought as he walked round the church with joined hands held before him ; his eyes, which saw everything, cast humbly on the ground ; his shining satin vestments glistening in the sunlight as he passed the open door and across the light of the windows ; his heart swelling with pride, as one part of his great object was thus magnificently accomplished. Fortunately for the peace of the congregation Theresa was too weak to make any hysterical outbreak. She lay during the service in a kind of trance, conscious only of the heavy clouds of incense which rose up about the altar, touched by the sun to gold, and enveloping the officiating priests in a glory that likened *him* to Moses or to One yet more divine—conscious only of the thrilling music that now sighed in supplication, now swelled in triumph through the church, stirring up vague, delightful images of a love which was at once human and divine, and creating that kind of ecstasy which satisfies all desires and perfects all emotions. She heard his voice, of which in her half-unconscious state the music seemed only the continuance ; she saw his face transfigured in glory, half-revealed, half-hidden, in the golden cloud that seemed to lift him from the gross material earth and carry him midway to heaven. It was all indeed like heaven visible and

entered for her ; and as she looked at the window which she had given—Magdalen worshipping at the feet of Christ—she lost herself in her dreamy and delicious delirium, and was herself the woman while he was the god.

So the service passed, without a break or hitch. Many women wept, and many young men were carried out of themselves by that passionately sensuous emotion which a splendid ritual excites. Aunt Catherine was smiling all over her round, fresh-coloured, apple face, while tears of ecstatic imbecility ran down her cheeks ; and Hermione was always the Queen who had done great things for her people—the Daughter of the Church who had honoured her Mother.

When the service came to an end and all who would went up to the Abbey for breakfast, as they called what was substantially luncheon—the triumph of the day was complete. Mr. Lascelles took the foot of the principal table ; and for the moment Hermione did not remember that he was in her husband's place. In the midst of such guests, such circumstances as surrounded her, the presence of that husband would have been too incongruous for his absence to be regretted ; and in truth she did not remember him at all. The drums were too loudly beaten, the stupefying drugs too liberally

used for thought or reflection to be possible. She was surrounded by a crowd of courtiers, each of whom vied with the other in praises, flatteries, congratulations. Mr. Lascelles, in his speech, likened her to all the gracious women of old, and made her fair face flame with the lusciousness and strength of his praise; needy priests with "cases" and close-fisted or impecunious congregations, with gaunt unfurnished churches and scant ecclesiastical finery, buzzed round her as flies round the honey-pot, wondering if they could get anything out of her for themselves, and, if anything at all, how much;—the whole thing was like a bridal day with a shadowy bridegroom somewhere in the distance. She had never been so happy, she thought to herself—indeed, until now she had never known true happiness at all! She was in a state of blessedness that almost rivalled Theresa's passionate ecstasy—the state in which, whether the occasion be right or wrong, the sentiment true or false, the human nature to which we give such fine names is completely satisfied, leaving us no more to ask of fate or fortune.

All day long this delicious excitement was kept up. Breakfast over, there were more splendid and intoxicating services in the church, where Hermione was

always the Eldest Daughter of the sacred Mother. The services over, there was again adjournment to the Abbey, where she was the beautiful and bountiful Queen of the Land, hemmed round by her obsequious courtiers, her sweet-voiced flatterers. But all things come to an end in time, and so must this glorious day of ecclesiastical triumph. When the last great chord from the organ had died away in sighing whispers through the empty aisles—when the last glass of wine had been drunk in the Abbey—then the company began to depart, melting away like spring snow on the meadow; and Mr. Lascelles himself was forced by good manners to go too, accompanying his own friends. It was like the fading of a dissolving view, when one after the other left—and left the place peopled with images and ghosts. How strangely silent and empty it was! thought Hermione; and yet how confused and disturbed her mind! She felt as we do when we suddenly pass from a deafening noise to intense stillness, and by that stillness realize how great the noise has been.

A certain Sister, one Sister Monica, had stayed the last of all. She was Edith Everett's especial friend, and the two had been upstairs when the last priest had shaken hands with this fair-faced Mother in Israel, and

had laid his parting contribution of flattery at her feet. Now they came down—Edith as well as the Sister in her cloak and bonnet.

“I am going to Starton,” she said to Hermione. “Sister Monica cannot stay here for the night, I am sorry to say.”

“No,” said the Sister. “Our dear Edith was good enough to ask me, but I must get back to C—— to-night.”

“I have ordered the carriage; it is at the door now,” said Mrs. Everett quite tranquilly. “Come, dear Sister, you will be late if you do not make haste.”

“Good-bye, Mrs. Fullerton. I am sure you must feel happy to-night,” said the Sister, smiling.

“Good-bye, Sister; yes, I do,” answered Hermione with a troubled face. “You will come back soon, dear?” she asked of Edith, turning to her anxiously.

Her guide and friend—her guest and mistress—smiled contemptuously.

“I shall not run away,” she said smoothly but coldly, as she hurried out of the room.

And now Hermione was alone. That delicious turmoil was over—that intoxicating excitement had passed—the day of her triumph had come to an end, and

she was once more herself and alone. The solitude to which she was unused, and naturally disinclined, touched her to-night with double force. The silence hung about her like some grim companion from which she could not free herself; thoughts which had been pressed back in her mind by the invading influences of the day gathered with greater volume, more loud insistence to be heard. All was so empty—everything so distant! In this large house even the very servants might have been miles away; and not a sound crept out of the stillness to break the loneliness and gloom of the moment.

She wandered up and down the room, restless, nervous, in dumb distress and vague, unreasoning terror. She went into the dining-room whence all had been cleared and put in order—not a chair displaced to mark the stations of her triumphal course and bring back the living memory like a presence; she crossed the hall, intending to go upstairs to her own room, but dragged as by a secret influence—a “spirit in her feet”—she turned aside and took the passage that led to the study.

Half frightened, half longing, she opened the door, with a wild kind of childish hope as if she could possibly

expect to find Richard there. All here too swept and garnished!—all evidence of that infidel's contaminating presence gone! It was the first time since her husband's departure that she had visited the room, and the shock of its changed aspect was almost beyond her strength to bear, overwrought and weakened as she was by all that had happened in the day. How much rather than this cold spiritual cleanliness would she have preferred to see those sinful evidences of his abominable atheism!—how she would have welcomed even a hideous skull, or the godless, soul-destroying portraits of a nosed ape and a flat-faced savage set side by side as shameful parallels. All gone!—even that criminal accessory to infidelity, the microscope—and those dumb witnesses of agnosticism, the spectroscopic diagrams and the maps of the moon! It was like going into a mausoleum where she had looked for signs of pain and horror; and found only emptiness more painful, more horrible still.

At last, lying half hidden by some papers in a corner of the bookshelf, she saw the cast of a two-headed fish and a sheet of paper whereon her husband himself had figured the development of the bird's skeleton from that of the reptile. No one was there to see her, no one to ridicule or condemn her. She took the cast of that ugly

two-headed fish and kissed it, and her tears fell on that rudely drawn picture, from which she well knew some abominable conclusion had once been drawn. The reaction was as sudden and violent as a physiologist might have foreseen ; and she stood by the bookshelves weeping for her lost love, for the banished lord of her past life—the man whom she herself had driven out—weeping passionately and bitterly. Then she went and sat down in his chair by his writing-table—where she had sat when he asked her to sign those leases, and whence her refusal had banished him for ever.

Had she done right, after all? He was her husband, and, though an atheist, such a good man ! and so true to her ! How she wished that she could see him again ! Oh, if she could but once more throw her arms round his neck and feel his round her ! No one loved her as he had—as he did. Superior was charming and delightful, but to everyone alike, and in reality more devoted to Edith Everett than to her ; but her husband had been hers, and she his, in such perfect oneness, such unbroken fidelity, till—— Till what, Hermione?—his agnosticism or your defection ?

Here at last, at this melancholy moment, in this deserted room, her conscience answered truthfully ; and

the widow realized her sacrifice and the horror of the suttee she had been so craftily persuaded to perform. The glittering heights had been won, but the poor, weak, foolish heart turned back to the warm and leafy hollows where she had lived and loved ; and the wife regretted what she had lost more than the Churchwoman rejoiced in what she had won.

When Edith Everett came home she found her still sitting there weeping—Nemesis having at last come up with her and overtaken her.

“ Poor child ! ” said Mr. Lascelles with artificial tenderness, when this was reported to him ; “ she needs firm handling and incessant care.”

“ Yes,” said Edith Everett with as artificial smoothness ; “ and she shall have both.”

“ At your good hands ?—of that I am convinced,” he said.

“ And at yours,” she answered. “ But ”—in another voice—“ she will go back to her husband, Superior. Believe me, I know the kind so well ! ”

“ You are too timid, dear friend. I think she will be faithful,” he replied.

“ And you are too sanguine, dear Superior ! Remember my words when the time comes ! And take my

advice: Make her do now what you wish her to do at all. The day will come when your reign will be over."

He smiled at this.

"My reign will never be over, because it is the reign of the Church," he said with humility. "And I have assured that here!" he added with triumph.

At that moment the servant brought in a letter. It was from Ringrove, giving him notice that he, the churchwarden and Aggrieved Parishioner, would carry a complaint to the bishop, objecting to the vicar's papistical observances.

Mr. Lascelles slightly snapped his well-kept fingers.

"Worth just that!" he said with a calm smile, flicking a speck of dust from his sleeve.

CHAPTER X.

QUENCHED.

A CHANGE was gradually creeping over things at the Abbey ; and as time wore on the relations between Edith Everett and Hermione entered on a new and unpleasant phase. Subtle, secret, like a venomous blight that burns unseen, this change was of the kind when those who feel aggrieved cannot seize one salient point of offence, cannot halt at the moment when nor challenge the reason why. But there it was ; and Hermione was conscious of covert insolence and thinly-veiled tyranny, which she had neither the courage to resent nor was given the opportunity to resist. She longed to get rid of her guest, who seemed to have taken up her permanent abode at the Abbey. But the good breeding of a gentlewoman forbade her to say crudely, Go ; and so long as it suited her purpose, it was very evident that Mrs. Everett would continue to stay, and not trouble herself either about the length of her visit or her manners as a visitor.

The danger of conjugal backsliding passed, it was un-

necessary to watch Hermione as in the beginning ; and Edith, to whom dry-nursing, as she once said to Superior, was especially distasteful, was once more free to live her own life. As her own cleverness had delivered her from her task, she thought herself privileged to profit by her liberty ; and she did not stint herself. In some incomprehensible way she was always with Superior, and Hermione was not. Even when the pretty woman's turn came round, and the business of her district, to which she was kept close, demanded a conference, even then Edith stood between them as the careful guardian of appearances and picked her traditional gooseberries with bland fidelity. Save at confession—which somehow had become rather meagre and unexciting of late—she was never suffered to be alone with Mr. Lascelles ; and more than once she had been plainly admonished by Edith as to the need of greater caution in her manners and actions, with hints, not always gentle, of secret proclivities to be carefully repressed.

“For you know, dear,” she said one morning, when they were sitting together in the Abbey drawing-room—Hermione embroidering, Edith illuminating—“a separated wife cannot be too particular ; and though Superior is so pure and holy, the world is so censorious and people are

so wicked ! They will be sure to talk if you go so much to the Vicarage as you do, and are not more indifferent in your manners to Superior."

"No one could be so wicked as to talk of me in that way," said Hermione hurriedly. "Everyone knew how much I loved poor dear Richard, and how I nearly broke my heart because he would be an infidel. Besides, I am not a girl now—forty next birthday !"

"Yes, of course forty is forty ; and a woman of that age must be a downright fool if she cannot take care of herself. But then you see some women are downright fools. Not that I mean you, dear," said Edith Everett with an odd smile ; "but you are not always guarded in your ways, and you might, you know, get yourself talked about ; and then think what a scandal it would be ! You really are quite good-looking still, and sometimes don't look above thirty-seven or -eight, I assure you. Superior said yesterday how wonderfully well you wore ; but then he thinks you much older than you say you are. Are you really under forty, dear ? At any rate, whatever your age, you are wonderfully well-preserved and at times look extremely nice. And then, you see, Superior is not an old man, and everyone must allow he is a very handsome one.

Besides, although he is a priest, he is perilously fascinating to some women," she went on to say in her smooth, artificial, monotonous voice, which had begun to grate on Hermione's nerves as much as if it had been made up of rusty iron rods. "I could tell you such stories of the follies that I have known of—quite too disgraceful altogether."

"I do not see what that has to do with me," said Hermione with a sudden flush. "I am not aware of any special folly that I have committed."

"No, dear, I do not say you have; but you must remember you discarded your husband only after you came under Superior's influence. Looking at things from the world's point of view, there is enough here to get you into trouble unless you are very careful. You must indeed, Hermione, be more particular now than when Mr. Fullerton was living with you. A husband is such a shield, even when the wife is light and people are disposed to be ill-natured! But you see you have deprived yourself of this defence, and now you must mind what you are about with everyone—but especially with Superior."

"It seems odd that you should say all this, Edith, when you were the most earnest in the matter," said Hermione, opening her blue eyes very wide.

“Say all what, dear?—that you should be careful of your conduct now that you have discarded your husband and are a separated wife?”

“No ; but to speak in that tone, as if I had done something wrong,” said Hermione. “To discard one’s husband—to be a separated wife—what horrid expressions ! They are scarcely proper, Edith ; they certainly are not ladylike !”

“Ah ! I see you like periphrases, and I don’t,” replied Edith calmly. “Spades should always be spades, my dear ; and when a woman ‘chassé’s’ her husband, no matter what the cause, she is none the less a separated wife. What a little goose it is !—Honey and butter ! nothing stronger or sharper than honey and butter !” she added with a careless smile, glancing at the clock and putting down her brush. “Will you send for me to the Vicarage at one o’clock ? and shall I bring back Superior with me ?” she then asked as she rose from her seat.

“Are you going out now ? You were away all yesterday !” said Hermione, colouring with displeasure.

“Superior wants me,” said Edith.

“You are always at the Vicarage !” cried Hermione petulantly. “I am sure if people were inclined to talk of Superior with anyone it would not be with *me*, Edith !”

“You mean they would with me? I dare say,” said the guide and friend tranquilly. “But then you see I am free, and you are not. That makes all the difference. If Superior and I were in love with each other there would be nothing to prevent our marrying, excepting our principles about a celibate priesthood. But these would prevent our falling in love in the first instance. And the world understands this. It is quite another matter with you. And the practical result is—I can do things which you must not.”

“So it seems,” said Hermione cringing her small lips.

“Besides, I am of real use,” continued Edith in a lounging kind of a way. “I can add up his accounts and keep the district books in order, and all that; and you know, dear, you are not strong in that line,” with a little laugh.

“Why do you make all these apologies, dear?” returned Hermione, with a rapid change of front. “If I am old enough to take care of myself I am sure you are too; and it cannot signify to me whether you go to the Vicarage every hour of the day or not. I have plenty to do at home, and of course I do not want you to feel tied to me in any way, or that I am responsible for your actions.”

“Of course not ; I know all that, dear,” replied her friend. “So, good-bye. Do not expect me home before dinner then, unless you send the carriage for me and Superior to come back to luncheon. By the way, won’t you come for me yourself?”—graciously, as if giving an invitation.

“No, I should be in your way,” said Hermione disagreeably.

“Think so? Please yourself, dear,” answered Mrs. Edith Everett.

“No, I keep away to please you,” retorted Hermione.

“Why? How silly of you! I am sure Superior would be glad to see you. I know you are quite a favourite of his,” said Edith with a little insolence. “However, do as you like, dear ; I must go at all events. *Au revoir*, little woman.”

She made a French salute with her hand, smiling, and glided from the room with the satisfied feeling of the duellist who has drawn the first blood.

“She is perfectly odious ! I must get rid of her ! I will tell Superior that I will not keep her any longer ! insolent wretch !” were Hermione’s passionate thoughts so soon as her friend had closed the door. “She is of

no use to me ; none in the least ! She leaves me all day alone, and is staying only to flirt with Superior. How can he ! a plain thing like that—with her small ferret eyes and insignificant nose, and that hideous upper lip ! I thought he had more taste. Poor Richard saw through her from the first, and hated her ! And I am sure I do not wonder at it. She behaved in the most insolent way to him, and now she is beginning the same kind of thing to me. But I will not bear it ! and will tell Superior of her. It is too bad, and when I am so miserable and lonely. Dear Richard ! my poor Virginia ! ”

The indignant tears which had gathered into the big blue eyes changed from anger to self-pity, and Hermione suddenly realizing her full loss turned her face downward to the sofa cushion and sobbed aloud.

Always that grim shape of Nemesis on her traces—always that deep sense of disappointment in the Paradise to which her Act of Sacrifice was to be the gateway—and now, the dawning perception of ingratitude as the reward of her abject submission. It was a bitter moment for her ; and yet she had not fathomed half the possibilities of cruelty in a woman like Edith Everett, or a man like Mr. Lascelles ; both strong-willed and unscrupulous—

the one devoted to a cause which had for its object the subjugation of humanity, the other to making her own way clear through the brake ; and both indifferent as to the means by which they should gain their ends.

Like all his kind, using his personal graces to excite the love of those women who would be useful to the Church, Mr. Lascelles never faltered because of the sorrow to come, when, having given all that they had to give, he should throw them aside as no longer of use. When they had done their work they were as dead to him as seeded plants, and he thrust them back that their place might be taken by the fruit-bearing members as yet ungarnered. He did not care to spend his strength in ornamental attentions. Life lies before us, not behind, he once said ; and when things are done with it is a man's duty to go past them and press forward to new duties. This was just what he was gradually doing with Hermione Fullerton. Now that the contest was over between himself and her husband, and he declared victor at every point ; now that he was sure of getting all he wanted in the way of money for his own parish and the ragged congregations of his friends ; now that the Abbey was a kind of hostelry for him, where he could invite whom he would, and which he could use as his own private pro-

perty ; now that Hermione was committed too deeply to retract ;—he was glad to give up the close attention and dangerous spiritual flirtation by which he had accomplished his purpose. It was the repose of conquest, the security of possession, and thus left him free for fresh exertion—specially for that most important of all, the coming contest with Ringrove Hardisty. Also, it was only wise, as Edith Everett suggested, to be very much on his guard, and while giving Hermione nothing of which to complain, to be careful not to give the world anything of which it could take hold. Hence the same kind of subtle change crept into his relations with the pretty woman as already existed in those between her and Edith. He saw very little of her at all, and never alone ; and he made her understand, at first with regret but now with resignation, that he must be careful for her sake, and she submissive to restrictions for his. The less she was seen at the Vicarage, or he at the Abbey, the better ; the more she was among the sick, at the Home, the schools, the women's meetings, without him, the better still. The roaring lion of calumny must find no weak place in the defence set up by prudence round her good name and his ; and though as she well knew, he said with suggestive tenderness and well-defined sorrow at the stern neces-

sities of things, no soul given to them by Our Lord was so precious in his sight as hers—yet, that wisdom of the serpent! Compared with it, the innocence of the dove was nowhere!

With Mrs. Everett, of whom Hermione now spoke with sudden bitter self-betraying jealousy, things were different. No one could mistake matters with *her*, he said, looking at Hermione with undisguised admiration in his eyes, and speaking of Edith Everett with fine contempt for her womanly attractions conveyed in his voice. And Hermione was reassured and her fears set at rest, at least for this time. The vicar had no need to quiet his own fears. He had none. Edith's place with him was distinctively her own, and he wished nothing altered. He did not make love to her, nor she to him—at least, not of that open fulsome kind in use at Crossholme. She was the one woman whom he could trust to carry out his wishes without that silly exaggeration which was so fatally compromising to him, and who could translate even his silence according to its meaning. She was astute, quiet, prompt; the most valuable coadjutor in the world, and he was more dependent on her than he knew. She was quite as helpful to him as his sister had been, and he was as much

at ease with her. Wherefore she was welcome at the Vicarage at any hour, because she was always practical and useful ; and while slowly yielding to her influence Mr. Lascelles was congratulating himself on the possession of a friend—a dear sister in the Church—on whom he could rely as on a second self, without the necessity of godly flattery or crafty love-making.

As if the cleverest man in the world is not as helpless as a babe when the right kind of woman, who knows how he ought to be managed, takes him in hand :—and manages him !

Poor Theresa had also been shunted in these changeful later times. There had never been more real love for her than for Hermione, though the vicar had so often simulated the half-suppressed signs to both. With Hermione it had been the honest desire of good and gain to the Church in the destruction of her infidel husband ; with Theresa, professional zeal in securing converts had been mixed up with the psychological curiosity which makes a man tempt a woman to show her love that he may study the process. It improves his knowledge of human nature ; and experiments in moral vivisection cause no outcry. But the real basis of all that had been said or done to both had been the establishment of

Ritualism here in Protestant Crossholme; and now, when the Ritualistic Church was established four-square, and apparently not to be shaken, he was released from further trouble.

Besides, things had got too hot with Theresa to make a continuance of any show of personal interest—even of his private ministrations—advisable. Wherefore he had, for some time now, given up to Brother Swinfen—who was no spiritual philanderer even for the sake of the Church—the daily attendance proper to her state; alleging as his excuse the multiplicity and importance of his occupations, and the impossibility of the pastor of a flock devoting so much time to one, even though that one was sick unto death.

This also was the effect of Edith Everett's clever manipulation. She had the art of suggesting a course of conduct by assuming that Superior had already determined on it, and praising him with decent warmth for his wisdom and common sense; but indeed there was no other way, she would say, as he had evidently seen. Hence it was that by her advice, conveyed as commendation, he had yielded the daily care of Theresa to the Brother, reserving to himself only special occasions and the more sacred offices.

Meanwhile Hermione, weary of the dull parish work, to which she was held so close, without reward ; missing the flattery, the acknowledgment of personal supremacy which had hitherto been hers in such full measure ; missing too the excitement of opposition to her husband which had been a factor in the sum while it lasted ; and not fitted by nature to take her place as a simple member of the congregation, of no more account in the celestial calendar than Miss Pryor, say, or Nanny Pearce ; —was beginning to feel tricked and sore ; and Theresa's last day was drawing on apace.

The dying girl was making a hard fight of it. It was beyond pathos—it was terrifying, awful—to watch her fierce struggle for life, the passionate tenacity with which she clung to hope, her angry refusal to recognize her danger, her rebellious determination to contest every inch of the way, and to live, whether it was God's decree that she should die or no. It was as if her will was stronger than disease ; as if she lived because she would not die. But at last she was conquered. All her desire of life, all the feverish love for Superior which had been such an overwhelming passion, had to give way before the one great King. The last strand was frayed to the breaking-point, and the sands of the hour-glass had

nearly run out. Then, and then only, she accepted the terrible truth, and confessed that this was Death.

Hermione had seen much of her of late. Superior had intimated that he wished Mrs. Fullerton to undertake Theresa as her special care, and a strong sympathy had sprung up between them during these last weeks, very unlike the mutual jealousies and pretensions of the earlier days. Now they were both in the same position—practically abandoned by the man to whom they had sacrificed, the one her marriage and the other her life.

If Hermione had not yet fully confessed to herself how things were going, Theresa had the clear vision of the dying to whom further deception is unnecessary, and who see the truth sharply cut and without disguise. But up to now she had held her peace and kept faithful to the man whom she loved. Now however the moment had come when she had done with life and all that life means; when weakness had conquered resolution, and her brain had at last yielded to the terrors and conviction of her state.

She was lying there, gasping painfully, the death-damps already on her. All day long there had been an unwholesome excitement about her bed; a coming and

going of priests and Sisters ; a perpetual succession of religious offices, of prayers and exhortations ; her last confession ; the last Celebration ; extreme unction ; the crucifix to kiss ; the spiritual presence of all the Divine Personages in the Christian drama asserted as an incontestable fact which she would soon realize for herself—excitements infinitely mischievous and disturbing, hurtful to the peace of the passing hour and making the agony still more terrible than need be—excitements which the doctor from Starton had vainly tried to check. Now things were quieter. The doctor had gone ; he was wanted elsewhere. Here he was of no more use ; he had done all that he could, and that all was substantially nothing ; there he might save life. He pressed her hand for the last time ; said a few words of honest, manly comfort ; and with him passed her last earthly hope.

Brother Swinfen also had left her for the time ; it was his hour of private prayer and meditation, and a man must attend to his own soul though occupied in trying to save another's. No one was in the room save Aunt Catherine, Drusilla, the faithful, foolish maid, and Hermione. The evening was wearing on. Would Theresa live into the night ? She had always been at the worst

in the evening, and it would be a hard time for her now.

All knew this but Aunt Catherine, who never lost her imbecile cheerfulness, and who smiling placidly said she was sure the dear saints would come about her so that her passage should be swift and the process ecstatic.

“So faithful as she is, she must pass in glory,” said the weak-brained creature, thinking of the picture where Saint Catherine is carried up to heaven by angels, and sincerely believing that this would be Theresa’s experience—as in time her own.

Too weary to care much about men or angels, just living and no more, Theresa lay with half-closed filmy eyes and pinched mouth, breathing hard and heavily. All was still; that heavy breathing the only sound which broke through the silence of the death-chamber. Feebly she motioned to Hermione to take her hand, and made a sign for water to moisten her lips.

“Take care of Mrs. Everett,” she then said in a hoarse whisper, and with difficulty; “she is not your friend; has not been mine; is here for no good; Superior will marry her.”

She closed her eyes again as she said this, and

seemed for a while to doze. Suddenly she opened them wide and started. The filmy glaze that had been over them before seemed to be withdrawn, and they blazed out as if a fire were behind.

“Send for him! send for him!” she said in a wild unnatural voice. “I cannot die till he comes. He must bless and pardon me.”

“Dearest, you have already been pardoned. He gave you absolution and the Blessed Sacrament this morning. Don’t you remember, dear? You are waiting only for heaven—you are sure of salvation,” said Hermione’s soft voice tenderly.

“No, no! send for him! I am in the torments of hell already!” cried Theresa again, passionately beating the air and plucking at the bedclothes. “I cannot die like this. He must release me!”

“Pray to the dear saints, my darling!” said Aunt Catherine. “The dear saints will hear you!”

“We had better do as she wishes,” said Hermione; and, writing on a slip of paper: “Pray come at once; Theresa is in agony,” she sent it off to the Vicarage at speed.

Her message found the vicar at home with Edith Everett at work in the study; and both came back in the Abbey carriage to Churchlands together.

And now began that terrible scene which occurs so often and is so seldom confessed in the horror of simple truth—the scene when the reason is extinct, when hope has died, and only spiritual fear and the physical agonies of death are left. Here was no poetic euthanasia—no sweet spirit leaving the body to the music of angels' harps and the vision of the opening heavens, but a tortured woman writhing in the agonies of superstitious terror, realizing the wrath of the God whom she imagined she had dishonoured, and believing herself already in the power of the Devil to whom she had given herself by the secret sin of her thoughts.

Her blackened lips drawn back from her teeth—her thin face set into a mask of horror, terror, passion, despair—her eyes opened wide, flaming with the awful fires of a distracted brain—disturbed by unwise excitement in what should have been the peaceful passage from life unto death, and roused by all the spiritual turmoil of the day into a temporary spasm of strength—she poured out her last powers in the terrible delirium of her dying agony. Her love for Superior had been idolatry, she said—a sin that was not nor could be forgiven. Not all the power of the Church could absolve her; the Eternal Mercy could not reach her;

and the Evil One had already his sharp talons in her heart. She was going down to hell, and her love had sent her there. When she had prayed it had been to Superior—he had been her God, her Saviour, and she had worshipped him instead of the Lord. She had loved him more than her own soul, and now she was to suffer for her sin. She had loved him till she had died of her love, and now she was to be sent to eternal torture for punishment.

“But,” she said in a hoarse shriek, “you made me love you, Superior. You made me think you loved me; and when you kissed me in the sacristy you took my heart out of my body and put one of fire in me instead. I was never the same after. I thought no man would have kissed a girl if he did not love her, and that you would have married me after that. It was cruel! cruel! You sold me to Satan then, and now he is claiming me. He is there! at the foot of the bed waiting for me! Save me, Hermione! Aunt Catherine, save me!”

She started up with superhuman strength; beat off something with her hands; her ghastly face, on which the lamplight fell with strange black shadows, fixed in horror; her eyes wide open, fixed and staring; then

with one loud shriek she fell back on the pillow, but for her breathing to all appearance dead.

Hermione trembled and turned sick with terror. She threw herself on her knees almost fainting and scarcely praying; Edith Everett's clever face looked blank, but her keen eyes stole one sharp glance at Mr. Lascelles. Brother Swinfen, whose "hour" had passed and who had now stolen back into the room, felt outraged and shocked, but more on account of the scandal that would result to the Church should any word get about than because of Superior. Like Father Truscott, he had long seen this astute priest's propensity for playing with edged tools, and he was not surprised at what he had just heard. But Mr. Lascelles himself, standing there smooth, tall, bland, priestly, sublimely self-possessed, bent over the dying girl with the angelic pity, the unruffled serenity of innocence.

"My poor, poor child!" he said softly, making the sign of the cross over her. "Theresa, do you not know me—your priest, your Director?—These terrible deathbed hallucinations!" he added, looking round on the little group behind him with a soft compassionate smile.

Theresa's eyes opened once more. All the darkest passions of humanity burnt in them in one last expiring

flame. There was no softness, no womanhood, no love left in her. It was hate and rage, scorn and despair; the best already dead and only the worst left still alive.

“Hypocrite!” she said fiercely; then her body collapsed, her jaw dropped, and her glazed eyes turned.

Mr. Lascelles knelt and began to intone the Office for the Dying—his voice interrupted by the stifled sobs of the women and the hoarse death-rattle from the bed. By degrees this terrible sound grew fainter and fainter, then ceased; a few shuddering gasps—one last deep sigh, and all was over. Then the vicar rose from his knees, closed the glassy eyes, and repeated in an artificial voice the prescribed formula for the dead. Yes, she was dead and he was in a sense her murderer; but to his own soul he was the sinless priest who had not gone beyond his rights when he had bound this poor victim to the horns of the altar by the compelling force of love, and offered her as a living sacrifice acceptable to the Lord and useful to the Church.

This last clause was doubtful. Stories got about, no one knew how; and the deathbed scene of Theresa Molyneux was exaggerated with every repetition. The vicar, as one justified by the truth, met the whole thing fairly and manfully with those whom it more

specially concerned ; and those whom it did not concern he passed by with the lofty disdain of conscious rectitude. He was specially anxious that Hermione should be set right, and her mind disabused of any lingering doubt ; and at last, after some difficulty, his cleverness prevailed, and he succeeded in making her believe that the poor girl's dying words had been pure delusion and that he had given her no cause to mistake him.

“She was never more than a fragile enthusiastic kind of child to me,” he said with the finest accent of sincerity ; “and that story of the kiss—I blush to repeat it!—was a simple hallucination—a vision conjured up by the Devil to bewilder her dying moments and set a stumbling-block in the way of the Church. Have I ever shown *you* that I was this kind of man?” he added, fixing his eyes on her with meaning.

“No,” she answered uneasily, with a deep blush. Was that “No” perfectly honest?

“Then, if not to *you*, of all women in the world, certainly not to her ! Do you not believe me?” gently.

“Yes,” said Hermione, frankly holding out her hand.

He said the same thing to Edith Everett, using precisely the same words ; and the widow answered smoothly—

“Of course it was hallucination from first to last! We all know that!”

She smiled incredulously as she spoke. He did not feel quite sure whether it was incredulity of the assertion made by Theresa or the denial made by himself; and he thought it wiser not to ask. There is such a thing as probing too deep.

“It is always so difficult to deal with hysterical girls!” then said Edith quietly, as Father Truscott had said before her. “Really an unmarried priest is placed in a very dangerous position. He must do his work, and yet he may be brought into such trouble by his penitents!”

“It is our cross,” said Mr. Lascelles, with his most sanctimonious air.

“Yes,” she answered, catching his tone. “But the worst of it is, that it sometimes brings so much scandal on the Church when women are silly and fanciful, and have nothing better to do than dream themselves into love for the priest! It is really very difficult to know what is best for the Church in the end!”

“That, Wisdom must decide,” said Mr. Lascelles enigmatically; and Edith Everett smiled again and said “Yes,” without further comment.

The world however was not so easy of belief as

Hermione nor so complaisant in its incredulity as Edith ; and the vicar's name got rough handling among all classes. Yet, after all, it was one of those reports which, the nearer they are looked at, the farther they recede and the more shadowy they become. It was hardly fair to count it for sin to the vicar that an hysterical girl had fallen in love with him and killed herself by severities undertaken to please him and as the expression of her love. Nevertheless the flavour of his spiritual philandering remained like a bad taste in the mouth of the public, and so far helped on the astute widow's designs by making it evident to the vicar himself that his celibacy was a cause of offence and a temptation to evil speakers.

Everyone was talking of the affair ; some doing their best to sift the truth from the falsehood, others piling up the romance without regard to either. Among the former were the Nesbitts, being of the kind to whom scandal is not pleasant food and charitable interpretation comes easy. All the same they blamed the vicar to a certain extent ; and thought, not unreasonably, that "there must have been something in it," and that Theresa had not made it all out of her own imagination. He must have flirted with her to some degree, even if she had been silly, poor dear, and believed that he meant more than he did."

Ringrove said the same, and added a few masculine epithets that were more forcible than polite. No one wondered at this. It was well known how the young fellow felt for Mr. Lascelles and with what good reason—owing indirectly to him the loss of his own great hope and love, and more directly the destruction of his friend's happiness.

They were all walking up the garden at Newlands, on their way back from church the Sunday after Theresa's death, when the vicar had preached her funeral sermon with saintly quietness, speaking of her as now a soul in glory—the middle passage having been mercifully shortened in consideration of her good deeds done to the Church.

“How could he stand there and preach that sermon when he knew how much she loved him, and that she had killed herself by all that she did for the Church!” said Bee as her rather disjointed contribution to the talk going on.

Tears of confused feeling rose in her big brown eyes, and she was unstrung and unlike herself. She and Ringrove were a little behind the rest.

He turned and looked at her with a strange fixed look that made her blush and confused her yet more. He looked as if he forgot that she had eyes and could see him,

as if he had somehow the right to look at her, smiling with the masterful security of a man who neither doubts nor fears.

“Bee ! how glad I am that you never gave in to all this detestable folly !” he then said suddenly.

She laughed nervously, but did not answer. She wished he would take his eyes away. It was not like Ringrove to look at her like this—to make her feel uncomfortable and confused.

“Do you know why I am glad ?” he said again abruptly, turning into the shady shrubbery walk.

“I suppose because you do not belong to it yourself,” she answered in a voice that was not quite her own, and making an heroic but totally useless effort to appear at ease.

He stopped in their walk, and quietly put his arms round her.

“Not only that,” he said ; “I am glad because, if you had been one of them, you would never have been my dear wife. And now you will be—will you not, sweet Bee ?”

“Oh, Ringrove !” said Beatrice, turning away her face ; but involuntarily, instinctively, she not knowing what she did, her own arms were round him, and her

pretty head was laid on his shoulder as if a resting-place there was natural.

He pressed her to him and whispered tenderly :
“ Kiss me, darling, and then I shall know that you love me. Do you love me, Bee ? ”

“ Yes,” she said softly, lifting her face with the sweetest mixture of shyness, love, submission, and offering her fresh lips with the innocence of a child.

“ My own darling ! ” he said fondly. “ You are just what you ought to be. You were made for me, my Bee ; and now I am perfectly happy.”

“ And I, too, Ringrove,” whispered Bee, raising her soft eyes to his, worshipping.

Surely a better ending to her girlhood than Virginia’s immolation or Theresa’s self-destruction—the one for devotional enthusiasm, the other for religious excess ! Surely too a better kind of confession, warm, loving, natural as it was, than those made so often in the church where casuistry creates sins that do not exist in fact, and superstition bends its neck to acts of penitence that have neither warranty in reason nor cause in nature !

CHAPTER XI.

EBB AND FLOW.

THE Samson of Erastianism, Ringrove Hardisty, churchwarden and aggrieved parishioner, made a gallant fight of it with their local Pope ; but things came to but a lame conclusion when all was done. The ecclesiastical law is not too explicit in its regulations touching the uniform conduct of public worship ; and the Church of England boasts of her elasticity. That she can give tenable lodgment to the Ritualist priest who is a Romanist in all save submission to authority superior to his own ; to the Evangelical minister who is a dissenter from her organization in all save his appreciation of her endowments ; to the Broad Church clergyman who coquets with Socinianism, denies eternal punishment, and rationalizes the miracles ;—is her title to honour. She calls it catholicity, and glories in that she sweeps the sea with so wide a net, and so generous an arrangement of closely-meshed pockets. If this is incommodious, perhaps that will hold you safe. Between the

supreme power of the Church which admits of salvation only through obedience to her commands, and the doctrine of free grace by faith and the Bible ; between the daily recurring miracle of Transubstantiation, and the bland endeavour to find an intelligible meaning in the story of the dispossessed devils sent into a herd of swine ;— there is surely some possible abiding-place where the most fidgety soul may find rest ! And at the worst, if you are a spiritual nomad, as some are, and go through states and doctrines as people go through climates and diet, you can travel from one pocket to the other, yet always remain in the net of the Church of England as by law established.

What is true of the doctrines is also true of the ritual. Catholicity of formula goes into diversity of practice ; and it is as difficult to define what is lawful and what is forbidden in the way of observance as to state the leading colour of a chameleon. Mr. Lascelles knew every inch of the ground whereon Ringrove Hardisty had ventured ; and knowing his way he had no fear. He followed in the footsteps of some of his predecessors, and bought his crown of martyrdom cheap. He simply ignored the right of the law to deal with things ecclesiastical, and proved his foresight when he snapped his fingers and said : “ Worth just that ! ”

He made no reply when called on for his answer to the charges brought against him ; put in no appearance when summoned ; let judgment go by default, and then paid no heed to the sentence of prohibition. He still swung his censor, lighted his candles in broad noonday, offered up the Sacrifice of the Mass, kept the crucifix on the table, bowed and knelt at strange places in the service and before strange objects of adoration. He performed the service just as he had performed it before the suit had been instituted and the decree pronounced ; and the Court of Arches might have been an Aristophanic city in Cloudland for any respect paid to it by the Honourable and Reverend Launcelot Lascelles. Only when the voice of the law found a hand, and these “fond and superstitious” fancies were removed by main force—only then did he give way, always under protest, and to prevent, as he said, an unseemly riot in the sacred edifice.

These indignities were worth something to him, and brought him in a pleasant little solatium. The subscription got up by the faithful of the congregation, and headed by soft-hearted Hermione, as a salve for poor dear Superior's wounded feelings, was of an amount for which many a man would willingly have undergone an hour in the pillory or a twist with the

thumbscrews, and held himself well paid ; but according to his own account of things and the relative value of salve and suffering, money was but scant comfort to the vicar for all that he had endured. Posturizing as a martyr, and preaching as if the Church were on the brink of persecution—as if *Christianos ad leones* were the popular cry against conscientious Catholics, and the winnowing process had begun—he made the women weep for sympathy, shudder with dread ; while he, grand, calm, handsome, hierophantic, solemnly exhorted all men to constancy and courage so that the wicked might not prevail nor the Holy Mother be aggrieved.

The prosecution, which he and some others were careful to call persecution, had one evident result—good or bad as people may think ; it divided the parish sharply into placets and non-placets, and did away with the indefinite fringe of neutrals. Those who went with Ringrove got up a written address to him, which all signed boldly ; those who went with the vicar got up a subscription for him, to which all gave liberally ; and the two factions mutually spread evil reports, falsified facts, ascribed unworthy motives, and made ducks and drakes of neighbourly sociability and Christian charity.

But the vicar was the stronger on the whole. He

had the women and the purse-strings, and beat the liberals on the rubber if he lost here and there a point.

While the action was going on, and for some time after the decision, the two parties were not on speaking terms together. Mrs. Everett wrote to Ringrove in Mrs. Fullerton's name, formally forbidding him to come to the Abbey; and Mr. Lascelles intimated to him, the Nesbitts, and some others that he would prefer not to see them at Holy Communion, as he did not consider them in a fit state to receive that blessed consolation. They tried the question however on its merits; and forced him to recognize their rights as Christian citizens, to whom the services and solemnities of the Church were part of their national inheritance, and who had done nothing worthy of disinheritance according to the provisions of the rubric—the only code of denial to which they would pay obedience. The bishop, to whom they appealed, decided in their favour; and the vicar here again received an open check. He was very wrathful, but he had to give way; and for the special Sunday when those abominable Erastians presented themselves, found himself obliged to be from home. But, in spite of this little discomfiture, he was essentially

the victor. A few ornamental adjuncts had been removed, but the core was left untouched. Confession, prayers for the dead, the worship of the Blessed Virgin, obedience to the Church as synonymous with obedience to God, the vital principle of the power of the priest to regulate the lives, limit the knowledge, and order the thoughts of the laity—all these were left. And by these the manly spirit of the parish was subdued, the essential purity of the women sapped, the right of intellectual freedom denied, the progress of true education stopped, and the law of the land stultified and defied.

All the same the vicar still complained of the wickedness of an unbelieving generation, and preached on the theme of a glorious martyrdom with an air of saintly courage that made the soft hearts of the women bleed for sympathetic pain.

Meanwhile the more secular portions of local history were being followed to their appointed end ; and among these came that unfinished chapter on Mr. Fullerton's men, whom Mr. Lascelles had found it imperative by the law of Christian duty to ruin.

Ringrove Hardisty had housed them, as has been said, and had done his best to befriend them all round ; but somehow things had not gone well with them. It

is always difficult to help high-spirited workers when their work will not keep them and they object to unearned gratuities. Even the faithful had suffered with the recalcitrant in one way, if not in another, and George and Nanny were as hardly holden as the rest. Nanny, always in delicate health and now frailer than ever, pined away after the death of her child, and gradually sank into her eternal sleep ; while George, thrown off his balance by grief, gave himself up to religious enthusiasm and the realization of the Promise, as the only assuagement he could find. Full of the restless energy of proselytism, desirous that all should experience the blessed Hope that had come to him, and feeling his place as a member of a ritualistic congregation, where his highest virtue was quiescent obedience, too narrow for his burning zeal, he went out into the open, became a free-lance in the general army of the Lord, and gave himself to preaching in the highways. He took a solemn leave of all his old friends and associates, of whose eternal perdition he was only too sorrowfully sure, and told them with many tears that he should never see them again, neither in this world nor the next, for where he went they could not come ; he did his faithful best to convert the vicar on another count, and to prove to

him the scriptural apostasy of his papistical doctrines which put anything of man's invention before free grace and the naked Bible ; and then he went out, as another St. Francis Xavier, and made his scanty daily bread by hawking tracts among the unsaved, while preaching the doctrine of Faith, and getting up small village Revivals.

“I would rather have seen him laid by the side of my poor girl,” said John Graves, with something that was more pathetic than tears in his eyes. “He is lost, not only to me, but to all reasonableness and manliness ; and a turn more would land him in Bedlam.”

So it would ; but wanting that turn he was free to tramp about the country, preaching salvation by faith, and the sin of priestly mediation, just as Mr. Lascelles was free to go into the pulpit and preach salvation for Englishmen by the Anglican Church only, with the priest the appointed agent of God, and the sin of heresy less pardonable than that of murder.

Like the rest of the men John was painfully poor in those dark days. Custom fell off from him, no one but Mr. Lascelles quite knew how. A new tailor set up in Crossholme and prospered apace. He came from London and was a devoted Churchman ; but his work was not as good as John's ; and devoted churchmanship

gave neither a fair fit nor satisfactory stitching. All the same, he got the best part of the local custom ; and only those few old-fashioned carles who disliked the vicar's doctrines, and preferred the old stagnation to the new movement, stuck to John for the sake of the lang syne and stitches that would hold together when they had a strain.

Tom Moorhead's case was the worst, for he lost more than house or money. He had not the fine fibre of John Graves, nor that kind of manly philosophy which would keep him straight under pressure. He had always been a ramping, violent, hard-mouthed Son of Thunder, who, at the best of times, had needed careful handling, and to be deftly guided, not harshly driven. Richard Fullerton had had supreme influence over him, and had kept him pretty well to the right point of the moral compass ; but since the fatal evening when the old Adam had blazed out in those fiery words, and the vicar had taken such revengeful note of them, Tom's demoralization had begun ; and it had continued ever since at a hand gallop.

His work left him, and he left his work. He had always been sober in fact, with possibilities in him of a loose life if things went wrong ; and now these possibilities had become actualities. His pride crushed, he took refuge

in forgetfulness, was seldom out of the public-house and ever "on the rampage." With his great personal strength and furious passions, he was a formidable element in the little village society; and the vicar had his eye on him, as had many others, prepared to fling him heavily at his first legal trip—which everyone felt sure would come in its own good time.

As Tom went down Adam Bell went up. It was the old seesaw, and this time craft and a shaky past had the best of it. Adam had prospered right over the borders. The man had a jackdaw's faculty for accumulation, and money seemed somehow to grow in the night with him. He had left off scheming out his mechanical revolutions since he came to Crossholme, and had applied himself with a will to the more profitable occupation of making more than the two ends meet. Evidently he had succeeded; and the lap over was considerable. He had put a fine new front to his little shop, and his plate-glass window was the admiration of the village; his goods were well chosen, and he was always bringing in some novelty of which use made a necessity; he was secretary here and treasurer there; and his energy, obliging manners, and neat handwriting had their share in the garnering of his goodly harvest. Whatever might lurk in the

shadows of the past, here in the present he was all square and above-board ; and really, as some said, it seems scarcely fair to mistrust a man because he came out of the dark of yesterday without a character pinned to his back or a certificate from his last place, when he had lived so long as Adam Bell had lived at Crossholme, and not a soul had a bad word to say of him ! It was only a reasonable argument, as most confessed ; and the little chandler got the benefit of it. People had left off distrusting him, and had begun to think him no worse than his neighbours ; in which they were about right ; and at all events they paid him the wage for which he had been working.

Thick-headed, bull-necked Tom Moorhead was not one of these kindly ratters. Once a blackamoor always a blackamoor with Tom ; and he scoffed at the theory of leopards changing their spots. To him Adam Bell had always been a sly cat of a man who had come mousing here from the Lord knows where, and who shall say with what kind of soot on his muzzle ?—and let him get a character by half a century of industry and solvency, Tom would still have that apocryphal parish register to fling in his face, and those two unanswered questions to ask : “ What workhouse bred you ? ” and “ What gaol

held you?" Pretty Janet took a different view of things. Pretty Janet saw no fun in a bare cupboard and patched gowns, with a drunken father staggering home at night, half mad from bad liquor and a worse conscience, and fit to take the house if so much as a cricket chirped, as she used to say. Adam Bell, a clean-shaven, smart, smug little man, as sharp as a needle and with a repute for good gear, had followed her for many a day now, and so far showed his disinterestedness. Young men here-away were scarce; so she made up her mind to take Adam for good and all, and run for shelter under the vicar's wing should her father "turn rusty."

The result of all this was, that one moonlight night Tom, coming home a trifle earlier than usual and not so drunk but that he could see, caught the pair of them standing just under the haystack, with Adam's arm round Janet's waist, and their lips too close to each other for his taste. He took the little Chandler with one hand, and almost thrashed the life out of him with the other. It was a near thing; and for two months the one lay in prison, while the other hovered between life and death—the issue to determine whether Tom was to be tried for murder or only aggravated assault and battery.

Thanks to the wiry thread that ran through him

Adam lived over his broken bones ; and as soon as he could turn himself about he and Janet were married at the parish church and the vicar himself officiated. So that Tom when he came up for trial had the additional smart of knowing that he was to serve out his term, with hard labour, for the man who was now his son-in-law, and who had his daughter as well as justice and public opinion on his side.

But nothing much signified to him now, he said. He was a broken man from the day when he had been put into the Starton lock-up for inciting to a breach of the peace anent the vicar ; and he took his punishment so sullenly, that it was no matter of wonder to the authorities when they found him hanging in his cell by an ingenious contrivance of rope made out of his bedding. So perhaps it was a wise instinct in Janet to make her own nest warm, seeing that her father's house would never more give her comfort.

Soon after this, the marriage of Ringrove and Bee Nesbitt came to the point, and with it arose a certain difficulty. In the relations in which they stood to the vicar and his party they did not wish that he or any of his curates should perform the ceremony ; but he, also because of those relations and

to punish their disobedience, refused to lend his church to a stranger for this or any other purpose. Ringrove, as his solution of the difficulty, proposed the Registrar and said he thought it would be better to fling over the Church altogether. It was the law which made the marriage, he said, not the priest. The law suffered the Church to run side by side with it in this matter—allowed her to be exponent, lieutenant, a second self; but it was always the law that had to be satisfied; and if the Church married you against the law it would be a dead form, null and void for all the purposes of marriage.

At first Mrs. Nesbitt, who represented conformity to established custom, shook her head, more than a little scandalized by this audacity of her prospective son-in-law, and said: “No, certainly not! Bee must be married from home and at her own parish church, like any other lady.” She would not dream of allowing such an indignity as a marriage at the Registrar’s office. If they were not married in church it would not be like a proper wedding at all, and she would never feel that things were as they should be. No! the meagreness of Ringrove’s proposal had no kind of support from her, and even Mr. Nesbitt said it would scarcely do.

For Bee herself, she would have been married at a

police court if Ringrove had wished it. He was her lord, and his will was her desire ; but he convinced Mrs. Nesbitt at last, and proved to her that for him in his position the Registrar's office was the most suitable kind of thing, as evidencing the majesty of the law, and being another blow dealt to the supremacy of the vicar.

It was a hard struggle ; for conformity is like lifeblood to the normal Englishman, and still more to the normal Englishwoman ; but Samson conquered at last, and put the finishing touch to his iniquity by making his marriage simply a civil contract, and flinging overboard the blessing of the Church as a caligraphic flourish not vital to the bond.

They did not do themselves much harm by their rebellion to forms. People said : " How very odd of the Nesbitts ! " and mothers declared they would not have allowed such a marriage with their daughters ; but by degrees the little tumult subsided and the reaction set in — when it was called plucky, and just what that papist in disguise deserved.

" And this is the man for whom you designed your sweet Virginia ! " said Edith Everett, in a tone as if Hermione were personally responsible for all that Ringrove

had done or was designing to do, from the "persecution" of the vicar to this infidel and ungodly marriage.

"Oh! he was much better then than he is now," said Hermione simply. "He was a very dear fellow then, and I was very fond of him."

"What an extraordinary expression! How much I dislike to hear a married woman use it!" answered her guide and friend suavely. "A married woman should never say she is fond of any man whatsoever. It is indelicate and not nice."

"I do not see anything either indelicate or not nice in saying that I used to be fond of Ringrove Hardisty," retorted Hermione with spirit. "I knew him when he was a little boy, and I hoped at one time that he would have married my daughter; so I think I am entitled to say that I was fond of him. You have such strange ideas, Edith; and such an uncomfortable way of putting them."

"Now don't lose your temper, dear. I speak only for your own good," said Mrs. Everett, with amiable equanimity.

"You are always doing and saying disagreeable things for my good," said Hermione. "I must be very bad to want so much putting to rights."

“You certainly want a great deal of putting to rights, my dear,” returned her friend with an amiable smile. “Whether you are very bad or no is another matter.”

“I know what *you* would say; so we need not discuss that part of the question,” Hermione answered hastily.

She had come to the pass when all that Edith Everett said or did seemed harsh and cruel—Edith to that when all that Hermione said or did seemed contemptible and quite beyond the need of courtesy. It was getting time for them to part if they were to keep even the lifeless husk of friendliness between them; and Edith was only waiting for the moment until she felt that she had made herself so useful to the vicar as to be eventually indispensable.

“In that case silence is golden, dear,” returned Edith.

Hermione put her head on one side a little defiantly.

“You can scarcely wonder at my feeling an affection for Beatrice Nesbitt and Ringrove,” she went on to say, as if there had been no break in that part of the conversation. “They have always been so sweet and affectionate to me! It seems quite another life when I look

back and remember how good Mrs. Nesbitt always was, what care she took of me, how kind she used to be, and how respectful and attentive Ringrove was !”

“What a soft, sugar-loving baby it is !” said Edith. “I do believe, Hermione, you care for nothing in the world but flattery and attention ! It never seems to occur to you that people are valuable or reprehensible for themselves and what they are—only whether they are what you call kind to yourself or not. Cannot you raise your thoughts a little higher than this, dear ? It is distressing to see such immaturity of mind in a woman of your age !”

“I don’t wish to become one of your cold, hard, strong-minded women,” returned Hermione, crimsoning to her very temples. “I hate that kind of woman—so cruel and self-sufficient as they are ! I would far rather be what I am, and care whether people liked me or not.”

“Well ! live on sugar-plums to the end of your life, if you like, dear ; I prefer a nobler kind of food,” answered Edith, shrugging her shoulders. “I like to make friends with people I respect, not only because they take it into their heads to be what you call kind to me ; and I think mine is the nobler view of life, dear.”

“Mine is the more natural, and I should not care to live as you do, dear, with no one to love me,” was Hermione’s seemingly artless reply.

To which Edith Everett made answer by a laugh, and a sudden announcement of going to the Vicarage, “where Superior had something of great importance to tell her.”

“And that is the flattery I care for,” she said in a drawling kind of voice. “When such a man as Superior, with his mind, tells me his troubles, confides to me his most secret affairs, and asks my advice, then I feel that I am of some use in the world and that I am more cared for than if I were just a pretty little doll, flattered and caressed because good for nothing else !”

“Thank you,” said Hermione.

“Oh, I did not mean you, dear,” said Edith Everett blandly. “You are of use, you know. You have got rid of the parish atheist and restored the church!—two titles to honour of no mean value. Well, good-bye, little woman. I see Sister Barbara coming up the drive, so you will have a companion. When we meet again I hope you will be radiant. Smiles become your pretty face more than frowns ; and you are undeniably frowning at this moment.”

She gave the round dimpled chin a little "chuck" as she passed; but Hermione drew herself away, saying crossly—

"Don't be so silly, Edith! You treat me just like a child."

"Do I, dear?" said Edith, laughing, as she left the room; while Hermione was soon immersed in tiresome details with Sister Barbara, who came to her from the Convalescent Home, and worried her almost into tears about uninteresting matters which took up her time and prevented her from doing what she wished to do, and gave her no satisfaction from thanks or *kudos* when they were done.

At last the big, fat, smiling Sister left, and then Hermione ordered the carriage and drove straight to Newlands.

She was so irritated, so disturbed altogether, that she felt as if she must do something desperate and insubordinate. She knew nothing worse than to show favour to the Nesbitts and Ringrove, who were now almost as typical for ungodliness as Richard himself had been. And she thought that, although she was very angry with Ringrove, of course, still dear pretty Beatrice had done no wrong, and they had once been such friends together!

She did not like that the girl whom she had known from her infancy should marry without some little token from her ; so she put up in a little parcel the row of pearls which she and Richard had given Virginia on the last birthday spent at home, and which had been worn only once, at the fatal dinner. She wrote a few kind words, accompanying the gift ; and felt so much the happier because of her generosity, her delicate thought in connecting Ringrove's wife with Virginia, which she knew would please him so much, and her disobedience to Superior and Edith Everett ! Mild mutiny was in her way, and she thought that to be easily lost when not carefully held was something for a woman to boast of and quite within the range of righteous self-assertion. " *Qui me néglige me perd* " had been one of her favourite mottoes when she had been a girl ; and a bird escaping from the unguarded cage her device.

She had not intended to go in at Newlands, but when her carriage was seen coming up the drive Ringrove and Beatrice both rushed out to the door ; and it touched her soft heart to see the evident delight with which the young lovers, and presently Mrs. Nesbitt, received her.

" Ah, this is nice of you ! this is like you, Mrs. Fullerton," said Ringrove enthusiastically ; and before

Hermione well knew what had happened she found herself in the Newlands drawing-room, where Mrs. Nesbitt kissed her like a sister, and Bee made much of her with cushions and footstools, and words as sweet and soft as her own dear eyes. Her visit was made quite a fête by all, and she was surrounded by the pleasant and affectionate little fuss which was what she liked better than anything else.

“You are only a great boy yet, Ringrove,” she said, smiling in spite of her endeavour to look grave, when he insisted on kneeling at her feet. “You will never be what the children call grown up.”

“If to be grown up means to become indifferent to you, I certainly never shall be,” laughed Ringrove. “Bee knows that.”

“Yes, indeed,” echoed Bee. “Not a day passes when we do not speak of you, dearest Mrs. Fullerton. Ringrove seems to care more for you than anyone in the world.”

“Bar one,” said Ringrove, with the folly of happiness; and Bee gave back a happy, soft, foolish little laugh, as she said: “I don’t think even ‘bar one,’ as you call it.”

“Ah, my dear, you know where your true friends

are," said Mrs. Nesbitt patting the pretty woman's round shoulder. "Never any change here, dear Hermione!—always the old affection when you care to take it!"

"I know that," said Hermione, with a sudden feeling of choking at her throat.

What a pity that these bad Church-people should be so nice as friends, so good as the natural man! If they had but come over how much pleasanter everything would have been!

"You have always been a kind of Queen among us, you know," then said Ringrove. "Our beautiful Mrs. Fullerton was the crown of our society."

"You must not flatter," said Hermione, with a kind of frightened pleasure.

It was delightful to hear all these caressing words once more; but what would Superior say when he knew she had been here and listened to them? She must not let herself be carried away, and she must cut the whole thing short.

"I dare say you wonder at my coming, dear," she then said to Mrs. Nesbitt; "but I could not let Bee marry without a little present from me, and I have brought you"—to Beatrice herself—"what I am sure you and Ringrove both will like better than anything else—this row of pearls

which we gave our dear Virginia on the last birthday she spent with us. She wore them only once, at that awful dinner party," with a shudder; "but perhaps you will like them none the less for that. It was only once; and they are really great beauties."

"They are all the dearer for that," said Beatrice heartily; and Ringrove, taking them from her hands, kissed them reverently, then fastened them round Bee's soft throat and kissed her after he had done so.

"I am glad that your wife will wear those pearls," said Hermione impulsively.

"And I am glad that my marriage will connect me with you by even this little link," he answered with grave tenderness.

"Poor, sweet Virginia! these pearls will be a sacred treasure in our house," said Mrs. Nesbitt lovingly; and Beatrice half whispered, "Yes;" with tears in her eyes.

Then Hermione rose to leave, and Ringrove took her to her carriage.

"Have you heard from your husband lately?" he said abruptly but quite naturally, as if Hermione had been in the habit of hearing from him every week.

"No," she replied, with painful embarrassment.

"I shall see him when I pass through London on

my way to Paris next week. Shall I say anything from you?"

"Give him my love, and say I hope he is well," answered Hermione in a low voice; "mind you say this, Ringrove."

"Willingly. Nothing more?"

"No, nothing more—only my love, and I hope he is well. Good-bye, Ringrove; God bless you and make you happy, and do not think harshly of me;" she said impulsively; "and give Richard my love," she repeated for the third time as the carriage drove away.

When she reached home she found a certain odd bustle of preparation about the house. The servants were discomposed and the hall was encumbered with luggage.

"What is the matter?" she asked; and the man, with a broad smile, answered—

"Mrs. Everett, ma'am. She is leaving by the next train."

"I have had a telegram," said Edith with perfect tranquillity of conscience, when Hermione went into her room to ask what it all meant. But if she had it must have been by a private wire and special service. "My boy wants me."

“Is he ill?” inquired Hermione anxiously, her dislike subdued by sympathy.

“A little out of sorts,” answered Edith. “At all events it is my duty to go to him.”

“I am so sorry ! You will let me know how he is, and you will come back again,” the soft-hearted creature said with a pitying accent ; but at the same time drawing a deep breath. It was as if a prison door had been suddenly opened and the fresh mountain air had blown in on the dust and darkness.

Edith smiled sarcastically. She understood too well the difference between impulse and conviction not to see the rootlessness of Hermione’s invitation.

“Thanks,” she drawled ; “thanks for all your great affection and generous hospitality. I hope, however, I have been of use to you. I think I have ; but you must not fall back when you are left to yourself, Hermione. And above all things keep clear of those dreadful Nesbitts and Mr. Hardisty.”

This she said with a little laugh, and Hermione became crimson. It was a chance shot, but it had the look of a true aim ; and when the pretty woman changed colour in that tell-tale manner, her inquisitor knew that somehow she had hit the mark, though the how was not quite clear.

“You are so weak, you see, dear,” she added amiably, “that one never knows what you may not do. But you will be shamefully wrong if you make friends again with these people who have persecuted poor dear Superior and the Church so bitterly.”

“One cannot quarrel for ever,” said Hermione at once evasive and apologetic.

Edith Everett curled her lip.

“You are impossible !” she said contemptuously ; and turned to her own affairs with the manner of one who has renounced further communion.

Even when she took her final leave she still kept up this manner of renunciation and severance ; and hastily brushing Hermione’s cheek with her own, as the only kind of embrace she could find it in her heart to give, she hurried into the railway carriage and did not even look up from her travelling bag for the last orthodox salute.

“Gone at last !—how glad I am !” was Hermione’s thought as she turned away ; and : “What a relief to have got rid of that awful fool !” was Edith Everett’s, doubled with : “I wonder what Superior will do without me. I am sure he will miss me awfully. I hope so ; else I have done foolishly to go !”

CHAPTER XII.

RING DOWN THE CURTAIN.

THE loss of Edith Everett was more severely felt by Mr. Lascelles as time went on than even it had been in the beginning ; and more severely by far than had been that of his sister. A certain sympathy of nature between the vicar and the widow, which had not been between the brother and sister, had given a special charm to all that came from her hands ; and though Sister Agnes had been clever, Edith Everett was cleverer still. With as much devotion to the Church, she had more tact with outsiders ; and then she was just those five years younger which make all the difference in a woman's life—those five years which leave the gate still open and keep the roses blooming within—over-blown and damaged by wind and weather, if you will, but all the same roses and in bloom.

The vicar bemoaned himself bitterly on the loss of his faithful friend. He felt desolate, oppressed with tiresome minutiae, and not able to gather up the multifarious

threads which she had quietly taken into her own hands, and had now thrown down in a tangled heap at his feet.

It was exactly the result which Mrs. Everett had foreseen, and for which she had played. To make him feel first her value, and then her loss, was about the best card in her hand ; and if this did not win the game, she knew of none other that would. Had she seen him now fuming over insignificant details from which she would have freed him—besieged by hysterical penitents whose consciences could be soothed only by his writing to them or their calling on him ; had she seen him with his sacerdotal calmness laid aside and an undeniably petulant humanity manifest in its stead, she would have glorified herself in the success of her stratagem, and would have thought, as so often before, that no matter how much intellect a man may have, he is nothing but a lump of plastic clay when an astute woman undertakes to mould him.

When Mr. Lascelles heard that Hermione had been to Newlands even while Edith was still at the Abbey, and speculated on what wrong use she might now make of her dangerous freedom, he was swept into a torrent of wrath that made him ashamed of himself when it was over. Adam Bell had told him—for there was very little

that Adam did not know—and he had sworn aloud when he was alone ; but he curbed himself so far as not to send the scathing letter he rapidly wrote out, and contented himself with passing on coldly and hurriedly after evening-song, when he came out of the church and found Hermione as usual loitering slowly up the road hoping he would overtake her. He did overtake her—he and all his curates and choristers, whom he generally shook off long before he came to this point. This afternoon, however, with a curt : “ Beautiful day it has been ! ” as his only greeting, he passed on at speed.

“ Superior is angry ! ” thought Hermione, as he and his following strode on. “ He has heard of my going to Newlands, and means to punish me. What a tyrant he is ! ” was her next thought. “ How unlike poor dear Richard in everything ! ” her last, ended with a sigh.

Should he marry her? This was the question which evening after evening the vicar asked himself as he sat in his solitary study, turning the thing over and examining it on every side. Should he marry her? She was eminently the right kind of wife for him if he should take one at all ; and those things which some men might consider drawbacks were so many points in her favour with

him. She was not handsome, therefore the ungodly could not say that he had sacrificed principle to the temptations of the flesh; she was not rich, therefore the cry of Mammon and mercenary motives would be a failure; she had four children—four witnesses of his Christian patience and philanthropy; and she was capable, intelligent and devoted to the Church. Perhaps she would be more useful to the cause as a wife than as merely a friend! The world is so censorious, so unwilling to believe in purity, so set against innocent friendships between men and women! A celibate priesthood is undoubtedly the ideal of ecclesiastical organization, and in certain circumstances gives the most power. In others, the reverse obtains. Was this one of those others?—and, here at Crossholme, would a married vicar be of more solid benefit than one, like himself, unmarried, fascinating, and consequently a living target at which all women aimed their erotic darts and calumny let fly her poisoned arrows? Poor Theresa had been a case in point! Unless something supremely good offered he should remain at Crossholme. The church made attractive by its appointments and splendid ritual, the benefice enriched by the offerings which he had induced the wealthy faithful to give, the majority submissive and the recalcitrant

minority impotent:—yes, he would keep the living ; for all that he summed up on the other side of the account : —the Abbey funds almost exhausted, Ringrove Hardisty sure to prove troublesome if he had the chance, and Churchlands reported sold to a Roman Catholic who would draw away more than one weak vessel when the opposition mass was in working order. But he would stay, in spite of all this ; unless indeed he were called away by an offer of so much gain or dignity as it would be impiety to refuse. And being here, a country vicar—so different from a town incumbent—would it not be better for him to marry ?

He had no doubt of Edith herself. Though she did not give him the idolatrous love of poor Theresa, nor had he over her the same kind of rootless personal fascination that he had over Hermione, still he knew that she would marry him if he asked her. The tie between them was stronger and tougher than that of personal affection. It was the tie of intellectual companionship. They mutually supplemented each other, he said to himself ; and she was a wonderfully intelligent executant. He little thought that, while he thus patronized her as the worthy handmaid of his power, she knew herself his manager. Every time she led him by that invisible

thread of suggestion was a triumph of which she understood the full value. He was strong, but she was stronger ; and however brilliant his intelligence, hers was the governing influence. "The cleverest man is not equal to the cleverest woman." This was her axiom, and her own life justified her.

And still, while he pondered and hesitated, those matters which she could best regulate pressed more and more heavily on him, and Hermione's practical uselessness was more and more evident by force of contrast in this hour of need. Then he decided on what to do, and wrote to Edith Everett the letter which was to determine all.

When the answer came, as he expected, in the affirmative—a grave, sensible, judicious answer, for which he had been made to wait many days, and wherein was expressed no jubilation, no personal affection, nothing but a rational review of their joint circumstances, and how the Church could be best served—he went up to the Abbey, where he spent several hours with Hermione alone. He did not tell her what he had done. He had in his pocket the letter by which the whole programme and meaning of his life would be changed ; but he kept his own counsel and made no confidences—at least, for

the present. Time enough to proclaim this sudden revolution in his principles when secrecy was no longer possible and public avowal had to be made.

It was long since he had been so delightful to Hermione as he was to-day. The return on the original Mr. Lascelles, whom somehow she had lost since she had performed her final act of sacrifice at his instance, was as complete as it was fascinating. Never had his manner been so tenderly suggestive, his personal devotion, purified by pastoral care, so satisfying. It was like some one lost and now found again; and she welcomed his return with pleasure that passed from gratitude to self-abasement. It pleased him, strong and cruel as he was, to act out this last scene in the drama where he had all along played under an impenetrable mask, and she, poor soul! with not even the flimsiest rag as a veil between her innermost heart and his keen eyes. It flattered his sense of power to see her sensitive face change from the discontented sadness that had lately settled on it into something of its former girlish softness and shy delight; to watch her colour come and go as he skilfully mingled priestly exhortations and lover-like flatteries together; to see her blue eyes brighten when he spoke to her in parables, wherefrom she might, if she

chose, infer that had she been free he would have made himself her slave, but which he knew she would not dare to interpret too closely. It was a pleasure, and in existing circumstances no peril ; and this was the last time that he should know it.

So the hours passed ; and when he went away he carried with him, in the same pocket as that which held Edith Everett's letter, a cheque of four figures, which he knew too well it was simple robbery to take from her cruelly diminished income.

“It may be the last,” said Mr. Lasceilles to himself, as he took the paper with effusive thanks and delightful praise. “I am wise to take what I can get and when I can get it ; and by rights it all belongs to the Church.”

For some time yet the vicar kept his secret ; but at last one evening he wrote to Hermione, telling her that he was leaving Crossholme to-morrow for a short time. After having recommended to her care this case and that house, and planned out her work during his absence, he said : “And now I am about to communicate to you, my dearest and most faithful friend, a fact wherein I am sure of your loving sympathy. When I return, it will be with Edith Everett as my wife. This will, I am sure, be good news to you. It will not only render my ministra-

tions here at Crossholme more effective than at present, but it will also be of benefit to you. It will give you a sister in her, as well as a more efficient protector in myself. Else I should not have taken a step to which, I am sure you will believe me when I say, the consideration of your gain has most powerfully impelled me. Let me have your prayers and congratulations ; my cup of happiness will then be full."

It would have been difficult for Hermione to have put into words what she felt when she read this letter. Anger, disappointment, sorrow, the sense of having been duped and played with, of having been badly used, of having had something taken from her that she believed was hers—all sorts of confused and embittered feelings came like tumultuous clouds, unstable, intangible, but evident and real. And yet, why should she feel as she did? Why should this marriage make her loneliness so much more barren—her widowhood so much more burdensome? What did it take from her?

When she tried to reason it out fairly she had no self-justification in fact or common sense ; but none the less she felt so much the poorer and more desolate on account of it as to be substantially wrecked—as also, in some obscure way, insulted, jilted, and aggrieved.

She was very foolish to take it so much to heart, she thought, as she sat there with the letter in her hands and the sensation of utter ruin and collapse about her. But, after all, it was a shameful thing to do! Superior had so often spoken against marriage for the priesthood; he had so often said that a celibate clergy was the only righteous body; and now he himself had broken through his own rules and falsified his own principles! Yes, now she had made it clear to herself:—it was because he was false to his own teaching, not because he was false to her. Of course that was impossible! She was married, and it could not make any difference to her, as a woman, whether he took a hundred wives or no. But on that other ground he could not expect anything else than her displeasure. After he himself had taught her that a married priest is a sacrilegious anomaly, to go and marry on his own account—and of all women in the world that odious Edith Everett! Anyone but her! Poor Theresa Molyneux, a thousand times rather; even that ridiculous Miss Pryor, with her sidling airs and wasp's waist, would have been better; but Mrs. Everett, so ugly as she was, and such a hypocrite as she had been!—it was horrible to think of! Her sister, indeed!—no sister of hers! She should never come to the Abbey as Mrs. Lascelles—

never! never! Whatever happened, this should not come into the list of her trials to be undergone for the sake of the Church and her Director! It was shameful, it was impious! Superior married, and Edith Everett his wife! She wondered he did not expect to be struck dead before the altar the next time he celebrated the Sacrifice of the Mass!

And then her mental ravings ended, as of course they must, in a passionate burst of despair, in a wild cry of "Richard! Richard! why did I ever leave you?"

All this happened just before the return of Ringrove and Beatrice from their wedding trip. They had made a long journey on the Continent and had been over more than the stock touring-ground. Now they came back to begin the life that Ringrove had once pictured with Virginia; and the county prepared to do them honour. But the first who called on them was Hermione Fullerton.

Conscious that she had been played with, deceived, and *exploitée* by the vicar for his personal ends—whether connected with the Church or no, still personal—she was feverishly anxious to show him that she had thrown off her allegiance. She was still a good Churchwoman; that she would always be—must be, indeed, by the nature

of her mind, unless she should go deeper still and follow in Virginia's steps ; which was not impossible—but she must make it clear that she was no longer under his special domination, and that the individual priest was nothing if the organization was still omnipotent. All that delightful haze of feeling, that half-flattered, half-reverential homage which had given the whole thing its special power, making it religion and fascination, worship of the Divine and tenderness for the man in one—all that had gone ; and she must show that it had. She had never been really in love with him ; looking back, she could say that. But he had had a greater hold on her by her imagination, by her belief in his esteem and sympathy for her, and by her instinct of obedience, than was perhaps wise. When the spell was broken, she recognized so much of the truth, and knew now, when he was about to marry Edith Everett, how much of her religious zeal had been due to the splendid personality of the priest who had converted her. The man had endeared the creed ; as must ever be in those religions which give the priesthood powers beyond nature and supreme authority over the consciences and lives of men.

From this date however all was to be changed ; and she would take up again so much of her old life as she

could reconcile with her conscience. She would find out Richard and bring him back in triumph to the Abbey. Or if he liked it better, they would make a new home for themselves somewhere else. Perhaps she could yet reclaim him from his errors. God might still work a miracle on her behalf, and strike him with the blinding light of truth before it was too late. He was so good!—though an infidel, still so good! She wanted him too in matters of business. Her affairs were in frightful confusion and she could not put them straight. She would give them all into his hands again, and he might do as he thought best. She would ask no questions; and ignorance would absolve her from the guilt of participation should he use her money as he used it before—for the spread of infidelity. Anything was better than the present wretched state of things, where she did not know what she had to spend nor what she had to pay; when bills on which she had never calculated were always coming in, and interest on loans which she never remembered was always going out. And really cottages let for so much rent, even to infidels, would be better for her in the state of her finances than these same cottages given now to this and now to that purpose of the Church for no rent and some outgoings. These loans to

the Lord, so perpetually negotiated by Mr. Lascelles, were terribly heavy, all things considered, and, since the treachery of the negotiator, unendurable.

Full of these thoughts, she drove over to Monkshall to call on the young people just returned, and to make the first step in that backward path which was to redeem the past. She had heard nothing of her husband since Ringrove's letter from London, two days after his marriage, telling her that he had seen Richard ; that he was not looking well, but would not confess to feeling ill ; that he was occupied at a certain Institution where he gave lectures and made experiments and investigations ; and that he had gone back to his own name, being now simply Spence—Richard Spence. Ringrove did not give the address either of the Institution or the lodgings.

This abandonment of her name had hurt Hermione at the time more deeply than she could explain to herself. She thought it cruel, insulting, a repudiation that she had not deserved, taking her at her worst ; for she was of that large class of women who think it a shame that they should be made to pay their forfeits, or have a return in kind when they do wrong to others. She had withdrawn herself from her husband, but he had no

business to drop her name. She had been misguided, but he had been actively to blame. Her anger however had died by now, and had left only a faint feeling of a wrong somehow done her; so that when she resolved to seek out Richard, and offer him reconciliation and reinstatement, it was pleasant to believe that she had something to forgive. It strengthened her purpose and gave her courage.

Weary, pale, depressed, over-taxed with work, and disabled by disease, Richard Spence, the popular lecturer at the ——— Institution, came back to his meagre lodgings early in the afternoon of an off-day at the laboratory. That old pain at his heart scarcely ever left him now; he had often fits of sudden faintness and general loss of power; he was soon tired, and no rest refreshed him—always exhausted and unable to eat. But he still went on doing his day's work manfully, though his life was drawing to its close—and he knew it. He was lying back in the easy chair, not sleeping, but in that half-doze of weakness which looks like sleep, when the door softly opened, and Hermione, trembling, shamefaced, eager, came in.

By an instinct of pure womanliness she had dressed herself as of old in a certain grey silk gown, touched

here and there with pink, which had been a favourite of his. She had arranged her hair in the fluffy frivolous way that he liked, and put on her rings and chains and bracelets. She was as she used to be in the days before her divorce—the dream of his youth, the wife of his manhood, the woman whom he loved, and, because he loved, believed in and trusted.

For a moment he thought that he was dreaming and this a mere cheat of his brain; but when she came up to him and laid her hand on his, and half sobbed half whispered his name, then he knew that it was true, and that his weary exile had come to an end.

He raised himself from his reclining position with the difficulty, the faintness, of overpowering gladness; hung over her and held her to his heart as she knelt by his side—just as he had held her and just as she had knelt on the evening of the day when Mr. Lascelles had successfully defied and she had divorced him. Neither spoke; only her quick sobs and his laboured breath told how with her contrition was greater than joy, how with him joy was so great as to be pain.

At last he lifted her face and held it back with his hand on her forehead.

“Let me look at you,” he said in a low voice. “Ah,

this dear face of my wife—how sweet to see it once more! My own again! My wife, my love! Sweetest and dearest of all women on the earth—Hermione!”

“Say first that you forgive me,” she sobbed.

“Love has nothing to forgive,” he answered with infinite tenderness. “You have come back to me, and the past is forgotten. You are mine, my own, my second self, my soul. I have nothing to forgive, I can only love!”

“Do you love me, Richard, after all that has happened?” she asked, stealing her hand half timidly up to his neck.

“Could I live without loving you?” he answered. “A man’s love is not to be cast aside so easily, sweet wife. As soon could I live without breathing!”

“But you are ill, darling ! You are so pale, and your hands are burning. Why did you not tell me that you were ill?” her blue eyes raised to his full of loving reproach.

“Why should I, my wife? I did not wish to trouble you. If you had not come to me I should have passed away in silence and left you in peace for ever.”

“That would have been cruel ! It is cruel to think this of me,” she said with all her old fondness and in consequence.

"No, wife, it would not have been cruel," he answered, smiling.

"But I wanted to see you; I wanted to know all about you; and I knew nothing till Ringrove told me yesterday."

"You are here now, let us forget all the rest," he said hastily. "I do not want the shadow of painful memories to lie on the brightness of this day. See! the very sun comes out to welcome you," he added, smiling as a sudden burst of sunshine poured through the window and fell over Hermione like a golden glory.

"And now we will never part again," she said, clinging to him.

A spasm passed over his face as he pressed her to him fondly. Never? For how long would that symbol of eternity run?

"And I will make you quite well, Richard," she went on to say, smoothing back his thick gray hair.

He smiled a little sadly.

"If anything can make me well, it will be this dear hand in mine," he said.

"Why do you say 'if,' Richard? You are not really ill—only out of health; there is nothing really wrong with you, is there?" she asked in sudden fear.

“I am not quite myself, sweet wife,” he said, “but well enough to know all the happiness of your return,” he added with kindly haste.

“Well enough to live for many, many years in this happiness. You shall be so happy, Richard!—I will be always so good to you!” she returned.

“For your sake I will try, dear love,” he said still smiling, but this time even more sadly than before.

“And if you die I shall have killed you!” cried Hermione with a burst of unaffected agony.

He stopped her mouth with a kiss.

“Let the past be buried between us,” he said. “We must bury our dead, sweet wife; and all this sorrow is dead. Leave it where it lies, undisturbed.”

“I never knew how good you were till now! I never appreciated you as you deserved!” said Hermione, raising his hands to her lips.

“Hush! you were only too good to me, and you were my joy and delight,” said Richard softly.

“And will be again. The old life will come back just as it was,” she returned.

His eyes filled up with sudden tears. Just as it was? The unity of his happiness?—the continuance of his work?—the well-being of the men who had been ruined because of him?—and, above all, that beloved child,

fettered in the prison-house of superstition, and dead to him and humanity alike—could any of this be given back? Herself and all the happiness lying round her love, yes; but the old life as it was, never!

Nothing of all this fashioned itself into words; and though Hermione caught the reflection of his thought on her conscience neither did she speak. She only laid her face, which suddenly burned as if with fire, on his breast, while he passed his fingers through her golden feathery hair—glad to forgive because of love's sake, and the godlike power of magnanimity.

The next day they went down to the seaside to wait there until Richard should be strong enough to travel. Then they were to go abroad; for when Hermione had asked him with many tears and blushes, and shamed, shy looks: Would he not go back to the Abbey? he had answered: No; at least not yet. His work was now elsewhere, and the Abbey had passed from him.

She did not tell him that it had well-nigh passed from her too; and that she would soon have to give it up altogether, because she had been *exploitée* to the extent of not being able to keep it. She would reserve all that till he got well; meanwhile, the first thing before them was to get back his health.

By the seaside Richard seemed at the first really to

rally by this return to peace and love ; but it was only the delusive stimulus of happiness. After that first burst of apparent strength he fell rapidly back and grew steadily weaker day by day ; but she shut her eyes to the truth, and opened them only to the sweet flatteries of hope. She would not believe in his danger. He was her lover once more, as dear as in the early days, and she could not let him go. Now that they were so happy again, how could he die ? And again, so good as he was, how could he die, still unbelieving and impenitent ? As yet she had carefully abstained from all attempts at conversion, though she kept up her own devout habits and went, if not daily, yet often, to church. Still, she had let the question lie untouched between them ; but one day, from what the doctor had said, heartbroken for herself she had become infinitely distressed about his soul, and oh, how anxious to win from him one word of recognition for the solemn truths which were so real to herself ! But every tentative little effort that she made fell dead. He would not take up her more timid challenges, and when she grew bolder and insistent he kissed her with a quiet smile, saying:—

“Let sleeping dogs lie, sweet wife ! You and I must never have a theological discussion again.”

“ Only this once, Richard ! ” she said, anxious, yearning, caressing, lovingly pertinacious. “ Let me send for a clergyman. One word from him might clear your mind. God may manifest Himself at last ! ”

It was about noonday when Hermione said this. The sun shone bright and warm, and the quiet lapping of the sea, just at the ebb, came with a pleasant, soothing sound through the open window. Pretty trifles and vases full of flowers were set about the room—that peaceful room!—where Hermione, like some dear treasure recovered from the spoiler, sat by the side of the couch, her husband’s hand in hers, looking at him, as both knew too well, for the last days. At the best he could not hold out much longer, and he might die at any moment.

It was strange how Richard’s own dignity of patience had reacted on Hermione. Something seemed to have passed into her that had strengthened and ennobled her as nothing else had ever done. Her very religion was more rational than before—less a superstition and more a sentiment ; but always lying on her heart was the desire that Richard should confess and be converted, even at the eleventh hour.

“ Let me send for a clergyman ! ” she pleaded again,

and mentioned one well known in the place where they were. "Darling! one little act of faith in the Christian Sacrifice—one word of Hope in God!"

His calm face looked into hers steadily, but with inexpressible tenderness.

"Belief in the creed founded on a lie and maintained by craft and cruelty?—where the fiction of a God-man, because of God's love for the earth, is made the weapon which destroys human happiness and love?—No! I am what I have been, dear wife—an Agnostic, knowing nothing, and refusing to affirm what I cannot prove."

"But when we die, Richard?" Tears drowned her voice.

"We go into the light of knowledge or the darkness of annihilation," he answered calmly. "It must be one or the other, sweetheart, and the laws of the universe will not be altered because one man believes in immortality and another is content with doubt."

She sobbed bitterly.

"You are lost!—we shall never meet again!" she said in pathetic condemnation.

He drew her to him.

"If the God in whom you believe is true, you dishonour Him by your distrust," he said. "Why should

my soul be sent to an eternity of suffering because I am unable to believe contradictory and imperfect testimony?—testimony which stultifies all experience, and is disproved by every scientific truth?—which makes of Omnipotence a bungler and of Omniscience a dupe? If your faith be true, has not your God power to enlighten me now at the last moment?”

“You have neglected the means of grace offered to you, and we have no right to expect miracles,” she said.

He smiled.

“Let me die then in peace, dear love!”

“This is not peace—it is enmity with God,” she said.

“It is the best I know :—peace with man ; forgiveness even of him who was my enemy, and of those who stole my child from me. They acted according to their lights ; and it is not they but the creed which makes such crimes as theirs possible against which I have set myself. I have done my work. I can do no more now—only remain steadfast to the end.”

“And you do not even confess God?” said Hermione.

“I confess the Unknowable,” he answered with quiet solemnity. “Now kiss me, old love,” he said with a smile, “and stand in the sunlight, just as you are. You are

made for the sunshine, sweet wife. That glorious light ! source of all power and life ! shall we ever know what lies beyond?" he murmured, looking up to the sun. "Will humanity ever be delivered from superstition and set fairly in the light?"

He kept his dying eyes still fixed on the sun—his face irradiated with a kind of divine glory, as before his mind, marshalled in grand and long procession, passed thoughts of the noble victories over superstition and the glorious truths made manifest, the peace of nations, the spread of knowledge, the abolition of vice and misery and ignorance, the sublime light of universal freedom and the unfettered progress of humanity which should inform and govern the future through the supreme triumphs of True Knowledge.

"Man the God incarnate !" he said ; "yes, the myth was true."

Presently he looked at his wife, but scarcely as if he saw her as she was, rather as if he saw her and something more.

"Sweet wife ! my little Ladybird !" he said softly with a smile. "Good-night !"

He closed his eyes and his head sank back among the pillow as if he were sleeping. Hermione bent over

him, her tears falling silently on his face. He did not seem to feel them. So quiet, so placid, so pale and peaceful as he looked he might have been already dead but for his faint breathing, and once a little smile that crossed his face. Once, too, she heard him say in a low murmur: "My men, seek out the Truth:" and again: "Refuse to believe a lie, my friends. If it cost you your lives, refuse."

After this he said no more, but continued to sleep so quietly that she dare scarcely breathe for fear of awakening him.

His noble face was verily sublime in its grand tranquillity. His thick grey hair was spread on the cushion in shining locks that stood away from his broad brow like an aureole of silver; his full lips were slightly parted; one hand was quietly lying on his breast, the other in his wife's. The whole attitude was one of perfect peace, of untroubled, dreamless repose. Presently a change came over him; subtle, undefined, to be felt rather than seen—a change which showed that something had gone. His life—and what beside?

She stooped to listen to his breathing—to feel his heart:—all was still and silent. She laid her head on his breast—no answering throb of love welcomed her to her

old resting-place ; she took his hand—it lay powerless in hers ; she kissed his lips—no warm response came from them ; and when she carried his head to her bosom and held it clasped there for long long minutes, no colour came back to the pale cheeks beneath her kisses, the closed eyes did not open to her voice. Hushed, almost tearless, with strange and reverent patience, she laid him down again as tenderly as if a rough movement would have wakened him, and sank on her knees beside the couch. Passion and the violence of despair would have been a desecration about that quiet death ; it must be only love and patience in harmony with the life that had passed away. But she lifted up her eyes to heaven and said aloud, with a strange kind of belief that her prayer would be answered : “ O God, receive the soul which wanted only Thy Light to be made perfect ! ”

And yet it was a perplexing mystery to her for years to come when she remembered the agony and torment in which Theresa, a fervent Catholic, had died after receiving the Blessed Sacrament and Absolution ; while Richard, an infidel professing Agnosticism to the last, passed away with the serenity of Socrates or a saint already in glory.

And now to reckon up the loss and gain of this tragic

barter. For herself she had lost husband, child, money, place, and the finest flavour of her womanly repute. But she had gained the blessing of the Church which denies science, asserts impossibilities, and refuses to admit the evidence of facts. For Mr. Lascelles, what had he gained as the equivalent for the misery he had occasioned? Not so very much, when all was told. After his marriage, things went back into the old groove, and the excited zeal of Crossholme came to an end. The women, with no special desire now to win Superior's favour, took up again their fluffs and flounces, their glaring colours and frivolous ornaments. The salt waters of worldliness stole gradually back upon the redeemed lands, and Edith, as Mrs. Lascelles, had no power to speak of. The men, no longer pressed on by the women, fell off in their church duties; but, demoralized by the lavish use of pious bribes, the parish lost its former manly spirit, and the break-up of such a body as Mr. Fullerton's had been helped to bring things still nearer to low water-mark.

Cuthbert sold his estate to a Roman Catholic who brought his clerical staff to pick up the Anglican stragglers;—of whom Aunt Catherine was the first. She entered a convent, where she was treated kindly enough

—an imbecile, good-natured nun, who saw visions and dreamed dreams that never crept beyond the convent walls, not being out of line, and affording something to talk about in the cloisters. The Abbey was let to a Protestant who gave his countenance to the Nesbitts and Ringrove, and helped in putting on the break whenever it was possible. But, in truth, after his marriage, Mr. Lascelles himself modified his more extreme practices. He was looking for preferment, as enabling him to be more useful to his party; and he recognized the wisdom of drawing in so far as not to be counted with the Irreconcilables. When he reckoned up his gains—bought by the death of Richard and Theresa, the perversion of Sister Agnes, Virginia, Cuthbert, and Aunt Catherine, the destruction of Richard's men, the impoverishment and life-long loneliness of Hermione—he found:—a church far too magnificent for the population; a Convalescent Home and sundry ritualistic establishments which could not be kept up and were abandoned by his successor; and, as the permanent good, an increase of endowment which raised the value of the living to over fifteen hundred a year.

When all was over, Hermione went abroad, and in due time found herself in Rome. The day after her



'Her hands outstretched to her child?'

arrival, she went to the church where the Pregatrice for ever adore the Holy Sacrament, and where Virginia was now a professed nun.

As she was kneeling by the grating, two nuns came in to replace those whose function had ceased. The one was dressed in pale blue, the other in black; the one was Virginia, and the older woman by her side was Sister Agnes. Did they recognize Hermione kneeling there, in her heavy widow's mourning? Did they hear her sudden sob, her startled cry, and see her hands outstretched to her child, as she came with bent head and clasped hands to her station? Who knows? No sign of recognition was made; only Virginia became suddenly paler even than before. But she went through her prayers and psalms with an ecstatic passion of devotion that seemed to wrap her very soul away. Home and parents were alike forgotten; her father's death, her mother's tears—nothing touched her, absorbed as she was in the adoration of a mystery—the worship of the Divine Sacrifice. She was as dead to Hermione as was Richard himself; and her mother felt she would almost rather have known her to be in name what she was in essential fact.

Hermione knelt before the altar till Virginia's function

was over, and she and Sister Agnes had left. Then she rose from her knees and turned to go. The darkness of the early winter evenings had come on, and she stood by the church door uncertain which way to take. How desolate she felt—a solitary woman, childless and a widow, alone in this strange, solemn city—alone in this wide, empty world! Had she done well after all? She had given the victory to the Church; had the conditions imposed by the victor been righteous? Love, home, happiness, her husband and her child—these had been the forfeits claimed, the tribute cast into the treasury of the Lord under whom she had elected to serve. Had it been a holy sacrifice of the baser human affections to the nobler spiritual aspirations? or had it been the cruelty of superstition? the inhuman blindness of fanaticism?

THE END.

LONDON: PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET

