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HOLY ORDERS



MARIE CORELLI'S ROMANCES

A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS
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THELMA
ARDATH
THE SOUL OF LILITH
WORMWOOD
BARABBAS
THE SORROWS OF SATAN
THE MASTER-CHRISTIAN
TEMPORAL POWER
GOD'S GOOD MAN
HOLY ORDERS
BOY
THE MIGHTY ATOM
CAMEOS

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THE TRAGEDY OF A QUIET LIFE

BY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE chief incidents of the following story occurred some years ago in an obscure and dreary little village, not on the Cotswolds, but in a lonely and sparsely populated district lying some few miles inland from the north-east coast. The Vicar of the parish at that time was something of a hero in his quiet way, and fought bravely against the overwhelming forces of the Drink interests in his neighbourhood. Whether he really conquered or was conquered in the struggle has never to my knowledge been determined, and does not pertain to the present narrative. But his single-handed combat lasted for a long time, and was pathetic to the extreme of patience and endurance, and his history, though known only to a few, has furnished sufficient material for a similar character to his in my imaginary friend 'Richard Everton,' who may perhaps in his own person move the public to thoughtfully consider the silent martyrdoms bravely endured by many noble men of the Church, who have devoted, and are devoting their lives to bettering the conditions of the people and to lifting them out of the clutches of that devouring destroyer of all reason, health and good,—Drink. In certain rural districts, especially those which are solitary and secluded, and far away from great centres, there is a general dislike of a 'temperance' parson. He is looked upon as a 'sneak.' Sometimes he is one; far more often he is not. But a strong feeling

nearly always exists against him,—and this animosity is sedulously fostered and encouraged by all such persons in his neighbourhood as may happen to have 'interests' in the liquor trade. Sometimes the ill-feeling reaches such a climax that the unfortunate man is regularly 'boycotted,' or else exposed to the most spiteful and injurious persecution. It takes something more than the usual soldier's mettle to daily bear with the miserable slights, the mean abuses, the ignorant sneers and vulgar mockeries of a petty parish in arms against its spiritual Head ; yet there are hundreds of 'rural' clergy who cheerfully endure these narrow animosities and prejudices,—staunch warriors for the Right and the True, hidden away in the dullest and least frequented corners of the British Isles, fighting steadily under their Divine Master's 'Orders,' without honour, without hope of recognition, without personal comfort,—often, in the end, dying dispirited and broken-hearted because the powers of Drink have proved more potent with their parishioners than the power of Christ! Humble heroes these in the counting of their own lives, but surely contributing to the ultimate working out of the nation's health, strength and wisdom. For just as one ill-tempered, uncharitable and bigoted clergyman will infect with his own unpleasant attributes a whole community, so will one warm-hearted, kindly, humane and sympathetic man of the same high calling, work a beneficial, if slow and gradual change in the mental feeling and attitude of even the most narrow and embittered of rustic populations. Yet with all their cheerful patience and self-sacrifice such men are far less appreciated in the world and wield much less influence than those who make their money out of the people's drunkenness and degradation, such as 'Mr. Minchin,' whose 'original,' I am told, so far from coming to ruin, as in the ensuing

pages, is now a hoary-headed, complacent and professedly pious member of the House of Lords. And this perhaps is natural, for while the one side seeks to implant virtue, the other sows vice, and poor humanity will always be more prone to follow vice to its own undoing than virtue for its own happiness, till it knows better. That it is beginning to know better is hopefully evident. The Million whose labour makes the country's position and prosperity, are awaking to the realisation of the tyrannous grip in which themselves and their earnings are held by the Drink-Trade,—and with the usual sturdy common-sense which lies at the core of their being, they are beginning to question why they in their toiling thousands should be doomed, with their children, to disease and degradation for the benefit of a few Drink 'companies.' And it is devoutly to be wished that the answer they arrive at will be in the form of such a fight against the National Curse, as may cleanse our land from the slur on its fair fame. For it must be the People themselves who decide their own destiny. They know by this time that they cannot rely on the advice proffered to them by 'party' newspapers; moreover the large sums of money coined by press 'companies' out of the advertisements of brewing and distilling 'companies,' very naturally make the two Trades work along the same lines, hand and glove with each other. The pity of it is that the press should have ever become a Trade guided by money results more than by national honour.

In my present story I have selected only one episode out of many tragedies,—tragedies which Drink writes across millions of homes and millions of lives. There are hundreds of suffering martyred men in the Church like 'Richard Everton,' who would be all the better and much the happier for the confidence, help and support

of their parishioners,—confidence, help and support which is almost invariably denied to them. I should like to make special pleading for these; for while our higher ecclesiastics are nowadays practising such 'broadness' of view that they appear to condone and excuse the gravest offences in their own ranks, as well as in the ranks of that 'society' which assumes to 'lead' conduct and morals, these lesser men are keeping the Church cleaner and purer than it would otherwise be, and in their almost unrecognised labours are truly bearing all the burden and heat of the day.

As for the Drink-Evil, I wish that every one into whose hands this book may fall would honestly try to realise the wide-spread misery, disease, pauperism, crime and lunacy for which that hideous vice is responsible, and would add his or her wish and will to mine, in a strong prayer that the wicked financial profit derived by the few out of the physical and moral debasement of the many, may be checked and finally come to naught, so that the British people, released at last from the dominant sway of the liquor traffic, may rise to the best of everything in them,—the best of brain, the best of work, the best of health, the best of life. A temperate people must always be a strong people, and to hold our own in the days that are coming, we shall need all the strength that sound minds and sound bodies can give us. There is no room in the future of Britain for a national vice which betrays a national weakness.

STRATFORD-ON-AVON
July 1908

HOLY ORDERS

THE TRAGEDY OF A QUIET LIFE

CHAPTER I

A STORM of rain was sweeping over the Cotswolds. The clouds drifted along the sky in low uneven masses, breaking asunder now and then to show fitful glimpses of blue between their dividing gloom,—the hills looked bare and wan, and their ridges were blurred like the outline of a picture which the painter has smudged in haste and carelessness. Every now and again a restless wind arose and blew the tree-tops drearily to and fro,—the landscape wore a dismal expressionless aspect, and as the clammy wet mists crept over field and common, they brought with them a shuddering chill which penetrated coldly to the warmest blood, and created an uncomfortable sense of physical and mental depression. In a certain small village, which, to save all contest for supremacy, shall not here be given its true name, but shall be called Shadbrook, the rain seemed to gather special force, pouring in torrents over the irregularly clustered houses and trickling down from their roofs into wide puddles of mud through the 'main street,' as it was called, merely because the Post-office, a combined business of small groceries and the country's mails, happened to be located therein. Shadbrook was in some respects constructed so as to give the greatest possible inconvenience to those who by chance or fortune found themselves constrained to dwell in it. There were two portions of it,—one ancient—the other modern.

The ancient part was composed of small, strongly-built stone houses, many of them rich in the possession of old oak rafters and stray bits of fine panelling left here and there where the dealer in antiquities had found it impossible to remove them without destroying the whole structure,—the modern was one of those 'model villages' which well-meaning landowners go to the pains of erecting at great cost and little profit for their often ungrateful tenants, who not only find fault with the houses, but demur at the paying of their rents when occupying the same. Between the two there ran a brook of not very clear water, over which there was a picturesque bridge of a single span, which was traditionally reputed to have been built by the Romans. Looking down from this bridge into the stream, one saw various mute expressions of the interior life of the village — broken china, empty preserved-meat tins, old kettles, pots and pans of every description, commingled with unsightly portions of decaying vegetable matter which were not altogether odourless. And here indeed, though the passing stranger knew it not, was the centre of a great faction,—the core of an internal party strife. Year in and year out it was a matter of dispute as to which inhabitants of the village on either side of the bridge thus turned the river into a dusthole. Was it the 'original' or the 'model' village? No one could tell—no one dared. Many had been the protests from the kindly landowner, something of a benefactor in his way, whose mansion and deer-park were some two miles distant,—urgent and persuasive had been the requests both from him and his wife, a great lady of fashion, that their tenants should try and keep the rivulet clean,—and most effusive had been the promises received in return. But no real change was ever effected. Each side blamed the other. The people in the old stone houses declared they never did see such 'mucky' folk as those who occupied their landlord's 'model' cottages—while the dwellers in the model cottages declared that their neighbours of the 'stone hut period' were semi-barbarians, 'as didn't know a clean thing when they see'd it.' Only on Sundays was a kind of silent truce effected—for there was but

one church—a small and very ancient edifice, once the chapel, so legended, of a holy hermit in the early Christian era and carefully preserved by the monks until the stormy days of the Reformation, when it was—like all the churches in the neighbourhood—deprived of its images and relics, and considerably disfigured, though not destroyed. Of late years it had been carefully restored to something of its pristine appearance, and the simple services of the Church of England were faithfully performed in it Sunday after Sunday by the resident Vicar, the Reverend Richard Everton. He was a good and kindly man, and when the living was first bestowed upon him, he was moved to a sense of overpowering and grateful wonder at his amazing fortune. He had been working as a poor curate in the East End of London, and happened by chance to be chosen to preach a sermon on a particular occasion for some great cause of charity. Among his hearers was the wealthy patron of the living of Shadbrook, and so pleased was this good country squire with the young preacher's eloquence, that he sought him out and made his personal acquaintance—an acquaintance which soon deepened into friendship—the result of which friendship was his present position. And the Reverend Richard thought himself a more than lucky man. For not only was the church of Shadbrook an interesting one from the point of antiquity,—but there was a vicarage attached to it, which was quite a beautiful sixteenth-century house—full of untouched oak-panelling, and connected by poetic tradition with the love-story of a lady of that romantic period when young women were supposed to die straight off as soon as lovers betrayed their trust, even as lilies die when deprived of water. There were leaning gables and big latticed windows and quaint chimney-stacks to this house,—and a garden of the loveliest 'old-fashioned' type, shut in from the outer world by trees beneath some of which Sir Philip Sidney might have composed a sonnet. And so when Richard Everton first took up his abode in this charming rural retreat, he was as happy as a poet is when inspired with a fine idea. Life seemed to radiate joy upon him, inwardly and outwardly—for he was young. And on the faith of his dreams

and his delight and his respite from all financial care, he did what most men would have done under similar circumstances —he fell in love and got married.

Mrs. Everton was very pretty. She was, it may be at once stated, much too pretty for a clergyman's wife. She was dainty, *mignonne*, golden-haired, blue-eyed, light-footed, merry,—with a voice like a lark and a smile like the very sunshine—everything, in fact, that a clergyman's wife ought *not* to be, if she would stand in a 'respectable' position with county society. Her quite un-Christian name, too, Azalea—was absurd and almost 'stagey.' Her dress was always exquisitely tasteful though not extravagant—and people said—such people as there were in Shadbrook to say anything—that they 'wondered how she could do it.' She was a daily joy and bewilderment to her husband during the first year of their marriage. Then there arrived a baby-boy — like, yet unlike her, with a wise angel face, and a noble head like that of the infant Hercules. Where he came from neither of his parents could imagine. The Reverend Richard stared for hours at his offspring, wondering why it looked so grandly at him. For he himself was quite a plain, ordinary sort of man—his two best features being his eyes and mouth—eyes which were deeply set and darkly blue, and lips that were finely sensitive and accustomed to gentle lines of speech and smile. The beauty of his baby son confused and oppressed him. He was troubled by it, though he knew not why. His wife was not so much perplexed as delighted with her child—she looked like a little girl suddenly presented by a kind friend with a model doll.

After the birth of this wondrous boy, the family in Shadbrook Vicarage considered itself complete. Everything smiled upon the happy trio. The house was lovely—the garden delicious, the air good, and the surrounding landscape perfect. At the time this 'ower true tale' opens, the Vicar and his wife had enjoyed their enviable condition of connubial bliss for three years, and their beautiful son was two summers old—just at what is called the 'interesting' age. And it was at this very juncture that a kind of mysterious change came over the spirit of the

dream—so far at least as the Vicar himself was concerned. In the joy of securing Shadbrook living, and the greater bliss of winning the love of Azalea,—felicity crowned and completed by the arrival of the boy with the fine head and angelic countenance,—the Reverend Richard had forgotten altogether one trifling circumstance,—namely that he was a clever man. That is to say, a man gifted above the ordinary, with a wide knowledge of books, a keen grasp of things social and political, and a natural bias towards the graces of art and learning. Amid the smiles of his wife and the prattle of his infant, he had so obliterated himself that he had completely lost sight of the fact that perhaps there might be wider and more useful fields of labour than Shadbrook. When this thought first came to him he put it away as though it were a suggestion from the evil one, involving some deadly sin—yet every now and then it persistently recurred to him and forced itself upon his pained attention. He was ashamed of it, and angry with himself for giving way to what he called a 'weakness'—but nevertheless the question rang in his ears with haunting persistence—"Are you going to spend all your life in Shadbrook?"

All his life! He was only thirty-five—and probably—taking all the chances for and against, there were several years before him. Long years too—for in Shadbrook the time lagged on with a most extraordinary slowness. Yet who could wish for a more peaceful way of passing the days than the work of 'curing' Shadbrook souls? There was no prettier old village church in England than the one in which it was his duty to officiate, and as for his personal environment, there was no better house anywhere than his—no lovelier wife—no more beautiful child. What more then could he desire? How was it that a sudden cloud—small yet perfectly perceptible—had crept into his sky?

He asked himself the question many times—angrily and with a keen self-reproach. But he kept his own counsel as to his inward condition of mind—and not even to that dazzling creature of sunshine and gossamer, his adored Azalea, whose bewildering fairy beauty and gaiety of heart were a perpetual

amazement to his mind, did he confide what he gravely decided was 'a matter between himself and God.'

On this day of dull rain and sweeping mist, when even the Vicarage garden looked dreary, the spring not having yet made up its mind as to whether or no it meant finally to dethrone a long and obstinately reigning winter, and when Shadbrook in both its ancient and modern parts presented its worst and most forlorn aspect, there was something more than usually depressing in the atmosphere, and the Reverend Richard felt it poignantly. He sat in his study, at a round oak table profusely strewn with letters and papers, holding a pen listlessly in his hand, and trying to fix his mind on his next Sunday's sermon. Opposite to him the spacious latticed window gave him an open view of his garden—a dream of beauty in June and July,—but just now fitting itself into his particular frame of mind as somewhat like a well-kept cemetery from which the gravestones and memorial monuments had been recently removed. Tall dark firs and evergreens waved their hearse-like plumes solemnly to and fro in the driving rain —the lawns were sodden, and marked by the muddy trail of the delving worm—the flower-borders showed some meekly aspiring little spikes of green indicative of bulbs waiting to grow tall if the sun would only shine upon them—and a few withered snowdrops drooped towards the gravel path and shivered in the swish of the wind. Everton's deep-set, thoughtful eyes observed all these trifles with a kind of morbid acuteness.

"Even for March,"—he said to himself gently, as though apologising for the remark—"the weather is trying!"

He turned his pen about betwixt finger and thumb—but wrote not a word with it. A terrible conviction was forcing itself upon his mind that there was nothing to write about. It was a dreadful fact. Nothing to write about! He, a minister of the Gospel,—with the Book of all books beside him—the exhaustless fount of spiritual prophecy, poesy and power, could find nothing to say on any subject in it. Every week he was newly confronted by this amazing difficulty. Yet

it was not that he was destitute of ideas—only—and here was the stumbling-block—his ideas would not appeal to the intelligence of Shadbrook. Were he to express himself in such language as he desired to use—were he to give his heart and soul full vent, and speak with the passion and enthusiasm that inwardly consumed his being as with a consuming flame, why then, his parishioners—Well? What of his parishioners? Would they be angry, surprised, or in any way moved to unusual emotion? No—oh no! They simply would not understand. There was the core and kernel of his trouble. *They-would-not-understand!* They did not understand him as it was, even when he preached the oldest and most worn-out platitudes. In fact, he was often greatly concerned as to whether they in very truth comprehended the Christian doctrine at all. He sometimes had a glimmering painful sense that they merely accepted it, because it was the particular form of approach to the Almighty which was ordained to be taught according to the laws of the country—and that if by some singular chance Buddhism were introduced in its stead as the religion of the realm, they would accept that with equal alacrity and equanimity. He had often sounded the members of his flock on the question of their belief—because he felt it his duty so to do—but the answers he had received were for the most part vague and unsatisfactory. There was Farmer Hobday, for example,—the best farmer anywhere about for forty miles—a regular church-goer, and an excellent man in every way—yet no one could honestly say he was 'orthodox.' Once when the Reverend Richard had delicately touched on a certain religious matter, this very Hobday, huge-boned, red-faced and mighty of stature, had turned a pair of round expressionless eyes upon him, and with a slow smile had observed:

"Now doan't 'ee do it, passon!—do-an't 'ee do it! You minds your church an' I minds my plough! Neither on us knaws 'ow the A'mighty manages to work us along through a powerful lot o' trouble—yet worked we *are*!—an' if we axe's no questions, we woan't be told no lies!"

Then there was Mrs. Moddley—a widow with eight young children, whose husband had been killed while working on the railway line which purposely missed Shadbrook altogether on its way to Cheltenham. She too was a regular church-goer—and when Everton was preparing some of the village lads for confirmation, one of her boys had created confusion in the class by suddenly observing: "Please, sir, mother says she don't see 'ow God can bear to live, watchin' all the poor folks die what He's made Hisself!"

The Vicar had for the time managed to elude this startling proposition by skilful handling of the truism that we are all poor sinful souls who are not expected to comprehend the ways of the Almighty—but he took an early opportunity of interviewing Mrs. Moddley on the subject of her son's remark. Mrs. Moddley, who was washing her children's clothes, and whose arms, half in and half out of a tub of soap-suds, presented a boiled lobster-like appearance, listened with respectful patience, while the clergyman quietly and with the greatest kindness, pointed out that the thought expressed by Master Moddley—'Jimmy' as he was familiarly called—was a little—yes, just a little improper, and ought not to have been allowed to find refuge in a child's brain.

"Well!" said Mrs. Moddley, straightening herself up from the wash-tub and heaving a short sharp sigh—"You may be right, Mr. Everton, and I daresay you are, for it's not my place to argefy with my betters, an' I've never done it nohow—but as for puttin' thoughts in a child's brain, if you'll believe me, sir, they don't want no puttin', for they comes there with no trouble at all—and whatever I've said to Jimmy 'tain't 'arf as bad as what Jimmy says to me—which I don't put into his 'ed nohow—an' if God doos everything, then it's God as is to blame, beggin' your pardon, Mr. Everton, but it's the truth I do assure you!"

Here she paused, out of breath, and wrung her hands free from the soap-suds. Everton looked slightly troubled.

"But, Mrs. Moddley," he argued—"you are always in church on Sundays—and you understand——"

"No, *that* I don't!—and that I should never wish you, sir, to think as I did,"—she declared, with energy—"Nor ever 'ave I done so since I was born an' eddicated. But I takes it as it comes, feelin' it's all for the best, so long as we doos our dooty in that state of life in which it has pleased God to call us."

These last words she uttered in the tone of a stage recitation. Then, glancing at the clergyman's kindly, clever face, she dusted a chair and offered it to him.

"Sit down, sir,"—she said, with quite a motherly air—"You looks a bit worrited—but I do make so bold as to say there's no 'arm in either me or Jimmy or any o' my lambs—they'se only just curious sort o' little creatures, wantin' to know the why an' the wherefore of everything—and they gives trouble to us older folk without meanin' of it. But they all says their prayers as good as gold—and my youngest girl, Betty, she prays so hard that she's fair wore out when she's done, an' rolls over like a dumplin' into bed after the Amen—bless her 'art!—she's but four years old—an' all her trouble in this life is that old Mrs. Kibble will never get good enough to be an angel! Think o' that! Old Mrs. Kibble that 'as been a drunkard for these many years an' is gettin' wusser as she goes on,—an' my Betty wants her to be an angel! Lord, lord! I've laughed till I cried over that!"

An irrepressible smile crossed Everton's face. A picture of Betty, round, pink as an apple-blossom, and soft as a peach, praying till she was 'wore out' for 'crazy Kibble' as the irreverent lads of the village called the ancient female reprobate in question, was humorous as well as pathetic. And surely there was something very purely Christian in the child's feeling, if she could in her innocent heart implore the Almighty to transform an old, ugly, dirty confirmed drunkard, who was a disgrace to herself and her neighbours, into an angel!

"Good little Betty!" he said, gently—"Still, Mrs. Moddley, I think it is necessary for us elders to impose a certain restraint on our speech in the presence of very young children—and Jimmy's remark was almost—I will not say quite—but *almost*

on the verge of blasphemy. And it appears he only repeated what you, his mother, said. Now those words——"

"Those words was which?" demanded Mrs. Moddley.

"Well just to this effect," hesitated Everton—"That you wondered how God could live watching all the poor folks die that He made Himself."

Mrs. Moddley's eyes twinkled curiously.

"Well, I ain't goin' back on it,"—she said—"It's ezackly what I thinks—though I'll freely own my tongue often gets the better of me. But there, Mr. Everton, take me myself, if I sees a fly a-drownin' in the milk I picks it out an' gives the poor know-nothin' inseck a chance for its life, though flies is a nuisance in the summer-time as everybody knows, but seein' God made 'em I daresay if they thinks at all they wants their lives as much as we do ours. And though I'm told in church as God 'ad only one Son, an' killed Him in order to wash out our sins in the blood, I can't never believe 'twas meant that way——"

"Mrs. Moddley!" gasped Richard—"You—you—excuse me—you don't know what a terrible thing you are saying——"

"Look 'ere, Mr. Everton," and Mrs. Moddley leaned her wet arms argumentatively across the wash-tub—"I ain't goin' to b'lieve for a moment that the Almighty is a worser person than ourselves. Not a bit of it! Now I wouldn't kill a son of mine to save anybody—there! An' I'm only Martha Moddley. An' our wretched little sins, sich as they is, all comes through our not knowin' better—wherefore I says, the blessed Lord Jesus came down from heaven to show us how to live patient and die quiet without complainin', an' trust to the Father of us all to do right by us in this world, seein' we've been brought 'ere without our own wish, an' got to suffer a deal o' woe. That's my view of religion—an' a bad one no doubt it is—but Lord love ye, Mr. Everton!"—and here her round face beamed smilingly at him—"Don't ye worrit over me one bit!—you'll never see me miss a Sunday out of church, for the singin' an' the prayers doos us all good, even if we can't make it all out—and you're a real gentleman born, which is what we allus wanted

for this parish, 'avin' 'ad a man previous what lived with his cook,—quite a fine gel—on the sly, an' all of us knowed it an' couldn't say nothin'. For says my pore dear 'usband as is gone,—'We must ketch 'im in the hact'—an' that you will realise, Mr. Everton, was impossible—so that when he died of a 'plexy fit, 'twas a good riddance for all round. An' I'm sure we couldn't wish for a better parson an' wife than you an' your lady—so now, sir,"—and she nodded consolingly at him—"you've no need to worrit, as I says, for you doos your dooty, an' to the best o' my powers I'll do mine, an' I'll bite my tongue 'ard before I let it talk over Jimmy's 'ed 'bout what he's a bit too young to see for hisself proper."

With this most uncertain and entirely unprofitable explanation, Everton had to be content—and never afterwards saw Mrs. Moddley in church without a nervous qualm. He began to be afraid of getting on religious subjects with his parishioners at all, and found that it was safer to utter vague prognostications about the weather and the crops than to mention the doctrines of original sin and divine redemption. Pigs furnished a more appreciated subject of discourse,—the birth, growth and fattening of these interesting animals being more important to the inhabitants of Shadbrook than any other event which an industrious press might chronicle in any part of the world. There was no one, in fact, to whom he could impart the growing sense he had of his own incompetency to deal with this rough human material, which though undoubtedly endowed with the 'spirit which maketh for righteousness,' yet had no means of manifesting its real trend of thought. He was a scholarly man—and he had no other of his class with whom to exchange ideas. True, there were two 'great' houses, so-called,—the one of his patron, Squire Hazlitt, who had selected him for the living of Shadbrook, and who was hardly ever in the place, his wife and daughters preferring to drag him about in the wake of mischievous modern society, which elects to spend its money on foreign resorts rather than to help forward the equally beautiful and much more healthy pleasure places at home—the other the 'commodious villa,' to use auctioneer

parlance, of the brewer of the district, whose hideous brewery-buildings disfigured the landscape some eight or ten miles away. With the Squire, Everton and his pretty wife were on terms of pleasure and intimacy whenever that gentleman was at home; with the brewer, he was at open feud. For Shadbrook had two public-houses—a criminal superfluity for so small a place,—and both were 'tied' to Messrs. Minchin and Co., who kept them well supplied with the direst poison that ever went down the throats of poor labouring men in the shape of beer. Minchin himself was a pompous, self-satisfied commoner who had allied himself for his own advantage to the daughter of a pauper baronet, in order that he might claim to be 'connected with the aristocracy.' He was a persistent church-goer, and a publicly proclaimed teetotaller. That is to say, he drank nothing but water, and gave his friends nothing but water, while he made his money out of the working-man's drunkenness, or rather let us say the working-man's delirium, brought on by the consumption of his manufactured poison. With such characteristics as these, every one will admit that he was a good and righteous man. But he hated the Reverend Richard Everton,—and the Reverend Richard Everton, so far as it was possible for a Christian minister with human blood in his veins to hate, hated him in return. Mrs. Minchin, a somewhat 'horsey' lady, with a strident voice and an aggressive manner, 'detested,' to use her own expression, 'that odious little woman, Azalea Everton.' It was a case of simple cause and effect—Mrs. Everton being pretty and Mrs. Minchin plain,—Mrs. Everton being the mother of a boy whose beauty was the wonder of all who beheld him, and Mrs. Minchin having produced alarmingly ugly twins, boy and girl, who might for all the good temper and intelligence they showed, just as well have never been born. These, and other equally cogent reasons, kept the two families well apart. Mrs. Everton, indeed, though as a rule the sweetest of sweet creatures, could not altogether refrain from giving her pretty head a slight, very slight, toss of indifference, when she happened to pass Mrs. Minchin on the country road—and Mrs. Minchin made no

attempt to restrain the very unmusical snort which affected her nose and throat at the merest side glimpse of Mrs. Everton. Such being the position of things, it followed that there were no real 'neighbours' in the true sense of the word, for a man of learning and refinement such as the Vicar was, for even Squire Hazlitt, his patron, was scarcely to be called cultured, though he had plenty of good-humour and shrewd common-sense. Yet the years of his life at Shadbrook had so far been spent in such happiness that he had never thought it possible or likely that he might, with a growing, broadening mind, some day need a growing and broadening environment. That afflictive cramp which nips the intellectual spirit when it finds itself hemmed in on all sides by provincial nonentities, had not as yet seriously troubled him—and its first twinges were only now beginning to pinch him in a warning, and not to say undesirable and undesired manner.

"Are you going to pass all your life in Shadbrook?"

The question, put as it were by the mocking voice of some interior demon, was asked of him again on this cold March morning when he sat trying to write what he felt could never be written. And yet—what burning thoughts were in his brain, longing to communicate themselves to his motionless pen!—thoughts of the goodness and majesty of the Creator—thoughts of the daily discoveries of science—thoughts of the inexhaustible millions upon millions of solar systems in limitless space—thoughts that were like lightning-poems, singing themselves to his inner consciousness and declaring him to be a living Soul—a part of God—a spark of the Divine, sent to evolve itself through experience and difficulty from the imperfect to the perfect state of being. The daily papers brought him news of the world's unrest—and realising the paltry 'sensationalism of religion' worked up by certain followers of antichrist, who saw no shame in associating themselves with the notoriety-hunting proprietors of a cheap and degraded press, he recognised the wrong that was being done to the pure teaching of Christ, and the havoc that was wickedly wrought among men by the spread of infidel doctrine. He longed to be up and

doing—to don the spiritual sword and buckler, and go forth with the armies of the Lord—to preach with no uncertain voice, but with a true note, clear as a clarion call, and to help draw back the social world from the abyss whither he, and all deep-thinking men could see it visibly hurrying—and yet—his 'cure' was merely Shadbrook. Shadbrook was his business; with the rest of the world he had no need to concern himself.

The wind continued to howl and sigh, and he continued to sit in apparent idleness, twisting his pen in his fingers, and wondering—wondering—not what he should preach next Sunday, but rather what he should do with his life. He could only live once—at any rate on this planet—and must he make of that 'once'—nothing but Shadbrook?

"Yet why not?" he argued with himself—"The people here need to be drawn to God—need to be taught and helped just as much as the millions out in the wider world. Sometimes—yes!—sometimes I feel that they—in their simple way of accepting without question a faith which they really do not understand—are nearer the truth than I am. And yet again I cannot but feel sure that the Creator meant us to use all our faculties in the comprehension of His sublime intentions towards us—and that a merely blind unreasoning submission is more of an affront to Him than a service."

At this juncture the door of his study was gently pushed open, and a lovely face peered in at him.

"Are you *very* busy, Dick?" asked a coaxing voice, sweet as honey—"Or may I come in just *one* minute?"

He threw down his pen and sprang up from his chair with a quick sigh of relief.

"One minute isn't long enough!" he declared, going to meet his wife as she entered, and taking her in his arms—"Come and stay half an hour! I want you, Azalea—I want you badly!" Here he looked down into her tender eyes. "I want a kiss, too,"—and he suited the action to the word—"I've had a touch of the blues."

"Oh, poor boy!" And Azalea put up a little white hand and stroked his cheek caressingly—"You mustn't! It's the

weather—I'm sure it's the weather. And it's all horrid—but, Dick, you'll have to go out in the rain, I'm afraid! There's been a very bad fight in the village—and that dreadful man, Kiernan, has nearly killed his wife! Isn't it awful?"

She smiled angelically, and her eyes twinkled with a kind of sparkle—whether of tears or laughter, it would have been hard to say.

He loosened her from his clasp, and his face grew pale and stern.

"Kiernan again!" he said—"I must go at once, Azalea. He is a dangerous customer."

She looked at him questioningly, as he hastily swept his letters and papers together.

"Were you writing your sermon, darling?" she enquired.

"No—that is, I was trying to think about it—but really, I'm afraid my brain isn't as clear as it might be. I am not quite sure what I ought to say sometimes—and I feel anxious about it,—almost as if I were not altogether doing my duty."

"Oh, Dick!" And Azalea looked reproachfully amazed—"How can you say such a thing! Your sermons are simply bee-autiful! Perfectly lovely! You know they are!"

He took her pretty face between his two hands and kissed it again.

"I know nothing of the sort, little wife!" he said—"I feel myself to be dull and heavy. And helpless, too, Azalea!—that's the worst of it—helpless, for I cannot keep even Kiernan from the public-house."

With this, he hurriedly left his study and went out into the hall. His wife followed him, and watched him rather wistfully as he put on his thickest great-coat, and looked about for his umbrella.

"After all, Dick," she said—"how *can* you keep people from the public-house as long as Minchin has that 'beer club' where everybody who takes a ticket gets a big barrel of beer at Christmas all to themselves? It's too much to ask of a clergyman that he should be answerable for temperance as well as religion."

"Azalea, my dear, religion and temperance ought to go

together—and there's no getting over the fact. When men are drunkards, they have not understood the meaning of religion, or else religion has not appealed to them in the way it should do. The very Hindoo scorns to soil himself with so degrading a vice as drunkenness."

"The Hindoo is perhaps not under the dominance of the brewer," murmured Azalea.

"Dominance? My dear child, no reasonable man should allow himself to be 'dominated' by anything or any one. It's a sign of weakness. And of course a drunkard is weak, morally and physically—only what I mean is, that religion—the religion of Christ—should be able to impress and control the weak as well as the strong. Now I'm off. Don't wait luncheon—I may be detained."

He pressed his hat well down over his brows as he opened the street door and faced the bitter driving wind.

"Don't stand in the draught, Azalea,"—he called—"You'll catch cold. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye! Come back as quickly as you can," she responded. And shutting the door after him with a little bang, she re-entered the house and began to sing softly to herself as she flitted here and there, giving graceful touches of her own to the various ornaments about the pretty drawing-room,—re-arranging the flowers, which were scarce at this season and had to be cared for tenderly,—and generally amusing herself in her own way before going up to the nursery to superintend the dinner of the ever interesting baby, who was now promoted to the dignity of being called by his nurse, 'Master Laurence.' Master Laurence was so named after Azalea's father, who had been in his time a notable literary man, but who, worn out by the patient evolvement of great teachings for the benefit of an ungrateful and forgetful world, had died, more of sheer tiredness than anything else, some two years before his daughter's marriage. Azalea had never understood him in the least, but in her pretty caressing way she had loved him, while his fond admiration of her had amounted almost to idolatry. When she laughed perplexedly over the learned books he wrote, he

was more delighted than if he had received a column of carping praise from the most prominent growler in all the critical world. Sometimes his poor heart ached a little, as he realised that all his best work must for ever remain a sealed book to this, his only child, who in her easy lightness of mind and disposition could not comprehend why any one should ever think about anything.

"It's so stupid!" she would say, with a charming pout,—"All the thinking in the world does no good! Such *crowds* of wise men have lived and written all sorts of books—and nobody seems a bit the better!"

However, when poor Laurence died, his daughter was as sorry as she was frightened. Her mother had passed to the better world when she was barely six months old,—so that this was her first conscious experience of the grim visitation of the King of Terrors. She hated it,—she recoiled with shuddering fear from the quiet grandeur of her father's form, composed rigidly into that slumber from which there is no more waking in this world,—she shivered and cried at the solemn black paraphernalia of the funeral—and looked like a poor weak little snowdrop in her heavy mourning gown. It was while she was yet in the snowdrop state that Richard Everton first met her at the house of a mutual friend where she had been invited to stay for change and solace after her bereavement,—and she had comforted herself with his love, just as a small hurt kitten might comfort itself in the arms of a kind protector. It was delightful to find another man ready to pet and make much of her as her late father had done,—it was all she wanted in life,—and of the graver duties and responsibilities of marriage she took no thought. Richard was kind and nice and not bad-looking,—Richard had just got a 'living'—and what was best of all, Richard was 'perfectly devoted'—this was her own expression—perfectly devoted to her. And gradually the effect of her father's death wore off—she forgot him more and more completely—till, when her baby was born, a sudden rush of tender recollection flowed in upon her mind, and she said, with tears sparkling in her pretty eyes:—

"We must call him Laurence! Oh yes, Dick! We must call him Laurence, after poor dear old Dad!"

Her adoring husband made no objection,—if it had been her wish to christen the child Zedekiah, it is probable that in his doting condition of mind he would have consented. The name of 'Laurence,' however, seemed to suit the boy with the serious eyes and expression of angel intellectuality; and sometimes Everton, who had read many of the books written by the dead Thinker whose work his daughter had laughed at, wondered whether his spirit had become re-incarnated in this infant namesake, who already looked so wise beyond all earthly years. Moved by this thought, he one day expressed it to his wife, albeit remotely.

"I do believe, Azalea, that our Laurence will be as clever a man as your father was."

She uttered a little cry of alarm.

"Oh, I hope not!" she said, with delightful earnestness—"It's so dreadful to be clever, Dick! You don't know how dreadful it is! *Nobody* likes you!"

He smiled.

"You quaint wee woman! Do you want the boy to be a fool, then?"

"He couldn't be a fool!" declared Azalea, warmly—"Of course he couldn't! But I *hope* he won't be clever! If you had known poor Dad, you would understand what I mean. A clever man is really a *pitiable* object!—he is, Dick!—perfectly pitiable! He always wants what he cannot get—and he sees everything going wrong and he wants to put it right, and of course he *can't* put it right,—not in *his* way, because everybody wants to do it *another* way—and oh!—it's just awful! And he writes and writes, and lectures and lectures, and gets dyspepsia and headaches and gout, and dreadful things—and never enjoys himself one bit—how can he—?"

Richard laughed aloud.

"My dear little wife, you're talking at random!" he said, indulgently—"You don't understand the inward joys of a man who has mind and soul and imagination——"

"Oh, don't!" and Azalea covered her shell-pink ears with her pretty white hands—"I don't want to hear anything about mind and soul or imagination! I want baby to be just—Baby!"

And so it was decreed. Baby—at least for the present—remained Baby—and it was only Nurse Tomkins who called him 'Master Laurence.' Nurse Tomkins knew him better even than his parents, and had become much impressed by his personal dignity. This he showed in various ways of his own. For example, he disliked all dirty things, and was only content with perfect cleanliness. Certain pictures in the nursery he strove to hide from his eyes with one tiny chubby hand, and as this gesture was not quite understood by his elders, he managed to clamber up on his cot, and tear them down. They were not objectionable pictures, but they were unnatural—that is to say, they were 'nursery' pictures, of the kind which are called by the publishers of Christmas numbers, 'suitable for children.' There were fat infants petting impossible lambs—and red-faced peasants carrying pale pink dogs in their arms—all of which abnormal creatures moved Master Laurence to quiet scorn. Azalea was always hearing of some curious and original deed on the part of her son,—but she paid very little attention to any of the signs and symptoms of his possible future mental development. All she thought of was that he was *Her* baby—her own, her very own beautiful baby!—and her chief idea was that he must be fed well, and have his own way whenever it was possible. This was the business of the day for her—the business upon which she set all her energies—baby's food. Baby's brain and baby's thoughts were—to use her own frank parlance—'utter nonsense.' If asked, she would have said with the most charming assumption of maternal wisdom, that a child of two has no brain worth considering, and no thoughts worth thinking. That was her opinion. Nurse Tomkins entertained quite a different view of the matter, being a trained woman whose life had been spent with children of all sorts, sickly and healthy, bright and dull, and who had studied their moods and manners

with close and sympathetic attention. She was affectionately interested in her charge and said of him to her own special friends—"Master Laurence is a wonderful child! He will be a great man!"

But Azalea thought no such thing. She thought, in fact, as little about the mental development of her small son as she did of the 'soul' (if he had one) of the troublesome Kiernan, whose drunken delinquencies had summoned her husband out of his peaceful study into the wind and rain on this cross and cloudy March morning. She was perfectly happy in herself—she had never wanted more than a home, a husband, and a baby; and she had all three. Nothing further existed in the universe, so far as she was concerned. And as soon as she had finished 'dusting the drawing-room,'—which was one of the little duties she imposed on herself, regardless of the fact that the housemaid had always dusted it perfectly beforehand,—she tripped up to the nursery, singing as she went, full of a careless gaiety, being so happily constituted as to be indifferent to any troubles in which she did not share. And, after all, it is fortunate that the greater majority of women are even as she,—and that few of them have the finer perception and power to look beyond the circle of their own comfortable surroundings into the speechless miseries of the wider world.

CHAPTER II

MEANTIME, while the pleasures of peaceful and contented domesticity reigned in his household, the Vicar himself was hurrying through the mist and rain to the village—not to the ancient stone-built part of it, but, strange to say, to the 'model' portion, where the cottages were so pretty and so cosily devised with porches and little separate gardens to each, that one would have thought it impossible for any man dwelling in such comfortable quarters to so far forget himself as to come home drunk at any time of day, much less in the morning before twelve o'clock. However, such had been the case with the individual called Kiernan—a huge, hulking creature with enormous square shoulders and thick bull head, who now leaning his powerful arms folded across the bars of his cottage gate, looked up with a drowsy scowl as he saw the Vicar approaching. Two or three other men were hanging sheepishly about, and a little knot of women, with shawls over their heads, were grouped in the road, heedless of the pouring rain, talking together, their faces expressing a vague and pitiful terror. Everton walked straight up to Kiernan and addressed him at once without parley.

"What's the matter here?" he asked, in a quiet voice—"May I come in?"

The man eyed him over with a stupid leer.

"No—you mayn't"—he replied, thickly,—"A Glishman's 'ouse 's 'is castle! Go 'way!"

Everton looked at him steadily.

"Now, Kiernan, you know you don't mean that,"—he said,

gently—"What, man!—you and I are old friends, aren't we? I heard you wanted me."

Kiernan blinked at him suspiciously.

"Who told you as I wanted ye?" he asked.

"My wife did,"—the clergyman answered, simply—"Come now, Kiernan!—let me in—I want to speak to you privately——"

"Ye wants to preach at me, eh?" said Kiernan—"But ye woan't do it!—no, not by a long chalk! I knows you parson lot—whinin', no-drink, snivellin' beggars all of 'em! Drunk? O' course I'm drunk! What else should I be? Drunk an' 'appy in it! Drunk an' 'appy in it! There!"

And he made a thrust with his fist into space furiously, as though he knocked down an imaginary enemy. Everton paused a moment. Looking round among the group of villagers who stood hanging back, ashamed and inert, he said in a low tone:—

"Is there anything really wrong? Has he hurt his wife?"

A woman came forward and volunteered the answer.

"Yes, sir—I'm afraid so—at least as far as we can tell. There was words—an' she ran out o' the cottage screaming—and then ran in again, and then we heard a terrible groan,—and—and we're afraid she's very bad——"

"She's in there!" said Kiernan, suddenly then, waking as if from a dull reverie—"She's 'ad a good 'un this time!" He began to laugh thickly,—then with a quick change from obstinacy to maudlin mildness, he removed his arms from the gate—"Come in all of ye if ye likes! She's all right! Come in, Mister Parson! Come in! 'Adn't expected so much company, but never mind—there ain't no grudgin' where Dan Kiernan is! He gives it fair all round! Come in!"

He fell back and reeled on one side. Everton caught him by the arm.

"You're ill, Kiernan!" he said, kindly,—"With a worse illness than you know. Keep steady!"

The wretched man stared vaguely at nothing, and began to laugh again.

"I'm or'right!" he stuttered—"Or'right, Mister Jack Sniveller! Right and 'appy as a king! You lemme alone!"

He wrenched himself free from Everton's hold and staggering up to his own cottage fell heavily on one of the little seats in the porch. Everton left him there, and pushing open the door went into the cottage itself,—where the first thing that met his eyes was the unconscious body of a woman face downward on the ground. With an exclamation of horror and pity, he strove to lift her, but in vain—then, stepping outside the house again beckoned to some of the villagers who were hanging round the place waiting to know the worst. They came at his bidding, and pressed into the little dwelling, past Kiernan, who seemed now to be in a heavy stupor. Lifting the insensible woman between them, they laid her on her bed—and then remained in a frightened group staring at the ghastly stains of blood on her mouth, while one neighbour, more practical than the rest, fetching a sponge and a bowl of cold water, bathed the poor creature's forehead and tried to bring her back to consciousness. Everton stood by the bedside, gazing down upon the pitiful sight with a stern sorrow graven on his own face. This was what the sacred tie of marriage meant to many of the labouring classes!—this brutality to, and degradation of woman, by men who, when muddled by drink, were lower in their passions than the beasts they drove to the shambles!

"Pray God she is not dead!" he said, in a low tone.

The woman who was bathing the victim's forehead answered, in an equally low tone:

"Oh no, sir, I don't think she's dead,"—but she trembled a little as she spoke—"though Lord knows none of us never knows whether we'll live from week to week, the men are goin' that wild on Minchin's stuff which they drinks at all hours o' the day. Dan Kiernan was quite a decent chap, so I'm told, till he came here."

At that moment Dan Kiernan's wife opened her eyes, and her poor livid lips twitched into a little smile.

"Don't you worrit, Dan!" she said, faintly—"I know you didn't mean it—it was just the drink that drove you to it—only the drink, for you're the best an' finest husband ever woman 'ad when ye're sober. That'll do, Dan!—I'm obliged to ye!—I'll be getting up presently——"

Her eyes closed again, and at that moment Everton thankfully perceived the local surgeon, one Henry Brand, entering the little room—a quiet, shrewd-eyed man of middle-age, known as 'Dr. Harry,' who walking straight up to the bedside, bent over the unfortunate Mrs. Kiernan, and examined her injuries with kindly solicitude.

"She's rather badly hurt," he said then, turning to Everton with a friendly nod—"It will be some days before she gets about again. And she'll want some little nursing. Wouldn't some one——"

"I'll attend to her," said the woman who had already proffered her assistance—"I've got nothing much to do at home, my son bein' away—I'll see she gets all she wants——"

"And I'll pay you for your trouble, Mrs. Adcott," said Everton, quickly—"But Kiernan himself——"

"Kiernan himself is in a far worse state than his wife," said the doctor—"He's poisoned. That's what's the matter with him. He has got as much arsenic inside him as would kill a horse—it would kill *him* if he had not accustomed his system to it. I passed him just now in the porch—he's in a dead stupor."

"He's drunk,"—said Everton.

"He's *drugged*,"—said Brand, emphatically—"Not quite the same thing, yet passing for the same. Come and look at him."

They went out of the cottage into the little garden, and stood together surveying the heavy inert form of the miserable man who was half-sitting, half-lying in the porch, huddled together like a sack of useless lumber.

"What's to be done with him?" asked Everton, in a kind of despair—"He cannot go back to his work to-day."

"Of course he can't—and nothing's to be done with him. He'll sleep it off—and then—he'll go to one of Minchin's places again, and drink more of the vile stuff sold there—and then—well then!—he'll come home here and probably finish off his wife."

"But it can't—it mustn't be,"—said Everton, firmly—"I'll come myself and see that nothing happens. I'll call at both public-houses and ask them not to sell him any more drink——"

'Dr. Harry' smiled.

"You'll kick against the pricks, Mr. Everton!" he said—"I mean, you'll get yourself into trouble if you do! Take my advice—don't interfere!"

"But, good God!" exclaimed Everton—"Would you have me, as Vicar of this parish, stand off and allow a woman to be murdered by her husband when he is not really responsible for the crime!"

Brand was silent. He seemed to be thinking.

"That's a very true phrase of yours, Mr. Everton,"—he said, presently—"And I'm glad to hear it from a clergyman's mouth. 'Not really responsible for the crime.' That's it. Kiernan is not responsible. Who *is*? Tell me that!"

"In this case Minchin is responsible!"—rejoined Everton, hotly—"His brewery is a curse to the parish!"

"If it were only good beer,"—said Brand, thoughtfully, "there'd be no harm at all in it. A pint of pure beer hurts no man. But a pint of mixed poison is a different matter altogether. And—as you say—Minchin is responsible. If Dan Kiernan wakes up in two or three hours, and gets more drink and kills his wife altogether, Minchin will be the real murderer,—not Kiernan."

"That's the right way to put it,"—said Everton—"It's a strong way—but it's the right way. However, I'll take care no more mischief is done for the present at any rate. I'll look after Kiernan when he wakes."

"You'll look after him!" and the doctor's eyes twinkled humorously—"What will you do with him?"

Everton's rather thin, delicate face looked a shade more careworn and serious.

"I don't quite know,"—he said, simply—"But I am placed here in this parish as guardian of the moral and spiritual welfare of all the people under my charge—and I must try my best. I am quite aware"—here he hesitated a moment, then spoke out more bravely—"I am quite aware how little a clergyman can do even at the best of times to warn or persuade,—I know that the very doctrines of Our Lord are, in these strange days of rank materialism, placed as it were 'under suspicion,'—but I am inured to all that—and prepared for failure always; still—as I said before—I must try my best."

Brand was silent. He had a great respect for the Vicar, commingled with an under-sense of vague compassion. As a medical man whose practice lay chiefly among the working-classes, he knew exactly how much and how little to expect of them. He knew that they resented all interference, even if it were for their good—and equally he knew that most of them possessed an inexhaustible fund of warm homely sentiment, which if appealed to in the proper way, never failed to move them to a right condition of mind. In fact, as he often said among his own intimates, it was not religion which had so much hold on them as the *sentiment* of religion—and the most successful spiritual controller of their conduct was the man who most ably maintained that sentiment in his own attitude and behaviour towards them.

"I think,"—resumed Everton, after a pause, in a cheerier tone—"I'll just run up and tell my wife that I shall not be home to luncheon—and then I'll come back here and wait till Kiernan wakes."

"He won't wake for at least an hour,"—said Brand, surveying with some disfavour the hulking heap of man doubled up in the porch, over which an early flowering yellow jasmine nodded its innocent golden sprays—"Besides—why should you come back? Isn't there a man in the village who could keep an eye on him?"

"Not a man who would have the strength to contend with him,"—replied Everton—"If he wanted to go back to the public-house, there's no one in the place who would dare hinder him."

"No one who would *dare*!" repeated the doctor, musingly—"Well! No!—I suppose not." He looked again at Everton's slim figure and thoughtful face—then he said, hurriedly—"All right! I shall be about in the neighbourhood,—Mrs. Kibble, another victim of Minchin's brew, fell over with a kettle of boiling water yesterday and scalded her arm—so I'm looking after her and a few others. And—by the way—there's that young fellow, Robert Hadley—he'll not last very long now. It's galloping consumption and he has not the ghost of a chance. I suppose you couldn't say a word about him to the girl Jacynth?"

Everton's brows darkened.

"The girl Jacynth is a hopeless character," he said, slowly—"Hopeless, because heartless!"

The doctor gave him a quick glance.

"Well, you know best about that,"—he said—"Her good looks are almost as great a curse to some men as the brewery. You've certainly got enough to do with your parishioners, Mr. Everton! Your work's cut out for you in Shadbrook and no mistake! Good-bye for the present!"

He strode off—and Everton stood still in the little porch of Kiernan's cottage, smitten by a sudden sharp sense of pain.

"Your work's cut out for you in Shadbrook!"

Was it so 'cut out'? Had he not that very morning longed for a wider field of labour? His heart ached heavily—and a feeling of utter weariness overcame him. He looked at the drunken man huddled on the seat close by, with an almost shuddering sense of repulsion. Was the 'soul' of that disgraced human creature really valuable to the Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth, before whom our planet itself is but a grain of dust? Surely it was stretching too fine a point to say it was! And yet—Science with her clear vision and evenly-balanced scales of justice, declared that *not* even a grain of

dust was lost in the great scheme of the universe. And what and who was he—Richard Everton—that he should presume to set any limit to the minute as well as magnificent intentions of the Divine Cosmos! Stung by a quick shame as well as remorse, he roused himself from his thoughts, and turning towards the half-open cottage door enquired gently of the woman within—

"How is Mrs. Kiernan now?"

"Sleeping easy, sir, thank-you,"—and Mrs. Adcott, brown, wrinkled, but kindly of face and brisk in movement, came to the door—"Don't you bother no more, Mr. Everton—mebbe we'll 'ave a bit of trouble when Dan wakes——"

"I shall be here," replied Everton, quickly—"So you need not be anxious. I'm just going to the Vicarage for a moment—and then I'll come back again."

He smiled cheerily, and raised his hat with the courtesy which he invariably showed to all women, rich and poor, old and young—and hurried away home. His wife saw him coming from the nursery windows, and ran down to open the door, with expressions of cooing delight that he had returned so soon.

"It's only for a few minutes, Azalea,"—he said, regretfully—"Just give me a cup of soup and a biscuit—that's all the lunch I want. I must go and watch Kiernan till he wakes."

She uttered an exclamation of surprise and dismay.

"Go and watch Kiernan!" she echoed—"Oh, Dick! What *are* you thinking about! That dreadful man! Why *should* you! It's quite *absurd*!—it really is——!"

"I don't think so, Azalea,"—he said, with mild firmness—"Kiernan has nearly killed his wife as it is—it will be days before she leaves her bed. He's now in a heavy stupor—when he wakes, the first thing he will do is to set off to the public-house again—and I wouldn't answer for his wife's life to-night if he does. He must be prevented from drinking any more to-day—and I'm going to prevent him."

"You can't, Dick,"—said his wife, positively—"He'll simply knock you down!"

"Let him!" and Everton laughed—"I daresay I shall be a match for him if it comes to boxing!"

Mrs. Everton drooped her pretty head, and her lips framed the little pout that was so eminently kissable.

"But, Dick!" she protested,—"I don't really see that it is your business——"

He interrupted her.

"Is it my business to prevent murder in the village, or is it not?" he asked, almost sternly. "Azalea, why do you try to weaken my hands!"

She tried to look penitent, but failed.

"You might send for a policeman,"—she murmured—"and have the wretched drunken brute locked up——"

"If I did that,"—he said, quietly—"I should deserve to be locked up myself. Kiernan would, when sober, very rightly judge me as one of the sneaks and cowards he thinks all clergymen are. No, Azalea!—I shall deal with Kiernan as I would wish to be dealt with myself, if I were in his condition."

"Oh dear!" And Azalea clapped her hands and gave vent to a little rippling peal of laughter—"*You* in that condition! Fancy! *You*, poor, gentle, good old Dick! There!—I'm sorry if I've said anything naughty! I'll order the soup for you—and oh, Dick!—Baby is simply quite *wonderful* to-day!—Nurse says he is a positive *miracle*!"

"What has he done now?" And Richard, his momentary vexation passing, threw off his wet great-coat and went into the dining-room, there to wait till the light refreshment he had asked for was served to him—"I'm prepared for anything!"

"He has begun to *write*!" declared Azalea, gleefully—"Nurse gave him a pencil and paper just to keep him quiet, and he wrote all over it in the *sweetest* running hand! Don't laugh, Dick! It's really *wonderful*! Of course there are no real words on the paper,—it's only scribble,—but still it shows that he *wants* to write, doesn't it?"

"I'm afraid it does!" said Everton, with an air of mock gravity—"And it's a very bad sign, Azalea! It shows that

we must keep the boy down—nip him in the bud! For if he were to be clever—what then! You know you don't want him to be a clever man—you've often said so!"

Azalea pouted and looked a little cross.

"I didn't mean *that* way,"—she said—"Of course I want him to know how to read and write."

"Why?" demanded Richard playfully—"Why should he possess such doubtful accomplishments? For if he reads, he will perhaps think—and if he thinks, he may possibly want to utter his thoughts to a wider audience than his mother and father—and so he may perhaps become that dreadful, dangerous, and dyspeptic thing—an author—and what should we do then, Azalea? What should we do with such a disappointing son? Suppose he were to turn out a second Shakespeare? I'm sure it would break our hearts!"

He laughed, and his light luncheon being brought in at this juncture, he made haste to dispose of it. His wife watched him, looking rather like a chidden child.

"Will you be with that man Kiernan long?" she asked.

"I don't know. It will depend on Kiernan—not on me," he answered—"And I think—yes, I think, Azalea, you must go and see his poor wife to-morrow morning,—sit with her a little and cheer her up—it will do the poor thing a world of good to see your bright pretty face bending over her."

She was silent. In her heart she hated visiting poor people, especially when they were ill. It was so 'painful,' she said—and sometimes things were 'not very clean.' But she made no objection to her husband's suggestion. He finished his hasty meal, and looked at her questioningly.

"You'll go, won't you, dear?" he said.

"Oh yes!" she replied, with a little sigh—"I'll go!"

He took no notice of the touch of hesitation in her manner.

"Young Hadley is dying fast,"—he went on—"So Mr. Brand tells me. I suppose,"—he paused and then went on; "I suppose—you, as a woman—cannot do anything with Jacynth Miller?"

She flushed suddenly.

"Oh, Dick! How can I? Jacynth Miller is a real bad girl! It isn't *only* Bob Hadley—she's a brute to others as well!"

"I know!" he said, sorrowfully—"But Hadley is dying—and he loved her. He would like to see her again just once—and she will not go near him."

"Well, if she won't, I cannot make her,"—said Azalea, decisively—"So don't ask me to try, Dick!"

"Very well." He laid his hands on her shoulders, and for a moment, bent an earnest, rather wistful gaze upon her. Then he kissed her gently. "You must do as you think best, Azalea!"

"You won't be long away, will you?" she pleaded, as she followed him out of the dining-room into the hall.

"No,—certainly not longer than I can help!"—he answered, and in another couple of minutes he was gone.

"Horrible villagers!" and Azalea, uttering this exclamation to herself, gave a little stamp of her foot to enforce it—"They are just simply *awful*! Oh, they are! Drink, drink, drink, and gossip, gossip, gossip, all day long! They come to church on Sundays, and stare at each other, and pretend to say their prayers, and then they go home and run each other down as wickedly and scandalously as they can. And they actually call themselves *Christians*!"

She gave a toss of her pretty head and ran upstairs to her precious baby, never considering for a moment that perhaps she herself was not altogether 'Christian' in the sentiments she had just expressed, concerning the inhabitants of Shadbrook.

"Nurse!"—she exclaimed, as she tripped lightly into the pretty airy room, where 'Master Laurence' was just now considering the possibilities of a square wooden block with the first letter of the alphabet gorgeously painted thereon—"Mr. Everton has had to go down into the village again to see after that terrible Kiernan! And he's only had a cup of soup and a biscuit! It's too bad! There is such a lot of

drunkenness in the place! It's simply awful! And yet nearly all the parishioners come to church and *pretend* to be good!"

Nurse Tomkins smiled discreetly.

"Oh well, ma'am," she said,—"It's not only in Shadbrook that they do that!"

Azalea paid no heed to this remark. She flung herself down on the floor beside her small son, who stared at her with gravely sweet blue eyes, and a little wondering smile.

"Baby darling!" she said—"Oh, baby darling, you've no idea what horrid people there are in the world!"

Baby darling certainly had not. He wore an expression of heavenly peace and contentment—and only manifested a slight surprise when his mother, to attract his attention, held up a woolly toy-dog which had a bell in its inside, and shook it at him. Now he had left that interesting animal purposely in a corner—and he could not quite understand why it had been brought out to confront him suddenly, when he was busy with the letter A. In the strong predilection he had shown for neatness and cleanliness, he had likewise intimated his desire to avoid mental confusion—and he liked one thing at a time—not two or three things all cast before him in a higgledy-piggledy fashion. And at the present moment he grasped the wooden-blocked letter A more tenaciously and showed plainly that he considered the toy-dog an intruder. Whereupon Azalea threw it down, so that its inside bell clashed dismally.

"He doesn't like it now!" she said to Nurse Tomkins—"Isn't it funny? He used to be so fond of that little woolly thing!"

"Oh, he'll take to it again by-and-bye,"—said the patient Tomkins—"You can't expect him to like the same things always—even grown-ups don't do that!"

At that moment Master Laurence uttered a remark. He was beginning to talk in curious fragments of English—and only the trained ear could make out his efforts at wit and wisdom. He held up the letter A and said:

"Muzza yame!"

"Yes, that's right!" said Nurse Tomkins mildly—"Mother's name. Begins with A. A stands for Mother's name. Quite right!"

Azalea was almost breathless at this sudden outburst of Master Laurence's learning.

"The darling!" she cried—"Isn't he *sweet*! Oh, Nurse, I'm sure he'll be very clever!" She jumped up from the floor, and looked out of the window. "Oh, isn't it raining, raining!" she said, petulantly—"We might have gone out if it had cleared up only just a very little! I hate being indoors all day." She sighed. "Poor Dick! Fancy his going to watch that awful drunkard Kiernan!"

"He wasn't always so bad, I've heard,"—said Nurse Tomkins, slowly—"There's good in him somewhere—but it's hard to discover. However, if it's to be found at all, the Vicar will find it."

"You think so?" And Azalea drummed with her little white fingers on the window-pane as she looked out at the lowering sky—"I'm not at all sure! He's too good and gentle—and some of the people about here call him 'soft.' That *does* make me so angry! And I wish he would be hard! Hard as nails!"

"That wouldn't be like Christ,"—said the nurse—"And a Christian minister has to try and be as like Christ as possible."

Azalea looked at her curiously.

"You are a real believer, aren't you?" she asked, "I mean, you really *do* think Christ wants you to be good and to take care of your soul?"

Nurse Tomkins, who was a quiet, painstaking and devotional woman, seemed a little startled by the query.

"I don't think I quite look at it in that way,"—she replied, "But I love the beautiful life and teaching of Our Lord, and I don't ask any questions—I just trust Him, and do the best I can."

"But that's not orthodox, you know,"—said Azalea—

"That's not all you've *got* to believe. I sometimes think,"—Here she broke off and laughed—"Oh no! I never think at all. It doesn't do! But I ought never to have been a clergyman's wife really. Because I don't like visiting the sick and the poor, and all that kind of thing—and though I'm a mother, I'm not fit to hold a mothers' meeting, or preside over a Girls' Friendly Society, or *anything*—it wants somebody old and plain and prim for that—and I'm not old—and I'm not plain, and I'm not prim! I'm just *silly*! Yes—*silly*! It's so nice to be silly when one is young—and at present I really cannot be anything else. Even Baby *looks* wiser than I shall ever feel!"

Here she lifted the child from the floor, and held him up to the window. He at once showed displeasure at the sight of the pouring rain, and struggled to get down.

"Dear me, Nurse!" she exclaimed, almost pettishly—"How restless Baby is! He really seems dissatisfied with everything!"

Nurse Tomkins smiled again.

"Oh, I don't think he's dissatisfied, ma'am,"—she said, "But I've always noticed that he doesn't like being taken away from one thing to do another. You see he was busy——"

"Busy!" echoed Azalea, with wide-open eyes—"Why, what on earth was he doing?"

"He had his alphabet," and the nurse pointed to the scattered blocks that lay about the floor—"And I think he was trying to make words. He often manages to spell quite long words correctly. If you put him down I'm sure he'll go back to his work."

Azalea laughed merrily.

"Go back to his work! Oh, Baby dear! You queer little soul!" Here she set him on the floor, much to his delight—"The idea of your *working*!"

She laughed again, while Master Laurence, toddling unsteadily, yet determinedly, made straight for his bricks, and squatting down comfortably, set himself again to the labour of arranging them in such form and sequence as he imagined

might lead to the comprehension of the language used by the strange human beings among whom he, as a small transformed angel, had now to take his place and part. His mother watched him for a moment, then yawned undisguisedly.

"It's time for lunch now,"—she said, with a glance at the clock—"I must go down and have it all by myself. It's really too bad of Dick to put himself out so much, all for the sake of such a hopeless character as Dan Kiernan. He'll do no good, I'm sure."

She sauntered out of the nursery, singing as she went. Nurse Tomkins made no remark, and only continued her sewing a little more quickly. Glancing at her young charge, she saw that he had set three letters of the alphabet in line on the floor—wide apart, but in a fairly straight position,—and that he was alternately looking at these and at a large coloured text which hung on the wall: 'God is Love.' His baby brow was knitted, almost puckered with thought, and his little rosebud mouth was folded into quite a severe line. He studied his straggling blocks with deep earnestness. G · O · D. There was a mystery behind them, if he could only grapple with it.

"Put them together, dearie!" said Nurse Tomkins, coaxingly—"All together!" He turned and looked at her questioningly. She made a collective movement with her hand. "So! Side by side! All together!" His big blue eyes sparkled—and he understood. Soon he had the word clear: 'GOD.'

"That's quite right!" said the nurse, in her soft, soothing voice—"That's just as it should be. GOD. That's like the pretty picture up there. 'God is Love.'" And she smiled and nodded at him encouragingly. He gave her a responsive smile, but at the same time heaved a small sigh. 'GOD.' The word stared him in the face, and he folded his chubby hands together and stared back at it again. It was a great Sign;—and some dim consciousness of it seemed to affect him. The real idea which had taken possession of his brain was that he must try and copy the text on the wall,—but the

effort had been rather more than he had anticipated. He therefore permitted himself to pause and reflect. The nurse stopped her busy sewing for a moment and watched him. She was one of the very few women who think seriously about anything—and there was a certain suggestiveness in the attitude of the tiny child sitting with closely folded hands opposite that mystic name on which the whole world hangs like a dewdrop hanging on one petal of the immortal Rose of Life. GOD—and a Child! The two are near akin in purity, —and the words of Christ—"Except ye become as little children ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven,"—are true for all time. Almost involuntarily the nurse's lips moved in a sudden prayer: "God bless the dear little soul and make him a good man!"—and for once, she did not follow her usual habit of anticipation as to his possibly being a 'great' man. A 'good' man seemed the more natural outcome of that small sweet creature absorbed in the study of the Name by which he was to know his Maker.

"Between him and Dan Kiernan,"—she murmured—"What a difference! And yet—even Kiernan was a little innocent child like that once!"

CHAPTER III

WITH the passing of the hours, the clouds thickened, and the rain poured persistently over Shadbrook as though it meant to drown both the old and new village for good and all. The polluted brook swelled to a torrent which rattled among the cast-away pots and pans and preserved meat-tins with quite an angry volume of sound, and the decaying vegetables began to float steadily away on a journey towards the river, there to be mercifully swept into the clean oblivion of the sea. Everton sat just within the open doorway of Kiernan's cottage, looking at the heavy showers which spread a cold grey sheet of wet over the visible scene, and in the kindness of his heart felt sorry for Kiernan himself, who still sleeping in the porch, was likely to be chilled through by the creeping damp which penetrated to the very bones, despite the warmest clothing. In truth the wretched man made a miserable picture, rolled together as it were in what was more of a stupor than a sleep—his breathing was loud and irregular—his face was flushed with patches of feverish red, and the veins in his thick neck stood out like knotted whip-cord. The Vicar surveyed him anxiously—and from time to time glanced at his watch. It was nearing three o'clock. He had been more than two hours at his post—and it was only natural that he should feel tired. He *was* tired, and he admitted it to himself—tired and sick at heart. What, after all, was the good of his remaining beside this hopeless drunkard, who, when he woke would probably only resent his presence?

He had no power to persuade—he was merely a parson,—he was not a brewer. The brewer was the physical and moral governor of such men as Kiernan;—the brewer could compel them to murder or robbery—but the minister of Christ could not hold them back from the brewer's sway. How inefficient then—how more than feeble seemed the Minister of Christ!

"What use am I?" he thought, wearily—"I can read the services—I can preach sermons which are 'orthodox'—I can baptize, marry, and bury my parishioners—but I cannot hold one of them back from the public-house! I can talk to them of the evils of drink;—I can put a true scientific analysis of Minchin's brew before them—oh yes!—I can do all this—without the least effect! They listen, of course,—they show that outward respect which they consider due to me—and having heard all I have to say, they straightway forget it. And I am not alone in my trouble. Thousands of men in my calling are attempting the same hopeless task,—others, wearied by their own ineffectual endeavours, have given it up in despair and are content to 'let things go,'—and there is always the same old cry in every rural town and village—'the parson interferes with everybody and everything.' God knows I do not seek to 'interfere'—it is only that if I see human souls rushing blindly to perdition, I cannot look on without interposing myself between them and the brink of Hell. And for that I am likely to be blamed—and worse than blamed—mistrusted!"

At that moment the stupefied Kiernan gave a violent start,—stretching out his brawny arms, he entered into a kind of furious struggle with himself, in the course of which he opened his eyes and glowered about him like an angry bull.

"'Ullo!" he stammered, seeing Everton—"Who's—who's that?"

"The Vicar,"—answered Everton.

Kiernan gave vent to an inarticulate exclamation, and struggled up on to his feet.

"The Vicar!" And standing upright, he swayed to and fro unsteadily—"G—good-morning, sir!"

"Good-morning, Kiernan,"—responded Everton, composedly—"or rather, good-afternoon! It's three o'clock. You didn't think it was as late as that, did you?"

Kiernan was rubbing his hand vaguely over his hair.

"No,"—he said, thickly—"I didn't think 'twas so late—I've overslept myself——"

"You've over-drunk yourself, man—that's what's the matter"—and Everton stood up face to face with him as he spoke—"And, Kiernan—I know you'll be sorry for it—you've hurt your wife very badly."

"'Urt my wife?" Kiernan stopped rubbing his hair and looked startled—"'Urt Jennie? 'Ow's that? What's the matter?"

"Come and see!"

And Everton turned into the cottage, beckoning Kiernan to follow. He did so with a stumbling step, and at the first sight of his wife lying in bed, with her pale face and closed eyes, he became as it were instantly sobered.

"Jennie! Jennie!" he said, in quite a changed voice—"What's wrong, lass? Eh?—Jennie!"

She opened her eyes and her poor thin features were transfigured by a smile of inexpressible love and tenderness.

"Dan!" She held out her arms, and as he bent over her she laid them gently round his neck—"Dear Dan! You didn't mean it—I know you didn't!—it was just the drink that drove you mad for a minute——"

He lifted her up and held her against his breast.

"What did I do, Jennie? Tell me! Did I 'urt ye? God forgive me! Did I 'urt ye?"

"No!" said his wife, bravely—"Only a very little. Don't you mind! I'll soon be all right, Dan! But you'll keep away, Dan—won't you?—you'll keep away from the drink?—not for my sake, but for your own, Dan,—it does upset you so! Kiss me, Dan!"

He kissed her and laid her down—then looked in a be-

wildered way round the little room. Mrs. Adcott, in her self-appointed duty of nurse, had made some tea, and she now held out a cupful of that fragrant beverage.

"Drink this, Dan!" she said, brightly—"It'll do you good and clear your 'ed of that Minchin stuff. An' you, Mr. Everton, you ain't 'ad no lunch, an' you must be right-down tired—will you take a cup?"

"Thanks very much—I will,"—and Everton turned towards her, to avoid the pained stare of Kiernan's eyes, and to give him a little time in which to realise the situation. Kiernan stood for a moment inert, as though in doubt—then, setting the cup of untasted tea down on the table, flung himself heavily into a chair. Mrs. Adcott looked at him.

"Won't you 'ave your tea, Dan?" she asked, coaxingly.

He made no answer.

Everton quietly drew another chair to the table, and sat down opposite to him.

"Better now, Kiernan?" he said, cheerily—and nodding towards the little doorway which opened into the adjoining room where Mrs. Kiernan lay, he added—"She'll be all right in a day or two if you're careful of her. Her life depends on you—of course you know that."

"Her life—her life!" muttered Kiernan,—then, with a sudden darkening of his features he looked full into Everton's face—"What I want to know is this—how do *you* 'appen to be 'ere? What's your business?"

"My business?" and the Vicar flushed slightly and then grew pale—"My business, Kiernan, is to treat you as I would treat my own brother, and see that you get into no more mischief."

"Oh, that's what it is, is it?" and Kiernan gave a short laugh of incredulity—"Well, I'm oblecged t'ye—an' if ye'll be so good as to clear out, I'll not ask ye to call again!"

Mrs. Adcott, who had been sweeping up the hearth, and was now putting a fresh kettle full of water on the fire to boil, looked round, startled.

"Dan!" she exclaimed—"You don't mean that!"

"I *do* mean it!" And Kiernan brought his fist down heavily on the table with a fierce blow—"I mean that this 'ere reverend gentleman 'asn't no right to enter my 'ouse or sit at my table without I permits 'im, an' I *don't* permit 'im! An' I sez to 'im 'Clear out!' an' if 'e's a man 'e'll do it—*straight*!"

Everton rose quietly.

"All right, Kiernan!"—he said—"I came as a friend,—but I'll go."

"An' the sooner the better!" said Kiernan, with a kind of angry grin—"What! Do I pay rent for a 'ouse to myself an' yet can't keep a busy-bodyin' parson out of it? Came 'ere to see me drunk, eh? Well, you've see'd it, an' I 'ope you liked it! An' as for my wife, you've 'eard 'er say as 'ow I avn't 'urt 'er—why should I 'urt 'er? Ain't she my wife? Why should I go to 'urt what's my own? Do *I* sneak up to *your* 'ouse, Mister Parson, an' see 'ow *you* carries on when the doors is shut? Do *I* come in an' say to *your* missus—'Oh, my pore woman, your 'usband's no good an' I'm coming to look arter ye'? No, I doan't! An' what the devil do *you* mean by a-doin' what no 'spectable workin'-man would do, all 'cos you're a parson? You takes too much on yerself, Mister Everton!—a deal too much! an' so I tells ye to clear out o' this 'ere 'ouse afore I *makes* ye!"

Mrs. Adcott stood as it were rooted to the ground in terror at the tone of this speech, accompanied as it was by threatening gestures, but Everton maintained a perfectly tranquil demeanour.

"You mistake me, Kiernan,"—he said—"You mistake me altogether. But—never mind! Perhaps you'll understand better later on. I'm sorry you look upon me as an intruder,—I had hoped otherwise——"

He paused—then took his hat and prepared to leave the cottage.

"I wish," he continued, fixing his brave, clear, keen eyes on the drunkard's sullen countenance—"I wish I might, as your Vicar, ask you to make me a promise."

Kiernan gave a kind of grunt.

"Oh, ye may ask anything ye like,"—he muttered.

"Well!—don't drink any more poison to-day,"—and Everton, going fearlessly up to him, laid one hand kindly on his shoulder—"Give me your word you won't, and I'll believe you! Come, Kiernan! As man to man, promise me!"

With a smothered oath Kiernan sprang up from his chair and seemed about to give vent to a torrent of abuse,—but meeting Everton's steady, appealing gaze, full of a sorrowful, almost affectionate reproach, his head drooped shamefacedly, and he gave a forced angry laugh.

"All right!" he said—"Anythin' for peace an' quietness! I promise!"

The friendly hand dropped from his shoulder.

"Thank you! And to-morrow you'll see things in quite a different light, I'm sure."

Kiernan stood stolidly silent, and Everton with an encouraging smile and nod to the visibly distressed Mrs. Adcott, left the cottage without another word, outwardly composed, but inwardly sorely troubled. Again he felt his own helplessness,—again he questioned himself as to the usefulness or the utter inefficiency of the position he occupied.

"When the country's press permits open discussion of the 'New' theory,—old as the hills and false as the kiss of Judas—that Christ was merely a man like ourselves, what can be done with people who are only to be held in check by either fear or love of the Divine!" he thought—"And when medical men criminally unite together, under pressure brought to bear upon them by the beer and spirit traders, to pronounce alcohol—that curse of the country—as 'positively beneficial' what can the workers for Truth and Right do? Our hands are rendered strengthless—our souls dispirited—and our hearts, in the long and anxious struggle, are broken!"

He sighed, and walked on rapidly, almost unconscious of the pouring rain. He had a faint hope that Kiernan might possibly keep his promise—but he could not console himself with it as likely to be a certainty. And moved by an impulse, which whether wise or foolish, was at least straightforward and

well-intentioned, he made his way to the smart-looking public-house of the 'model' half of the village, which was known by the name of the 'Stag and Crow,' and entered it, to the surprise of the proprietor, a heavy-faced man with red hair, who passed most of his time in reading the halfpenny papers and airing himself outside his door in his shirt sleeves.

"Can I speak to you for a moment, Mr. Topper?" he enquired.

Mr. Topper smiled an affable smile.

"Certainly you can, Mr. Everton!—certainly! What can I do for you this afternoon? It's very wet for you to be out sure-*ly*!"

"It *is* wet,"—and Everton, looking in at the bar, surrounded as it was with shelves full of shining bottles and glasses, was bound to admit that, so far as outward appearances of comfort were concerned, Topper had the best of it in bad weather. "But I've been visiting Mrs. Kiernan—she got rather seriously hurt this morning."

"Oh indeed! How was that?" and Mr. Topper put on an expression of bland and sympathetic interest.

"Her husband,"—replied the Vicar, with a straight glance—"He was mad drunk, and knocked her down."

"Dear, dear!" and the placid Topper sighed—"Dear, dear, *dear!* Very sad—very sad——"

"Mr. Topper," went on Everton, earnestly—"It *is* very sad—and very *bad*. So sad and bad is it that I've come here myself to tell you that Dan Kiernan is not in a fit state to be given any more drink to-day. I've come here to ask you, as a *friend*, to help me in preventing him from getting any more. Will you?"

Topper's red face grew redder.

"I don't know what you mean——" he began.

"I mean," continued Everton—"that I want you to join hands with me in a good work—a work of rescue. It's quite simple. It won't give you any trouble. It's only just this—Don't sell any more beer or spirits to Kiernan to-day—if he comes round and asks you for either, refuse him."

Topper's little pig eyes glistened almost angrily.

"Mr. Everton," he said, with laborious dignity—"You are evidently not acquainted with public-house rules. We are bound to supply customers with whatever they ask and pay for. It is not our business to enquire whether a man is 'fit' to have beer and spirits,—if he pays his money we must give him his exchange."

The Vicar drew himself up a trifle more stiffly erect.

"So that if a man is drunk, you must make him more drunken!" he said, reproachfully.

"If he is drunk on the premises and behaves himself in a disorderly manner, I can turn him out,"—said Topper, with visible impatience—"But it's no part of my duty to find out the exact moment when he *is* drunk or sober."

"I tell you," said the Vicar, warmly—"that Dan Kiernan is not in a fit state to be given any more drink to-day. If he gets it, he is likely to commit murder."

"And *I* tell you!" retorted Topper, with equal warmth, "that I know nothing about it because I haven't seen him since dinner-time and don't want to see him. He came in here this morning, and went away perfectly sober."

Everton looked at him steadily.

"Perfectly sober!" he echoed—"*You* say that? Perfectly sober?"

"Perfectly sober!" reiterated Topper—"I would swear to it before a magistrate, Bible oath!"

There was a moment's silence. Then Everton spoke—

"If you swear to that, you would swear to a lie!" he said sternly,—and as Topper uttered an indignant exclamation, he raised his hand with a commanding gesture—"I repeat—you would swear to a lie—I, your Vicar, tell you so. Make the best of it that you can! You *know* that Kiernan left your premises drunk,—you *know* all about the injuries he has inflicted on his wife, and you only *pretend* not to know! Yet to make a few extra pence of profit you will, if occasion arises, assist this wretched man to poison himself again, so that driven by the force of a desperate delirium, he shall not know

whether he is man or beast—though no beast that lives is so fallen from self-respect as a drunkard! You and your class might help to cleanse the nation of its ruling vice if you would,—but you will not!—you would rather see your fellow-creatures die in misery and infamy than abate one jot of your gains on the accursed drugs you sell!"

His breath came and went quickly,—he was shaken altogether from his ordinary composure. Mr. Topper, however, was a man who rather liked to anger his 'betters'; 'give them a rub the wrong way,' as he himself expressed it—and the more justly irritated they became the more stolid was his own attitude. His favourite meat was pork, and his favourite drink Minchin's cheapest ale,—with the result that his physical and mental composition was made up of these two baneful ingredients. He smiled tolerantly at what he privately called the Vicar's 'temper.'

"I'm sorry you take it like that, Mr. Everton," he said, with unctuous mildness—"You're very hard on us poor publicans,—you are indeed! We've got to make our little bit of money somehow—and if Kiernan didn't take his glass at the 'Stag and Crow,' he'd take it at the 'Ram's Head'—so it would be just the same in the long-run. And there's not a drop of harm in Minchin's Fourpenny, if it's taken steady."

Everton could not trust himself to continue the discussion.

"Well, Mr. Topper, I have told you plainly what I think," he said—"and though it's not always wise to express one's thoughts, I'm not sorry for having done so on this occasion. I've been told that Dan Kiernan was quite a decent fellow before he came to Shadbrook, where he cannot walk from one end of the village to the other without passing two public-houses——"

"And why *don't* he pass 'em?" demanded Topper, with vehemence—"Why does he come inside? He isn't pulled neck and crop through the doors! The drink isn't forced down his throat! It's his own choice and his own doing. And if any change is to be worked in him, why that's more *your* business than mine, Mr. Everton!"

Everton's eyes clouded with a quick sadness.

"You are right!" he said, simply,—"But I am aware of my own shortcomings. I can do very little."

He said no more then,—and left Mr. Topper to his own meditations, which were rather of a mixed nature. Topper, like most of the inhabitants of Shadbrook, had a certain respect for the Vicar,—but every now and again this respect was drowned by a touch of contempt for his 'softness'—the phrase which so greatly irritated the Vicar's pretty wife.

"Why don't he let things alone and go easy!" he thought now, as he drew for himself a glass of the 'Minchin Fourpenny,' and drank it down with infinite gusto—"Look at Minchin himself now! He's a standing example to the community! He don't touch a drop of his own liquor—drinks nothing but water—and lets those that like his beer have it at a fair price, and so makes his money out of it. That's what I call common sense. As for Kiernan or any one else getting drunk, that's nobody's business and nobody's fault."

Such was his argument—the common argument held by most people. The fact that one human being is always more or less answerable for the good or evil affecting his fellow human beings is not realised by the majority. Each unit thinks that its companion unit stands, or ought to stand alone—and it needs a profound insight, as well as a most sympathetic intelligence, to see how all the units are really linked together by threads of cause and effect,—threads which slowly but surely weave them into communities or nations which according to their national merits, rise or fall. One man influences the other by word, thought and deed—though every man disclaims responsibility for his brother man, lest it should bring himself into trouble. But it was the full consciousness of such responsibility and the serious acceptance of it, that moved Richard Everton to a sense of deep sorrow when he reflected that he, a man of good education and scholarship, placed in a position of religious authority to guide, teach and control those who were set under his charge, could do nothing—nothing to rescue even *one* creature

obsessed by the demon of Drink! And he tramped through the village wearily, his face growing almost haggard under the pressure of vexatious feeling, wondering whether he should or should not risk a call at the 'Ram's Head'—which dominated the other half of Shadbrook, and see if he could lodge a warning there.

"But I shall only get the same answer if I do,"—he thought—"I shall be told I have no business to interfere—and, after all, that's true enough! My business is 'only' the saving of souls for Heaven,—but apparently I may not hinder souls from going to Hell through drink, inasmuch as their loss is gain to the national revenue!"

So he mused, conscious of his own bitter feeling, yet unable to look at the position in any other light. He was within a few steps of the 'Ram's Head' public-house, and he brought himself to a sudden standstill hesitating as to whether he should enter it or not. In a moment of indecision, a tall girl with a lithe, graceful figure, and a shawl flung carelessly over her head, came out and faced him with a smile.

"Rather a wet afternoon, sir!" she said.

He looked at her silently. Something in his straight glance confused her, for she coloured crimson. Then the deep blush slowly faded, leaving her pale, yet still smiling—and she lifted her head with an air of haughty self-assertion as though she sought to express the fact that not only was she beautiful, but that she well knew the power of her beauty. Everton understood her gesture—he had seen it often. Jacynth Miller did not spare him any more than she spared other men. A clergyman was no more to her than a day-labourer,—she was willing to make fools of both, and she knew that her physical charms exercised a strange and not always propitious influence upon the male sex generally. Certainly no one save the most jaundiced and spiteful of critics could have denied that she was perfectly lovely. An artist would have delighted to draw the exquisite oval of her face, and to paint the dark liquid lustre of her eyes, fringed as they were by long, silky upcurling lashes, and over-arched by the most delicately pencilled well-shaped

brows. Her mouth, rosy as a pomegranate, seemed framed for the utterance of sweet words,—and her tiny even teeth, white as milk, made her look enchanting when she smiled as she was smiling now.

"Jacynth!" said the Vicar, gravely—"Were you in there?"

"In where?"

He pointed to the 'Ram's Head.'

"You know what I mean,"—he said, his voice shaking a little—"You are only a girl, Jacynth—the public-house is no place for you——"

She gave a little shrug.

"Oh, don't you worry about *me*, Mr. Everton!" she retorted, "I'm all right! I can take care of myself."

He said nothing for a moment.

She looked at him curiously and with a touch of compassion.

"You're wet through, Mr. Everton!"

"Am I?" he answered, wearily—"I didn't know it!"

She moved a step or two closer, with a fascinating air of gentle penitence—

"I haven't been drinking, Mr. Everton,"—she said in a low tone—"I haven't really, sir!" Here she raised her wonderful eyes to his face—"I wouldn't vex you for the world,—I know you're set against the drink, and I'd like to please you——"

"Would you indeed, Jacynth!" and he shook his head doubtfully—"Well!—perhaps you would! I don't know!"

"I would—I would, really!"—and Jacynth gazed at him with a sweet frankness that startled him—"What do you want me to do?"

With a kind of nervousness he recoiled from her,—why, in Heaven's name, he thought, had this girl been made so bewitchingly beautiful that no man—not even the strongest,—could look at her without admiration?

"I want nothing of you, Jacynth,"—he said, with studied coldness—"except more steadiness of character. You say you were not drinking—God grant you were not! If you really wished to please me, you would be kinder and more

thoughtful of others—others whom you have wronged—Bob Hadley, for example——"

"What's the matter with Bob?" she asked, putting back her shawl a little more from her face, and by accident or design showing the luxuriant twists of her rich brown hair plaited on her head in the form of a coronal.

"He is dying,"—said the Vicar, gently—"And he wants to see you again. He loved you very much, Jacynth!"

"I'm afraid he did!" she murmured, with a quick sigh—"I couldn't help it! Could I?"

She lifted her eyes again, with a flashing coquetry in their radiant depths. He gave a slight gesture of annoyance.

"You need not have encouraged him,"—he said, stiffly—"You led him on to believe you would marry him——"

"Marry him!" She laughed. "I? I shall never marry any one in Shadbrook!"

He looked at her, vaguely perplexed. Here was a creature endowed with magnificent physical health and superb beauty—a girl of radiant loveliness in the full morning of her womanhood—were all her powers of charm and conquest to be limited to Shadbrook? Involuntarily he found himself asking the same question for her as he had asked for himself—"Is she to pass all her life in Shadbrook?"

Suddenly she spoke again.

"I've heard all about the row this morning,"—she said—"Dan Kiernan nearly killed his wife. And I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Everton—he shan't get any more drink to-day. I'll prevent that!"

The Vicar's face cleared, and he was conscious of a great relief.

"Will you? But how can you?"

Jacynth nodded mysteriously.

"Leave it to me! I'll manage him!" Her little teeth gleamed again like pearls between the red of her lips. "He's a fierce brute, is Dan Kiernan! But I can keep him in order!"

Everton was too keen a man not to perceive that there was some circumstance underlying her words with which he was

not acquainted. He was a little troubled—but forbore to press enquiry for the moment.

"Well—if you have any influence over him,"—he said at last, hesitatingly—"you will be doing a kindness to his wife as well as to himself if you can keep him away from the public-house. He gave me his promise that he would not drink any more to-day——"

"His promise isn't worth a penny!" said Jacynth, contemptuously—"I don't believe any man alive knows what a promise means! But I'll see he's all right. And—as you wish it, Mr. Everton—I'll go and see Bob Hadley."

He smiled—and his kind eyes lightened. He took her hand gently in his own and pressed it.

"That's right, Jacynth!" he said—"I shall be proud of you yet!"

She flushed a little,—then laughed, perking up a lovely rounded white chin from the folds of her shawl.

"I hope you will!" she said.

"I'm sure I shall! You'll be the best girl in the village before long!"

An odd quiver passed over her face—she grew suddenly very white. She drew her shawl more closely round her head, completely hiding the beautiful hair she had before been proud to try and show.

"It's going to rain all day, I think,"—she said, evasively—"Do get home as quick as you can, Mr. Everton—you are so wet,—I'm sure you'll catch cold."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that!" laughed the Vicar, cheerily—"I'm seasoned to all weathers. But as you seem to think you can answer for Kiernan's good behaviour——"

"I can!" she said, in a low tone.

"Well, that's a great weight off my mind—and I'm much obliged to you, Jacynth,"—here he lifted his hat to her—"But if there's any more trouble with him, be sure you send for me, won't you?"

"Yes—oh yes—I'll be sure!" and Jacynth smiled again—"Good-afternoon, Mr. Everton!"

"Good-afternoon!" he replied—and with a kindly nod, he turned away from her and walked rapidly up a little by-lane, which was a short cut out of the village, and led almost directly to the Vicarage. The girl Jacynth stood for a few moments watching him till he was out of sight, with a kind of angry wonder in her large dark eyes. Then she burst into a laugh.

"Poor devil!" she said, half aloud—"He wants to be good—and to make me good too! And he's only a man!"

She gave an eloquently contemptuous gesture with her whole body—a shrug and a writhe in one.

"Only a man!" she repeated—"And every man is just the same wherever a woman's concerned!—strong or weak, plain or handsome, married or single—they're all the same fool quality!"

Folding her shawl tightly round her shoulders, she ran with the speed and lightness of an Atalanta over the bridge which divided old Shadbrook from new, towards Kiernan's cottage, her tall figure vanishing like a dark blur in the driving rain.

The Vicar himself, happily unconscious of the disparaging criticism passed upon his sex by her whom he vainly hoped one day to call 'the best girl in the village,' reached his own dwelling with considerable thankfulness. In his mind he was perfectly aware that he had done little or no good by playing sentinel over Kiernan's drunken slumbers, and he met his wife's prettily enquiring expression and querying monosyllable of "Well?" with a practical statement concerning himself.

"I'm wet through, Azalea,—let me run upstairs and change, and I'll tell you all about it. Kiernan will do no more harm to-night, I think."

"That's a comfort, I'm *sure*!" and Azalea gave a decisive nod of her dainty head—"You poor dear Dick! You *are* in an awful state! Simply soaked! Go and change *everything* at once! There's a nice fire in your study—we'll have tea there, and we can talk!"

And in less than quarter of an hour husband and wife were seated opposite each other—a daintily spread tea-table between

them, glistening with wedding-gift silver and wedding-gift china, on which the firelight shed a rosy sparkling glow, in pleasant contrast to the deepening gloom of the outside garden view and the miserable weather.

"I met Jacynth Miller in the village,"—said Everton, then, stretching out his weary feet to rest on the fender in the warmth of the fire—"She told me she would see that Kiernan got no more drink to-day. And, Azalea, I really think the girl has some heart after all,—she has promised me to go and visit poor Bob Hadley."

Azalea, busy with the teapot, gave him a quick glance,—then her face lighted up with a dimpling smile.

"And you believe her, Dick? You actually believe her! Oh!"

The amount of meaning which the charming little woman managed to convey into that 'Oh!' could not be expressed in words. Richard was conscious of a slight, very slight sense of irritation.

"Of course I believe her,"—he said,—"Why should I *not* believe her? Even a bad girl may be sorry for her badness and may wish to be better,—don't you think so?"

"Oh, of *course*!" and Azalea, poising a lump of sugar aloft in the sugar-tongs, looked at it critically as though it were something quite curious and new—"Of course, Dick, she *may* wish to be better—but I think—I really *do* think that in the case of Jacynth, it's *so* unlikely!"

Everton was silent. He was annoyed by his wife's expression of opinion — but he did not wish to betray his annoyance by any hasty word or look. Moreover, his vexation was twofold,—he not only considered that Azalea was unjust in her remark, but he knew within himself that Jacynth's beauty had for the moment cast a glamour over him which would need to be shaken off before he could consider her generally questionable reputation in a properly dispassionate light.

"You will at any rate admit that it's kind and plucky of her to look after Kiernan so that he doesn't do any more

mischief?" he asked—"It's not a pleasant thing for a young girl to keep guard over a drunkard!"

Azalea poured out the tea carefully.

"No, dear, it isn't!" she murmured—"But I thought *you* had managed all that."

His brow clouded, and he sighed wearily.

"I? I can manage nothing!" he said, sorrowfully—"I sat with Kiernan till he woke—and then—then—well!—it's hard to say it, but I may as well tell you—then he ordered me out of his house. And, of course, I had to go."

Azalea's blue eyes opened wide.

"You—had—to—go!" she echoed—"Oh, Dick! How could you?"

"How could I stay?" he retorted—"My dear child, no man has a right to stay in another man's house against that other man's will. Unless he's a 'man in possession'"—and he laughed a little—"As long as Kiernan pays his rent, he's master of his own roof-tree, and he is not called upon to either welcome or entertain an uninvited guest——"

"But—a clergyman—the Vicar of the parish——" she exclaimed distressfully.

"Not even a clergyman has the right to stay in a parishioner's house if he is told to go,"—he said, quietly—"There's a great deal of harm done by district visiting, and by the thrusting of religious tracts on people who don't want to read them. When you come to think of it, Azalea, it's the height of impertinence for any man, or woman either, to walk into a house and offer advice to persons who haven't asked you for it."

Azalea's pretty eyebrows went up in perplexity.

"I can't understand you, Dick!" she said—"Isn't it just what you've done to-day? Haven't you been all this time with Kiernan—and gone without your lunch and got wet through, and made everything *quite* uncomfortable,—and now you say you oughtn't to have done it!"

He smiled, amused at the muddle she chose to make of the position.

"No, Azalea, I don't say I ought not to have done it in this case;"—he said—"Kiernan was infuriated with drink—and I feared that he might attack his poor wife a second time. Had he shown signs of doing so, I should have been there to prevent it. But he woke partially sobered, and I think sorry for his violence—at any rate he treated his wife very gently when he saw how ill she was. That being the case, I was not wanted. I should have liked to talk to him a little—but he was not in the humour. I did ask him to promise me not to take any more drink to-day—and he promised——"

"And told you to go!" finished Azalea, indignantly—"The horrid brute! And you *went*! Oh, Dick! What a *dreadful* loss of dignity for you!"

Everton's gravity gave way at this, and he laughed joyously with all the heartiness of a boy.

"Dreadful!" he agreed—"Positively awful! I was like a beaten hound—or rather more like a drowned rat—when I met Jacynth Miller."

Azalea pursed her pretty red lips together.

"Where did you meet her?" she asked.

Everton hesitated.

"Well,"—he said, at last—"I'm sorry to say she was just coming out of the 'Ram's Head.'"

His wife looked whole volumes at him.

"And yet you really think she may wish to be a better girl!" she ejaculated—"You really think so!"

His face grew suddenly serious.

"I will not say I really think so,"—he answered—"But I really *hope* so!"

A silence followed. Azalea glanced at him now and then in a somewhat perturbed way—and once or twice her lips moved as though she wished to say something—but she checked herself with an effort. He was quietly enjoying his tea—and if she knew any item of parish news that might have worried him, she was not going to trouble him with it just then. She took out a dainty-looking piece of silk embroidery and began to work at it with swift noiseless

stitches. She made a very pretty picture seated in her low easy chair by the fire, and her husband's eyes rested upon her with fond admiration. The glowing beauty of Jacynth Miller faded from his memory like the brief blaze of a showy firework fading in mid-air, and a sense of deep tranquillity soothed his mind. After all, he thought, why should he not be perfectly content with his life at Shadbrook? Why should he dream of wider fields of labour? If his power was insufficient to persuade one drunkard to abandon his drunkenness, why should he imagine himself capable of influencing a larger and more intelligent audience? To reform one man thoroughly would be a better piece of work than to try to reform hundreds—and if he failed in the smaller task, he was bound to fail equally in the larger. He ought, so he assured himself, to be perfectly satisfied with the position he occupied,—he had a comfortable living,—a delightful home, and a pretty wife and child,—his domestic bliss was perfect, and he was sole monarch of his little kingdom with just such limitations and oppositions, on a lesser scale, as all monarchs, whether spiritual or temporal, have to contend with. There was, in strict reason, nothing that should make him either restless or dissatisfied. Shadbrook was his God-appointed place in the world,—"and I must not," he said to himself—"regard it as too narrow a field of labour. There is plenty to be done—and I am bound to try and do it."

At that moment his wife spoke.

"How was Jacynth Miller looking?" she asked suddenly. He started out of his reverie.

"Jacynth? How was she looking? Just the same as usual; very beautiful."

Azalea's needle flew swiftly again like a gleam of light over her embroidery, and she asked no more questions.

CHAPTER IV

THE next day the clouds had somewhat cleared, and a pale tearful-looking sun struggled to shine through fleecy trails of mist which, rising from the oozy lowlands, spread themselves in thin grey filaments through the valleys and hung doubtfully in air as they reached the summit of the hills. There was a latent possibility of fine weather, according to some sagacious remarks proffered by the oldest inhabitant of Shadbrook—a venerable gentleman who, like the wooden mannikin in a certain make of Swiss clock, only hopped outside his door when the barometer rose, and promptly hopped back again when it fell. Old 'Mortar' Pike—'Bricks and Mortar' as he was sometimes good-humouredly but irreverently called by a few of his acquaintances—was allowed considerable license in the utterance of his opinions on all matters good, bad or indifferent, not only because nobody minded what he said, but also because he was in his ninety-second year, and as he himself was wont to remark: "If a man ain't to jabber a bit when he's nigh on a 'undred, when *is* he to jabber at all anyway?" This argument was held to be wholly unanswerable; he therefore 'jabbered' to his heart's content, and he had almost, if not quite forgotten the long-long-long ago, when as stalwart Mortimer Pike, he had been a celebrated wrestler and football player—renowned for his feats of strength throughout the whole Cotswold district. Sometimes, if any one ventured to remind him of those bygone days, the flicker of a smile would pass over his brown and deeply wrinkled visage and he would wave away the reminiscence as though it were a midge buzzing in his ear.

"Ay, ay!" he would murmur—"Mebbe I was a sharp youngster—mebbe I worn't. Them as knows can tell one from t'other!"

This was an oracular utterance, not always comprehensible to the untutored rustic mind—but it was 'Mortar's way'—so his neighbours said—Mortar's way of dismissing any subject he did not care to talk about. As a rule, however, he was very fond of talking—so much so that if he had no one else to talk to, he talked to himself. Clad in a neatly stitched grey linen smock-frock, with a straw hat which he had made with his own hands, pressed well down over his rather long straggling white hair, and leaning on a stout stick with a shepherd's crook handle, his figure was a picturesque and familiar part of the life of Shadbrook, and to see him 'jabbering' at the threshold of his cottage, was like the sign of the wooden mannikin in the Swiss clock, an augury of what the villagers called 'a spell o' sunshine.' And, in accordance with the Swiss clock theory, he had, on this particular morning, just popped out, and now stood peering up and down the village street with a kind of half-cunning, half-childish curiosity, the while he murmured under his breath—

"Marnin' gray, fine day! Ay, ay! The wet'll keep aff—it'll keep aff a bit—an' mebbe at dinner-time we'll have a bit o' blue sky. A bit o' blue sky!" Here he smiled and chuckled. "It'll do a power o' good—a power o' good it will! Nothin' like a bit o' blue!"

At that moment a woman came out of the neighbouring cottage to shake a small much worn hearth-rug. It was Mrs. Moddley, the same lady with whom the Vicar had held such serious converse respecting the irreligious tendencies of her son.

"Mornin', Mr. Pike!" she said cheerily—"Out early y'are. Wonderful active for your time o' life! How's you feelin'?"

"Fine!" responded the veteran—"Never better! I thinks I'm a-gittin' younger as I gits older. If it worn't for my legs——"

"Ah, it's the legs as gives!" and Mrs. Moddley with a resigned sigh shook a volume of dust out of her hearth-rug which, blowing towards poor old 'Bricks and Mortar' got into

his nose and eyes and caused him to sneeze violently. "And why the Lord made us with legs which is ever *bound* to give, *I* don't know! A little extra muscle an' strength put in to make 'em last longer wouldn't 'ave upset no one in the 'eavenly 'ost I'm sure! When my second boy Teddy, as is gone but seven, kicks out 'is legs in 'is bath an' sez 'e don't want no washin', I sez to myself, bless 'im, let 'im kick while 'e can an' upset all the water, for the days is comin' when 'e'll be that stiff an' roomaticky as 'e can't kick no more, so don't be 'ard on 'im now!" Here she shook the hearth-rug again. "Is your gran'-darter lookin' arter ye?—or will I bring ye in somethin' for breakfast?"

The old man raised a trembling hand to his straw hat, and taking it off waved it with an air of speechless courtesy.

"Thank-ye, thank-ye kindly!—my gran'-darter does all I want," he answered. "She's a good gel—she don't let me miss nothin'—thank-ye all the same——"

Here he broke off—a little startled at the sudden sight of Jacynth Miller, who came sauntering round a corner and strolled up to him in a casual way, nodding and smiling.

"Hello, Bricks and Mortar, how are you?" she said.

He looked at her, but did not answer.

"I've been up all night," she went on, addressing herself more to the air than to either of her listeners—"Taking care of Mrs. Kiernan."

"Oh indeed!" and Mrs. Moddley gave a kind of sniff—"Did she know who it was bein' so suddint kind to 'er?"

Jacynth laughed, and yawned.

"No—I don't think she did!"

Mrs. Moddley turned round and went into her cottage, giving her door a slight bang as she closed it. Jacynth laughed more loudly.

"She's shut me out!" she said, stretching her arms indolently and yawning again—"As if I wanted to go in! *You* wouldn't shut me out, would you, Mortar dear?"

The old man held up his hand in a kind of feeble expostulation.

"Shut ye out—shut ye out!" he mumbled—"My gel, if ye go on as ye're goin' ye'll be shut out altogether, not onny on the yerth, but in 'Eaven! Ye be doin' those things which ye oughtn't to do an' ye knows it. Ye poor mis'able gel, go an' tell parson what ye're at!—make a clean breast of it—an' God 'elp ye!"

Jacynth rested her two hands on her hips and looked at him with an indulgent scorn.

"You old fool!" she said, "You're benind your time, Mortar! God helps those that help themselves!"

With a smile that parted her red lips in a line of incomparable sweetness, she moved away. The old man thrust out a shaking hand and caught her by her sleeve.

"Where's—where's Dan Kiernan?" he stammered.

She flushed her dark laughing eyes over him compassionately.

"Where's Dan? With his wife, of course! Where should he be?"

Humming a tune she sauntered on, and as she went, the sun came out with a flare of gold, shedding a radiance across her path as though she were some favoured goddess of the morn. The old man shaded his eyes from the sudden brilliancy.

"A bit o' blue!" he muttered—"I said there'd be a bit o' blue! But, there's more clouds comin' by-an-bye—more dark clouds comin'!"

A woman's voice called him from his cottage just then, and, turning away from the street, he tottered indoors.

The 'bit o' blue' widened in the sky, and the hanging vapours began to roll up and disappear,—a thrush warbled a hopeful strain among the leafless boughs of an ancient elm tree which occupied a prominent position near the middle of the village street, and a genial sense of brightness began to warm and illumine the atmosphere. Up at the Vicarage this cheering gleam of sunshine was sufficient to put the Vicar's light-hearted wife in the best of spirits—she laughed, she chattered, she sang—she played with baby Laurence like a

baby herself, and succeeded for more than the thousandth time in creating around her that particular bedazzlement of gaiety and charm which not only delighted her husband, but also in a sense 'muddled' him,—though he would have been the last man in the world to admit such an expression as in any way befitting the situation. Nevertheless, it was a fact that sometimes when he heard Azalea's rippling laugh and her oft-repeated cry of "Oh, *Baby* dear!" to her infant son,—and also when he caught echoes of her voice singing those 'coon' songs, which, as base imitations of genuine nigger melodies, are so much in vogue with an age whose very sentiment is only part of its sham, he was apt to put his hand to his head in rather a perplexed way, and make an effort to collect his thoughts lest they should become scattered too far for logical and reasonable concentration on any given subject. It was sweet to hear Azalea laugh,—sweet, too, was her little caressing exclamation of "Oh, Baby dear!"—even the imitation 'coon' songs had their fascination—but—and the big 'but' that came in here could not be got over easily. It was a But that impeded action, like a stone wall in the way of a chariot race. And yet he could not have put into exact words why the 'But' should so obtrude itself. Surely he did not want Azalea—bright, brilliant, pretty Azalea,—to be serious and puritanical? No,—most certainly not,—any such change in her he would have regarded with a real concern, as indicative of failing health. Yet, to be quite frank with himself, he owned to his inner consciousness that there was something he missed in his life,—but what it was he could not tell. And he set his feeling down to his own great selfishness and ingratitude, and blamed himself heartily for these two most unbecoming and unworthy sins.

"Hundreds of men would gladly change places with me,"—he thought—"Poor curates working in the East End of London—missionaries exiled from home and country, working among hostile peoples for the cause of Christ—even country parsons, many of them clever men, utterly cast away in villages more obscure than Shadbrook,—any or all of these would be

glad if they could be as I am. I cannot understand my own restlessness—it is a foolish state of mind of which I am heartily ashamed."

And he was more than usually affectionate to his wife when she came to him, dressed in a neat dark blue serge costume, with a fascinating little turned-up felt hat to match, and stated with a small sigh that she was now going to visit Mrs. Kiernan.

"I think the weather has *quite* cleared,"—she said—"and I've got my thickest boots on, so I shan't get my feet wet. It's no good taking anything to read to her, is it, Dick? I'm such a *bad* reader!"

He laughed, and slipping an arm round her waist looked at her with indulgent tenderness.

"You don't like doing this sort of thing, I'm afraid, darling,"—he said.

"Not very much,"—she admitted, with a demure uplifting of her blue eyes—"You see the people themselves don't *always* like it, unless they're very very fond of you. I don't think they're a bit fond of *me*! I'm sure they're not! I ought to be different—*quite* different, to really please them!"

"In what way?" he asked, still smiling.

"Well, to begin with, I ought to be able to talk about horrid things—*quite* horrid things!" she said, with a comical earnestness—"Illnesses and funerals, for instance. They *love* those! Now Mrs. Linaker she has a bad leg—you know she has!—well, she *likes* to talk about it, and she *will* talk about it, oh ever so long! She tells you when it began to be bad—and how it went on, and how it is now,—and I *do* try to be interested, but I *can't*! And Mrs. Paterson was quite pleased when she heard that Mrs. Dunn's eldest son had died—she really *was*! She said that he had six silver spoons and one picture—and she wondered how the spoons would be divided, and who would get the picture. And when I asked her what the picture was like, she said she didn't think it was like anybody in particular—it was just a man and a cow in a sunset, but it had been in the family a long time!" Azalea stopped to laugh—then with twinkling eyes she went on—"And

really, Dick, I *am* so silly with these people! I never know what to say to them! Because I think it perfectly detestable to count up silver spoons when a poor man is lying dead,—and it seems to me just awful to dwell on bad legs and funerals. And then there are the babies!—oh dear!" Here she paused and grew suddenly reflective—"Of course I ought to be immensely interested in them, having one of my own—but I don't think I've got the real mother-spirit—no, don't laugh, Dick!—I really *don't* think I have, because all the women in the village talk quite differently about babies to the way *I* talk!"

Everton was amused.

"Well, of course!" he said, "you can't expect them to have your pretty little fancies, can you? Their lives are different, to begin with,—and it's wonderful—yes, when you come to think of it, it is wonderful that there should be so much deep sentiment and real tenderness among them,—you know they often love their children much more than people in our class do——"

Azalea opened her eyes very wide at this.

"Oh, I'm sure!"—she declared—"no one could possibly love any baby more than I love mine!"

"No, dear, I didn't say any one could,"—and Everton checked a slight sigh—"But you spoke of the mother-spirit—and you said, or you implied, that the women in the village had a different feeling about it to yours;—now I think it is just the same beautiful, divine spirit, only by different natures it is expressed differently."

She puckered her brows in a little line of perplexity.

"That sounds like poor dear Dad,—dreadfully solemn and learned,"—she said—"But what I mean is that the village women talk about all the *unpleasant* little matters connected with babies,"—and she shook her head at him very sagaciously; "Because, of course, there *are* unpleasant things,—things that are not always nice and clean to talk about,—well, *those* things are just what the village mothers love to discuss by the hour! And, of course, *your* business is to look after the *souls*

of the children, Dick; but their mothers don't really care a bit about that!—what *they* think about all the time are their stomachs!"

He put his two hands on her shoulders and looked down smilingly into her eyes.

"Come, come, Azalea!—have *we*, even *we*, thought much as yet of the soul of our wonderful baby Laurence?"

She coloured a little—then laughed.

"Oh, but Baby's too young!—too tiny altogether!" she said—"It would be nonsense to talk about his poor little soul——"

"You think so?" and he loosened his gentle hold of her—"Well, I'm not quite sure about that, Azalea! I think I often see a Soul—neither little nor poor—looking out of Laurence's big blue eyes—a Soul so pure and sweet that I tremble at my own responsibility for its security in this world!"

He spoke with such grave earnestness that she was a little abashed. A silence fell between them. Then, after a minute or two she said in a meek small voice—

"I think I'd better go now."

"To see Mrs. Kiernan? Yes!—do go, while the weather keeps fine"—he answered, affectionately—"It won't take you much time, because of course you mustn't stay long with her,—she's not well enough for that. I daresay you'll meet Doctor Harry—if so, just ask him if she's going on all right."

Azalea nodded submissively, and left the room. Her husband went to the window and watched her tripping along on the dainty high-heeled shoes which she called her 'thickest boots,' over the sodden gravel of the garden paths, till her pretty figure disappeared behind a screen of laurel bushes,—then he seated himself at his desk to work.

"Poor little woman!" he murmured tenderly,—"It must be rather dull for her here sometimes. She ought to have married a millionaire—not a poor country clergyman! She was made for the graceful pleasures and gaieties of the world—not for the plain routine of Shadbrook. Yet Love is said to make even a desert blossom like the rose—and I

think she loves me—I'm sure she does! God knows I love *her*,—more than my life!"

In this assertion he used no exaggeration,—it was the exact and simple truth. His nature was deeply affectionate and the garrulities and ecstasies of a Romeo were worth nothing as compared with the intense and faithful passion of this quiet self-contained man whose love was not for 'the uncertain glory of an April day,' but for all time, and—as he hoped and devoutly believed—for all eternity as well. If some profound Thinker, versed in the strange occultism of human sympathies, had pointed out to him that an eternity passed with Azalea's little butterfly soul might possibly be insufficient to satisfy all his stronger immortal aspirations, he would have been grieved and indignant. For one of the finest attributes of true love is, that it sees no limitations and no imperfections in the beloved object. Thanks to this gentle blinding power, he was unable to look too far into the future save with those imaginative eyes which always behold impossibly beautiful things destined never to be realised, but which in their visionary prospect serve to charm and stimulate the mind, keeping it patient and hopeful while 'that Divinity which shapes our ends' prepares our hardest and most needful lessons. Perhaps if he could have seen Azalea sitting by the bedside of the unhappy Mrs. Kiernan, with her pretty little face set primly in a line of rigid offence, and her whole attitude expressive of uncompromising virtue, he might have felt a certain misgiving as to whether she was really endowed with that delicate and sure instinct which he fondly fancied was the special qualification of her woman's nature,—an instinct fine enough to know when pity is resented and advice unwelcome, and therefore wisely forbearing to proffer either. In most village communities the uninvited visits of the clergyman's wife or the 'district lady' are regarded by the working-classes with considerable disfavour,—and when one comes to think of it, there is really something very grossly impertinent in the idea that because a man or woman is poor and lives in a small cottage, he or she is therefore to be considered a prey to interfering 'Church people,' who thrust their

enquiring noses into homes that do not belong to them, and ask questions of a personal nature on matters which are none of their business. One wonders how Mr. Millionaire would like it if the wife of the Reverend Mr. Peek-a-Bo walked into his palatial residence unasked and said:—"I hope you keep your rooms clean and tidy! Remember cleanliness is next to godliness!" or—"You must read your Bible every day, my good man! Let me leave you this little Tract on the 'Vanity of Riches'!" As a matter of fact, no clergyman's wife and no district visitor would dare to so insult a rich man. Then must the poor man be insulted, simply because he *is* poor? Does wealth alone hold the key to the Church's respect? If so, then the Second Coming of Christ will be the Church's annihilation!

Fortunately for herself, pretty Mrs. Everton did not take this point of view at all into her consideration. She was the Vicar's wife; and in that position felt that her visits to the parishioners were necessary. Whether the parishioners liked her presence in their houses, she did not pause to enquire. When she entered Mrs. Kiernan's cottage she half expected to see the master of it, the redoubtable Dan himself,—but he was not there, and Mrs. Adcott, still at her post as nurse to her suffering neighbour, stated that "he'd bin gone to his day's work since six in the mornin'."

"I hope he was sober,"—said Azalea, severely.

"Oh yes, ma'am, he was quite sober. He's a fine man when he's all right, is Dan—it's only the drink as drives him wild. Jacynth Miller sat up with him 'ere all night, an' he's bin as quiet as a lamb!"

Azalea gave a little gasp.

"Jacynth Miller!" She bit her lips as though to keep in some imminent expression of thought from rash utterance,—and then she hurriedly entered the adjoining room where Mrs. Kiernan lay. The sight of the sick woman in her bed, pale and motionless, rather frightened Azalea,—and she hung back, awed by the aspect of the still face on the pillow with the closed eyes and the greyish brown hair swept back from the

hollow temples,—it was a counterfeit resemblance or image of death which was not pleasant to contemplate. At last,—

"Mrs. Kiernan,"—she murmured, in a nervous little voice, "I came to see how you were—I do hope you're better——"

Mrs. Kiernan opened her eyes, and for a moment stared bewilderedly. Then a faint smile brightened her pallid features.

"It's Mrs. Everton, is it?" she whispered, weakly—"Thank'ee, ma'am, I'm better—much better—I'll soon be about again——" Here her eyelids drooped, and she moaned wearily.

Azalea took a chair and sat down by the bedside.

"I'm afraid you're badly hurt,"—she said—"That dreadful husband of yours is very cruel to you."

Mrs. Kiernan's eyes opened again quickly.

"My 'usband!" she echoed—"Dan? Dan cruel? Oh no, ma'am! Don't you believe it! Dan's the best man ever woman 'ad,—there's no one like Dan in this world to me!"

Azalea gave a little shrug of impatience.

"How *can* you say such a thing!" she continued—"Why he has knocked you about most wickedly! Look how ill you are! And yet you say he's the best man ever woman had!"

"So he is, when he's away from the drink, ma'am,"—and Mrs. Kiernan, moved by a sudden energy, lifted herself up a little on her pillows. "And 'e didn't mean to 'urt me—I know he didn't! But 'ed 'ad one glass on top of t'other, an' 'is poor 'ed was all a-swimmin' like, an' 'e struck out at the first thing 'e saw, which 'appened to be me—an' arter all I should a-know'd better than to stand in 'is way. That's all, ma'am; an' if you'll tell Mr. Everton that Dan's all right I'll be real glad, for I wouldn't 'ave the Vicar o' the parish think ill of 'im——"

Her voice failed her and tears stood in her eyes. Azalea was sorry for her, but at the same time remained more or less unconvinced.

"I can't understand you at all!" she said, perplexedly—

"It seems to me so strange that you should care for a man like that——"

"It shouldn't seem strange to you, ma'am, you bein' a wife an' mother yourself,"—and Mrs. Kiernan let her head sink gently back again on her pillow—"No man's ever like the man you've loved day and night an' been everythin' to in body an' soul. An' if ye'd seen Dan in 'ere last night, comin' back'ards an' for'ards, waitin' on me 'and an' foot an' doin' all 'e could for me, you'd a-said what a kind 'art 'e 'ad for all 'is little faults o' drink an' temper. An' 'e sent Mrs. Adcott away 'ome to rest 'erself, for she was fair tired out, poor thing, an' 'e got one of the village gels in to 'elp, an' sat up all night in the next room, watchin' an' waitin' lest I should want for anythin'——"

"One of the girls of the village came in to help, you say," and Azalea looked at her with gravely compassionate eyes—"Do you know which girl it was?"

"No, ma'am, I don't,"—and Mrs. Kiernan sighed—"I was that sleepy an' wore out that it was no matter to me who came or went so long as Dan was by."

"It was Jacynth Miller,"—said Azalea—"She sat up here with your husband all night. And you actually didn't know it! Oh!"—this exclamation was uttered with shocked impressiveness—"I call it perfectly *shameful*!"

Mrs. Kiernan turned her eyes wonderingly round upon her visitor.

"I don't quite follow ye, ma'am,"—she said, in tremulous accents—"What's the shameful part of it?"

"Oh well!" and Azalea gave a kind of hopeless gesture with her neatly gloved little hands—"You're too ill to talk just now—but when you're better you really ought to know exactly how things stand—you really ought——"

"I'm quite able to hear anything as I ought to know now, ma'am,"—and Mrs. Kiernan anxiously watched Azalea's pretty face that looked so young and kind and expressive of a thoughtful spirit—"An' it's better you should say just what's in you mind rather than have me worritin' like——"

Azalea began to feel a little nervous.

"Oh no, you really mustn't be worried,"—she said, with a delightful unconsciousness of having already prepared the way for worry—"I didn't think—I'm sorry I spoke——"

"So am I, ma'am, if you don't go on speakin',"—answered Mrs. Kiernan, with sudden energy—"An' ye'll oblige me more than I can say if ye'll just tell me plain what it is you're meanin' in the way that's shameful——"

Azalea thought a moment, the colour coming and going in her delicate cheeks, and her heart beating a little more quickly than usual. She had done mischief without intending it,—she had started an uneasiness in Mrs. Kiernan's mind, and she had not the tact to allay the misgivings which her thoughtless words had excited. She felt rather afraid of the poor bruised and beaten, yet loving and faithful woman—nevertheless there was a struggling under-sense in her of outraged propriety,—that resistless emotion which so often possesses the minds of clergymen's wives, and leads them to say and to do the most cruel and uncharitable things, not out of any intentional unkindness, but simply because they are personally pricked by the hedgehog bristles of a virtue so aggressive and opinionated as to be almost vice.

"Yet after all,"—she inwardly considered—"Mrs. Kiernan is not a woman of such *very* sensitive feeling! If she were, she wouldn't, she *couldn't* take her husband's brutal conduct so quietly! I don't suppose anything he does would surprise her. The common people look on these sort of things so differently!"

Alas, poor Azalea! She knew nothing at all of the special point of view taken by the 'common' people. She would have been surprised, possibly offended, had she been told that the 'common' moral sense is more poignant because more instinctive, and that the 'common' passions are more powerful because more primitive,—and that, therefore, the 'view' of things social is often straighter, saner and cleaner among 'common' folk than among over-cultured, hot-house specimens of 'high-class' humanity. At last she spoke, though a trifle hesitatingly:

"Well, I *do* think it's shameful that Jacynth Miller should

have been sitting up with your husband all night in your own house and in the very room next to you"—here her voice grew stronger with her excess of indignation—"For, of course, he was only *pretending* to be anxious about you and sorry for you that you might have no suspicions. You poor thing! Don't you *know*?"

Mrs. Kiernan sat suddenly upright, and put her thin work-worn hands to her head in a bewildered way.

"God 'elp me!" she muttered—"Don't I know—what?"

"Why, what half the village knows,"—said Azalea, desperately—"Oh, it is really so difficult to tell you! I thought the Vicar was the only one who did not guess the truth, he's so simple and good!—and I had made up my mind to break it to him somehow, because it *is* disgraceful!—and now you are just as bad—nobody seems to have given you the least hint——"

Mrs. Kiernan feebly caught her by the arm.

"Tell me—tell me, *quick*!" she gasped—"It's cruel keepin' me like this—it's cruel! What's—what's wrong?"

"It's all wrong!" and Azalea, rather scared by the distraught agony on the sick woman's face, shook up the pillow and tried to make her lie down—"Now do rest comfortably!—you can't make things any better by worrying yourself! It's *all* wrong—nothing could be worse—at least not in *my* opinion—and if you *will* know it, it is just this, that your husband is perfectly crazy about Jacynth Miller—he meets her every day when he leaves his work, and they're always seen about together—always!—and now they've actually passed the whole night together under your own roof—and you ill and knowing nothing about it! Why, it's simply dreadful!—don't you see how dreadful it is?"

The poor creature's mouth quivered, and large tears welled up in her tired eyes.

"No, ma'am!—it's not dreadful to me,"—she said, bravely choking back the emotion that threatened to overwhelm her strength—"Because—because I don't believe it!"

"You don't believe it?" exclaimed Azalea—"You don't believe *me*?"

"No, ma'am! Not if your happy face was the face of an angel from heaven, I wouldn't believe the lie you're tellin' me! It's a poor thing for a parson's wife to pick up all the gossip runnin' in a village an' take it for gospel—an' there's nothin' against my 'usband that I'll hear from ye, ma'am, though you're a lady, an' I'm only a poor workin' woman."

Her breath caught in a half sob, but she struggled with herself and went on—

"My Dan's as true as steel to me, ma'am—and it's only Minchin's stuff as alters 'im a bit now an' then. An' as for Jacynth Miller, Dan knows as well as we all knows, that she's a waif an' stray without father nor mother an' only an old dodderin' auntie as doesn't care what becomes of 'er, an' there's a devil in the poor gel as'll only be got out by pain an' sorrow. She'll get all her troubles soon enough, for 'andsome looks brings evil deeds—so if my Dan's kind to 'er a bit now and agin, I'm not for grudgin' it."—Here her voice broke in a sudden plaintive wail and she gave vent to a passionate burst of weeping, burying her face in the pillow and crying weakly—"Oh, Dan, my man! You couldn't be false to me! No, not you, Dan!"

Azalea was speechless and utterly dismayed. Who would have thought a 'common' woman would have taken the suggestion of her husband's infidelity like this? An educated lady would have behaved quite differently, and would have shown the indignation and scorn necessary for the assertion of her own proper pride. Azalea herself, for example, if she had heard that her Richard was 'carrying on,' as the vulgar phrase puts it, with another woman, she would have left him,—yes, she was quite sure, so she said to herself, that she would have left him. She would never have forgiven him! The 'common' woman's way of loving was totally beyond her. She did not know what to make of it. She stood by the bedside, helplessly unable to proffer any sympathy or consolation, and she began to feel rather sorry for herself. Then she took refuge in the ever-standing stronghold of feminine inconsistency.

"It's always the way!" she thought—"If you want to help

these kind of people you must never tell them anything that will really be for their good. They're not a bit pleased! I *did* hope I might be able to save the poor thing from being deceived any more—but it's no use! She believes in her husband and merely thinks *me* a liar!"

Her cheeks burned with offence at this idea, and while she yet hesitated as to whether she should speak again, or take an abrupt departure, Mrs. Adcott appeared in the doorway and beckoned to her.

"Better come away now, ma'am,"—she said rather tartly; "You've said enough."

Azalea moved a few steps—then paused—

"Good-bye, Mrs. Kiernan!"—and she waited for an answer, but none came—"I do hope you'll soon be all right."

With this she stepped daintily into the adjoining kitchen where Mrs. Adcott confronted her. The little brown-faced, wrinkled, hard-working woman's eyes were full of tears.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," she said tremulously—"I'm right-down sorry as you should 'ave said anythin' to Jennie Kiernan about Dan's goings on with Jacynth Miller. We was all for hidin' of it till everythin' was well got over." Here she wiped her eyes with her apron. "It'll kill Jennie, it will!"

Azalea was completely taken aback for a moment. Then she rallied herself with a pretty stateliness, indicative of the usual 'offended virtue.'

"What do you mean?" she asked, with a touch of haughtiness—"You know that it is impossible that such a wicked thing can go on in this parish without everybody knowing it—and everybody *does* know it, except the poor deceived wife herself——"

"And the Vicar, ma'am, your good 'usband—*he* don't know it," said Mrs. Adcott, trembling a little—"For he's that kind an' gentle as he don't suspect 'arm in no man an' no woman either. An' we was all in a band like, to try and manage so as he should never know,—an' that it shouldn't be a worrit to 'im, an' one of us was goin' to take Jacynth away by-and-bye—an' nobody would a' bin a bit the wiser——"

"Then you were all in a plot to deceive the Vicar!" interrupted Azalea, indignantly—"Just to screen a bad girl and a wicked drunken man! Oh! It's most *dreadful*! And you come to church and take Communion! What an *awful* thing!"

"It may seem awful to you, ma'am,"—and Mrs. Adcott raised her keen shrewd grey eyes, and fixed them steadily on Azalea's crimsoning face—"For you see you're a lady, an' you're young an' 'appy, and well cared for—an' you're not supposed to know the ins an' outs of sorrows an' sins. Dan's a bad man,—I'd rather say he's a good man spoilt by the drink, an' he's got no 'old now over 'imself at all,—an' he's as mad for Jacynth as he is for Minchin's poison. There ain't no 'elp for it—no one can hold 'im—an' the gel herself 'ull go to any man good or bad—that's 'er nature. An' we poor folks sees 'ow it is, an' we makes the best of a bad business—an' all we sez is, let's try to save the wife as ain't done no 'arm—an' keep the parson quiet so as 'e shan't fret hisself over it. An' now you comes an' tells Jennie——"

"How could I prevent myself telling her!" exclaimed Azalea, with some excitement—"Especially when you said her husband had sat up all last night with Jacynth Miller in this very kitchen, and she, poor deceived thing!—lying ill in the next room! And *you* left them together!—you actually went home and left them together!"

"Dan put me out,"—said Mrs. Adcott, quietly—"An' if I 'adn't gone, he'd a throw'd me out. He was sober enough—but he was wild to be with Jacynth. She came up, smilin' at 'im innocent-like, an' said she'd promised parson to take care of 'im. An' I knew she'd keep 'im from the drink—an' there couldn't be no more 'arm done than was done already——"

Azalea stared—her cheeks alternately flushing and paling.

"You mean——" she began.

"I mean that Jacynth's got into trouble with Dan,"—said Mrs. Adcott—"An' that it's no good cryin' over spilt milk. An' as I told ye, ma'am, we was goin' to get Jacynth quietly out o' the village presently—an' Jennie would never 'ave known—nor parson neither——"

"And you would have deceived *everybody*!" Azalea's eyes sparkled with indignation as she said this—"You were all in a positive conspiracy to hide this dreadful thing from your own Vicar, and you didn't think it wrong?"

Mrs. Adcott sighed a little.

"No, ma'am,"—she confessed at last—"I'm afraid none of us thought it wrong. You see we've all liked Jennie Kiernan; an' we wanted to spare 'er more sorrow an' cryin', seein' she's 'ad 'er share."

Azalea was silent. The position was, to her, quite terrible and incomprehensible. Here was a hopelessly bad girl 'in trouble' (according to the common and significant expression) with a hopelessly bad man—and yet a whole village was apparently sworn to silence about it on account of the pain it would cause to the bad man's suffering wife! Was there ever anything more 'unnatural'? Where, she asked herself, was the morality of these people? Where indeed! Where the Christianity? Stop!—Christianity was an uncomfortable, an awkward suggestion. Perhaps—only perhaps, of course—the conspiring villagers had a vague conception—or shall we say misconception?—of Christ's words—"If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you your trespasses." But it was all wrong—all *very* wrong!—so Azalea vaguely repeated to herself over and over again, the while Mrs. Adcott stood looking at her in a curious, half-imploring, half-resentful way, wondering what this pretty, bright-eyed, golden-haired clergyman's wife was thinking of Shadbrook and its people. And it was Mrs. Adcott who first spoke again.

"I suppose, ma'am, ye'll be tellin' the Vicar all about it now,"—she said, and her lips trembled—"An' if ye do, I'm afraid there'll be trouble!"

"I'm sure there can be no more trouble than there is already,"—Azalea answered, very coldly—"Naturally I do not intend to keep *anything* a secret from my husband. He ought to know of this wretched, shameful scandal in his parish—and of course he will deal with it in the proper way."

Mrs. Adcott's eyes brimmed over again.

"Might I ask ye, ma'am, to wait a day or two—just till Jennie's better an' able to bear it like? For if Dan gets any blame—or Jacynth either,—he'll visit it all on Jennie. Oh, ma'am, you don't know!—you don't know! You can't tell what it is to see a man like Dan blind with drink an' love for a gel, both together—with no sense in 'im to 'ear reason an' no thought o' what he's doin',—it's worse than 'avin' a mad brute beast to deal with—it is, ma'am, God knows it is! If ye'll just wait a day or two before speakin', it'll be better for Jennie an' better for all of us—it'll be a real mercy ye're showin', an' God 'll bless ye for it!"

It was impossible not to feel touched by the simple earnestness of this poor woman, whose pleading for the better comfort of her sick neighbour was so perfectly unselfish and tender,—and Azalea, being an affectionate little thing in her way, was not entirely without sentiment. She took Mrs. Adcott's hand in her own and patted it.

"You are a very kind woman,"—she said—"And I promise you I'll not mention anything to the Vicar till Mrs. Kiernan is quite well. But then—well, then something *must* be done."

"Yes, ma'am, and perhaps God 'll show us 'ow to do it"—murmured Mrs. Adcott, tearfully—"For it's 'ard—it's terrible 'ard to 'ave a man like Dan Kiernan to manage,—there's a good many as goes mad on the drink, but none of 'em is as mad as he, an' there's often such times with 'im as I've never seen with any livin' soul, whether drunk or sober. You don't know a bit what he's like—'tain't nat'ral as you should, bein' a lady livin' well out of 'arm's way an' safe with a good 'usband o' your own,—but for us poor women it's like 'avin' the devil let loose when Dan Kiernan's at his worst."

Azalea gave a little movement of impatience and disgust.

"He's a brute!" she said decisively.

"He worn't always a brute,"—and Mrs. Adcott gave a regretful sigh—"Afore 'e came to Shadbrook I've 'eard tell 'e was a fine workman somewheres down by Tewkesbury way. But 'e thought to better hisself by comin' up 'ere where Squire

Hazlitt gives good wages for farm-work—an' of course 'ere 'e finds two publics as 'andy to 'is mouth as the village pump and 'andier, an' so 'e goes from good to bad as easy as a child tumblin' downstairs. It's the drink, ma'am—it's nothin' but the drink as is the curse o' the whole village."

Azalea shrugged her graceful shoulders and raised her pretty eyebrows as one who despised the contemptible weakness of the whole human race. But she said nothing on the subject, simply because she knew very well there was nothing to say. The 'Drink Question' was and is one of these inexhaustible topics on which both Parliament and Press discourse perpetually in the most obvious and worn-out platitudes. It is a national evil which is for ever being deplored in the most eloquently rounded periods by gentlemen who at the same time do all they can to increase the profits obtained by the sale of spirituous liquors to the million, and who, while they nobly denounce the intemperance of the people, forget to equally denounce the equally intemperate and criminal adulteration of those same spirituous liquors by such of their friends in the House of Commons who are brewers and whisky distillers. It is all very well to blame the people for drinking poison, but the worst of the evil is with the national Government, which not only allows poison to be made and sold freely, but which actually legalises the sale, and not unfrequently rewards some of the chief Poisoners with Peerages and other titles of honour. Pretty Azalea Everton, for instance, was not half or quarter as rich in this world's goods as ugly Mrs. Minchin, the brewer's wife,—yet Azalea's husband was a good and honest man, and Mrs. Minchin's better half was a hypocritical Fraud. Why, then, should fortune or providence appear to favour Fraud more than Honesty? This was the purely personal question which Azalea put to herself by way of an unuttered comment on Mrs. Adcott's jeremiad; it was no use, she said inwardly, no use at all for Richard to take parish matters so much to heart, for improvement was impossible so long as two public-houses dominated the village. Minchin was the supreme ruler of the

place and its inhabitants—and for a clergyman—a 'man of God' to contend with a man of Belial was as if an idealist should contend with an usurer.

"It is a great pity,"—she said, at last, after a pause—"that the people are not sensible enough to see where drink is bound to lead them, and that they do not try to be better. If they denied themselves a little and prayed to God to help them——"

She hesitated here and coloured a little,—she had a kind of instinctive feeling that her words were but wasted breath.

"Ah!"—and Mrs. Adcott shook her head dismally—"Prayin' God don't do much good! Many's the woman who's been all night on 'er knees a-prayin' an' a-prayin' God to keep 'er man from drink, an' ten to one 'e'll come 'ome and fetch 'er a blow on the 'ed for 'avin' set up for 'im. Marriage ain't all a bed o' roses, ma'am, an' I often thinks when we sez 'for better for worse' at the altar, we've not much notion what the worse is like or we'd 'ang ourselves afore we ever got married at all! There goes Jacynth now!"

Moved by a quick curiosity Mrs. Everton went to the cottage window and peeped out. The sun was shining brightly by this time, and on the opposite side of the road Jacynth Miller was walking, dressed in a plain blue cotton gown, her hair braided in shining coils round her graceful head, and a knot of primroses fastened careiessly at her throat. She was smiling to herself—there was a lovely colour on her cheeks,—her step was light and buoyant—she looked not only a happy girl, but a good girl,—a girl full of the careless innocence of some forest animal that thinks no evil because it knows none.

"She's got a rare deceivin' face of 'er own,"—said Mrs. Adcott, watching her—"An' it'll take in a good many more men besides Dan Kiernan!"

Mrs. Everton moved from the window. Her charming features had grown suddenly hard and cold. She was annoyed; and she had not the moral courage to admit to herself that the cause of her annoyance was Jacynth's singular beauty. The conviction that she is virtuous cannot always atone to a

woman for the triumph of vice. Nor can the possessor of a pretty face be entirely satisfied with the contemplation of a prettier one.

"I must be going now,"—she said stiffly—"Please send up to the Vicarage if you want anything for Mrs. Kiernan. I don't think she will worry over what I have said—because—you see—she doesn't believe it——"

"It's a good thing if she doesn't,"—said Mrs. Adcott, sorrowfully—"But there's many a woman as *says* she doesn't believe bad news just for the pride o' not complainin', when all the time the knife's in 'er 'art. Howsomever, I'll do my best to keep Jennie quiet till she gets 'er strength up."

"And, of course," went on Mrs. Everton—"as I have promised you, I shall say nothing to the Vicar about this *most* painful business—not at present. I think, however,"—here she paused and reflected—"I think if Jacynth Miller did the proper thing, she would leave the village."

"It's quite likely she will, ma'am,"—and Mrs. Adcott smoothed her apron down with rather trembling hands—"There's plenty o' men as 'ull take 'er!"

"Plenty of men!" echoed Azalea in surprise—"Plenty of men who—who *know*?"

Mrs. Adcott gave one emphatic nod which spoke volumes. Azalea was shocked and disgusted.

"Well—good-morning!" she said, rather hurriedly.

"Good-mornin', ma'am."

And the world, as epitomised in Shadbrook, seemed a very strange place to the Vicar's pretty young wife as she tripped lightly away on her little high heels back to her own home. It never occurred to her to think that she had done no good by her visit to Jennie Kiernan, but rather harm,—and she had no foresight or skill to calculate the extent to which the harm might lead. She was one of the many who judge the poor by the rich,—or rather, who consider the poor as a class of beings altogether apart from the rich, hardly to be counted in with ordinary humanity,—a species of savage as it were, to be treated differently, fed differently, talked to differently,

and instructed differently. The one broad grand fact so plainly set forth in Scripture, that 'God is no respecter of persons,' carried no conviction to her mind,—she and her husband were, she felt, altogether of a finer quality to the gross material composing the parishioners of Shadbrook, and she saw not a shadow of resemblance between her 'baby Laurence' and the little village urchins who crawled down to the side of the dirty brook on fine days and made mud pies till they looked the very offspring of the mud themselves. And though she knew that her religious creed demanded that she should believe that we are one and all the same before God, she could not resist the temptation of making certain definitions which were narrowed or widened according to her mood of the moment. As she went through the Vicarage garden on her way into the house, she passed her husband's study window. She saw him writing busily at his desk—but he looked up as he heard her footstep on the gravel path and nodded and smiled at her. And then—

"How dreadful it all is!" she thought—"I suppose he actually thinks Shadbrook is a moral village, and that he is helping to keep it so! And he isn't the least bit of use—I'm sure he isn't—not the very least little bit!"

CHAPTER V

AS a natural consequence of his wife's visit to Mrs. Kiernan, Everton could gain from her very little information as to the injured woman's actual condition beyond the fact that she was 'very bad.'

"And very miserable," added Azalea, as an afterthought—"I wish, Dick, you could get Dan Kiernan out of the village."

"That's impossible,"—said the Vicar, gently—"Every man has a right to live where he likes, provided he pays his way."

"But if he is a positive scandal—a disgrace to the neighbourhood!" exclaimed Azalea, with indignantly flashing eyes.

"Well, my dear child, it must be my business to try and reform him,—I can't turn him out!" and Richard smiled—"Have you ever thought, Azalea, what would happen if the clergy were allowed to summarily eject all drunkards from their several parishes?"

She pouted. "No, I haven't! You are laughing at me, Dick—but you don't see the seriousness of the case——"

"Oh yes, I do!—no one realises the horror of the drink craze more forcibly than I do,—but—as I have just suggested, if we parsons could carry matters with such high authority as to banish all drunkards out of their chosen habitations wherever we find them, I'm afraid—I really am afraid, Azalea, that our parishioners would be rather scarce!"

"Then you think there are drunkards everywhere as bad as Kiernan?" she said.

"I not only think it—I know it!" he answered, and a cloud of sadness shadowed his features—"For there are public-houses

"Oh no, Dick!—nothing of that kind. Only—I was thinking,—people often do 'pretend,' don't they?"

He laughed.

"They do!—most assuredly!" he answered—"A great portion of what we call our 'social' life is made up of nothing but social lies. But because such a condition of things exists we need not admire it, or lend our aid in any way to support it."

She looked down and carefully fitted the point of her little shoe into the pattern of the carpet.

"You wouldn't approve of a lie on any occasion, would you?" she asked—"Not even to cover up the sins of somebody very dear to you?"

He was a little surprised at the question, and considered it a moment.

"No—I don't think so,"—he replied, at last—"Personally, I think truth is always best. Because, to begin with, it is the unwritten law of the universe that what *is* shall remain, and that what only *seems* shall perish. Therefore, we do ourselves wrong when we run counter to the Divine Mathematics. While a sinner conceals his sins he is self-condemned; when he confesses them he is at once half redeemed."

"Then you would forgive any wicked persons who confessed their wickedness?" queried Azalea, still looking at the carpet.

"My dear girl, you make me quite anxious!" Here approaching her, he took her face between his two hands, and studied its lovely colouring fondly—"Have you been doing anything *very* wrong?"

At this she laughed, and her eyes danced with merriment.

"Not very!" she answered gaily—"I'll confess to you at once when I *have* trespassed against any of the Ten Commandments—you may be sure of that!" She raised herself on the tips of her toes and kissed him—"You are a dear old Dick! You never suspect anything or anybody!"

At that moment a knock came at the study door, and on Everton's calling "Come in," the parlourmaid entered, bringing a small visiting card on a large silver salver.

"This gentleman would like to see you, sir,"—she said.

Everton took up the card and read its small neat superscription: 'Sebastien Douay.'

"I don't know the name,"—he began dubiously.

"He told me he was a stranger to you, sir,"—said the parlourmaid—"He particularly wished to see the church. He's quite a gentleman."

"Oh very well—just show him into the drawing-room, and say I'll come in a moment."

The maid retired.

"Don't ask him to luncheon!" implored Azalea—"Whoever he is, Dick, *don't* do that!"

Everton laughed.

"As if I should ask any fellow to luncheon without knowing something about him!" he said—"Really, Azalea, you *are* a quaint little woman!"

"Well, sometimes you are *rather* impulsive,"—she answered. "We see so few people down here that if a *very* pleasant man turns up, it is no wonder you don't want him to go away again at once." Here she also looked at the visitor's card. "Sebastien Douay! Oh, that's a French name. He's a foreigner."

"Let us beware of him then,"—said Everton, smiling—"Let us be on our guard like true-born Britons who view everything un-British with dark suspicion! Yet even a native of France may be a man and a brother all the same, mayn't he?"

"Of course he may!—Oh, Dick, why are you so nonsensical! But I don't want this particular man and brother invited to stop to luncheon, no matter how nice and agreeable he is."

"All right! But may I ask why?"

"Because there's only cold mutton. There!" declared Azalea, quite desperately—"And however you put it, cold mutton is a comfortless thing, even *with* salad and hot potatoes. You can *never* get over the cheerlessness of it! *We* don't mind it, because of course if we have a joint of mutton at all in the house it *has* to be eaten cold sometimes, but strangers always feel the *dismalness* of it *so* much!"

Everton nodded with good-humoured significance.

"Very well!—I won't argue the point!" he said—"But if every hungry fellow in the world could get a slice of cold mutton for the asking, the 'dismalness' might not be so very dismal after all!"

He went off then, and entering the drawing-room found his visitor standing with hands clasped behind his back, looking meditatively out of the window into the garden. He was a little man, with a clean-shaven round chubby face, and a pleasant smile which sparkled up from his lips to his eyes in a very taking and kindly way. He was dressed in a clerical surtout, buttoned up tightly to the throat,—and a soft felt hat of the approved 'churchman' model lay on a chair beside him.

"I must demand one thousand pardons!" he said, in somewhat imperfect English, turning round as Everton entered—"Poss-eebly it is not the time to call upon the clergyman to see the church?"

"Pray don't apologise!" replied Everton quickly, extending a hand in frank courtesy—"My time is quite at your disposal for an hour at least. You are most welcome to see the church—I'll take you round there at once, especially as you are of my own calling——"

"Ah non!"—and the little man gave a deprecatory gesture, "I will not permit you to mistake me! I am a priest of the 'True' Church—the Roman Catholique"—here his eyes twinkled with a most agreeable facetiousness—"But that shall make no difference, shall it, in our leetle meeting?"

Everton was quite charmed with the vivacious simplicity of his manner.

"Certainly not!" he said heartily—"We both serve the same Master."

"Not so!" and his visitor shook a forefinger knowingly in the air—"Not so by long ways! You serve the King—I serve the Pope! Two big personages that must nevare agree!"

Everton smiled rather gravely.

"I mean," he said—"a greater Master than either."

"Ah yes! You mean the good Christ. But nobody serves Him at all in our times—nobody!" He snapped his fingers, still smiling. "His name is une convenance! C'est tout! Let us see the church!"

A little puzzled, and not knowing quite what to say, Everton opened the long latticed windows of the drawing-room which led out immediately to the lawn, and escorted his new acquaintance through the garden to a private gate communicating with the churchyard.

"You have my name?" proceeded the little priest—"Sebastien Douay? Yes! That is me. Ah, so short while ago I was le père Douay—notre cher petit père—so the children of my village called me—ah oui!—a village not large—no, not so large as this Shadbrook"—he spread out his hand descriptively—"but charmant! Now Madame la Republique Française has swept me out with all that she calls her church rubbish—she has swept me and so many more into England! And here I am!—and to this place I wander like what you call a tramp—is it not so?"

"Your Church," said Everton slowly—"is making many converts in this country—I should think you would find plenty of friends here."

"Friends? Oh, for that!" Here he gave a shrug more expressive than words. "Yes, there are many, if you will do just as they tell you! But not if you desire to do something for yourself! I have just come from a leetle, very leetle place in Warwickshire—where there is a leetle, very leetle church—the curé is ill and poor—ah! so very poor!—and while he has been ill, the Bishop ask me to take the service—and when I say my bad English will not please, he say 'Bah! The people are so stupid they will not mind,'—and that is true! So I say the Mass and confess the stupid people—but I do very leetle preaching—they would not comprehend me—no!—they can perhaps follow the Latin in their missals—but I do not ask them to follow my English in the pulpit—no!—that would be a cruelty!"

He laughed, and Everton laughed with him. There was

something quite infectious in his cheery personality. They had by this time reached the church,—a quaint grey stone edifice, small, but of perfect proportion in every line, with a genuine Early Norman porch, and ivy clinging tenderly around its ancient square tower. It was a very quiet, peaceful little place, shadowed in its venerable tranquillity by a few tall old trees among which some rooks were evidently thinking of building their nests, for they were cawing to each other persistently as though the time for housekeeping had already begun. The churchyard was scrupulously clean and well-kept, and only a few of last year's leaves had fluttered down from the overhanging branches on some of the neatly trimmed graves. A sense of sweet repose softened by tender melancholy hung about this small 'God's Acre,' and appeared to touch some chord in the emotions of the exiled 'père Douay'—for he paused at a small rounded hillock which covered the mortal remains of a child, 'aged Three Years,' where a knot of white lilies lay fresh upon the wet turf, and said gently:

"Ah the pity! Those flowers mean so much broken heart! The leetle laughing child gone!—the sweet lilies so pure and still! Sometimes—yes!—it is wrong to say it—but sometimes I feel that God must be sorry to be obliged to kill so many pretty things which He has made!"

Everton offered no reply. The words at once recalled Mrs. Moddley's remark as repeated by her hopeful son—"Mother don't see 'ow God can bear to live watchin' all the poor folks die what He's made Hisself!" The thought was the same as that expressed by his present visitor, though differently worded. He took a large key out of his pocket and with it unfastened the church door.

"I see you lock up the dear Lord!" said Douay, with a little smile—"You keep Him a prisoner! Not so do we Catholiques. We leave our church doors open—we make the Lord always to be at home! If a man or woman is naughty, he or she can enter and say a prayer and try to be sorry. At one time, I am sure, in the history of this church, the Lord was also at home in it?"

Everton took this query without any offence.

"Of course, in the past, this church, like all the churches of England, was Roman Catholic," he said—"Up to the time of the Reformation, masses were said in it every day,—and I believe that even during Elizabeth's reign and despite all her laws against Catholics, secret masses were held in the crypt. The crypt is the most ancient part of the building—the genuine remains of the former hermitage. You know, I suppose, that it was once a hermit's chapel?"

Douay nodded emphatically.

"Of hermits I always read much!" he said—"They amaze me! That they should wish to leave society is not a matter for surprise,—but that they should live quite alone, and on hard beans and water, is all beyond my comprehension. I at once say it is not for me. A hermitage *à deux* would be more agreeable!"

He laughed—and Everton thought him frivolous. Douay saw and understood his expression, and his bright grey eyes twinkled yet more humorously.

"You are married, Mistaire Everton?" he asked. A slight flush warmed the Vicar's pale face.

"Yes," he answered—"I have been married three years."

"Ah! That is early days! I felicitate you!" and Douay made him a fantastic little bow, which was half jocose, and half complimentary—"You are still in Paradise!"

They passed through the porchway and entered the church itself. It was a very unassuming little interior, strictly in conformity with the formerly professed simplicity of the Church of England. The ugly part of it was, as is usual in many churches, the seating accommodation—this being the too familiar hard rows of light oak pews which much more suggest benches for a lecture hall than for a place of prayer. The roof was finely arched, and was supported on eight noble stone columns which mutely testified to the architectural skill of their long ago forgotten designer, while the chancel, though lofty and spacious, was spoilt by four modern stained-glass windows which, in their conception and colouring, might have

found fitting place in a twentieth-century hotel 'lounge,' but which were much too crude and gaudy for a house of worship.

"Those windows are an eyesore,"—said Everton, noticing Douay's quizzical expression as he looked at them—"But they were put in by Squire Hazlitt, the patron of the living, in memory of his deceased relations. He is a very good, kindly man, but unfortunately he has no taste for what is reverent and noble in art."

"Like so many good, kindly men!" smiled Douay—"Par exemple, like that most excellent personage who wished to put a sculptured memorial of his actress-wife immediately opposite the bust of Shakespeare, in Stratford-on-Avon Church. He would have done it, too, if he had not most fortunately been caught on a point of law and so prevented. Imagine! Your great Shak-es-peare face to face with a modern actress-lady in his own burial-place! Ha-ha! What a stupidity! But no doubt the amiable provincial gentlemen concerned in the scheme, settled it over a glass of wine at dinner, and could not understand that they were ignorant and irreverent enough to make the whole world laugh at them! Your Squire is like that—he does not see any laugh in these comic windows!"

Here he turned towards the font, which was a very ancient one, circular in shape and supported on a single column in the centre, with small auxiliary corner columns round it bearing curious devices of sculptured animals and flowers.

"This is good!" he said—"This is of the old faith time! And it recalls to me a leetle story of baptism. In the place where I have been in Warwickshire, there came to me one poor woman very brown and dirty—a geep-sy—with a very small girl bébé. She say to me: 'I have no money—I am poor geep-sy—will you give the name to my leetle bébé?' I ask her if she is Catholique and she say yes. So I take the leetle bébé and I baptize it with so very curious name——" He paused reflectively—"Let me see!—yes—Ar—ar—yes!—Arminellia! Imagine! For a geep-sy! Arminellia! C'est drôle! Then the poor geep-sy thank me and beg of me two shillings—she is so poor, she say—but you laugh? Why?"

For Everton's face expressed the most whimsical merriment, and his blue eyes danced with fun.

"I know that gipsy!" he said—"And I wonder how many times and in how many churches her helpless infant will be baptized! I baptized it myself the other day—gave it the same name—Arminellia—and gave the mother the same requested two shillings! She was a Church of England woman then!"

Their glances met, and they both smiled.

"We are what you English call 'done'!" said Douay gaily, 'But the leetle Arminellia is quite safe! Safe for this world and also for the next. If she go to one gate of Heaven she will find St. Peter—he say—'Are you Catholique?' 'Yes,' she say—'le père Douay has baptize me true Catholique.' So she pass St. Peter. If she go to another gate she meet St. Paul. 'Are you Protestant?' he say—'Yes—the clergyman of Shadbrook, Mistaire Everton, has baptize me true Protestant.' So she pass St. Paul! My friend, we have been careful for Arminellia! Shake hands upon it!"

Everton laughed gently, and entering into the spirit of the thing, clasped Douay's outstretched hand with ready cordiality.

"After all," continued Douay—"we are the same poor servants together—trying to perform our Master's orders without always comprehending them!"

Everton made no reply, and they presently left the church. Douay was interested in everything he saw,—he admired the landscape, now looking fresh and radiant in the unobscured glory of the noon-day sun—he paused to listen to a thrush singing,—and his amiable round face expressed so much contentment, good-humour and affability, that more than once Everton was sorely tempted to trespass against his wife's injunction and ask his visitor to stay to luncheon, despite the humiliating prospect of cold mutton. But he feared that Azalea might be really put out in her housekeeping arrangements if he did this after the urgent request she had made to him, for even the sweetest of wives may be apt to suffer from

a little flurry of temper over unexpected domestic difficulties, just as the prettiest rose may have a crumpled petal. Moved by these considerations he paused at the entrance gate of the Vicarage garden to bid his visitor farewell.

"Are you staying in the village?" he asked.

"Not so very far away,"—replied Douay—"I have an apartement in a cottage on the hill,—near a very big ugly house which they tell me is the house of one Monsieur Minchin, the brewer. Ah, how fortunate it is to brew the beer in England! To make the poor people drunk and to live on the profits! Excellent!"

"I wish I could talk to you about that!" said Everton, with quick earnestness—"I know that drink is the curse of our country, and yet I deny with all my soul that we are an intemperate people! We are *not*! We are by nature a steady, sober, God-fearing people. But we permit ourselves to be duped and cheated. Our easy-going good-nature gives us into the hands of fraudulent scoundrels, and our Government freely licenses the poisoners of our brains and bodies, so that they may continue to poison us for their own advantage and yet go scot free. There is nothing I feel more acutely than the hopeless position of the unhappy wretches who are classed as 'drunkards.' They are simply *poisoned*!—and the drinking of poison sets up a poisonous craving which is fostered—nay pampered—by the very laws of the country. We clergy can do nothing, because there has been so much cant and humbug talked about 'temperance' by certain of our cloth who, while preaching against drink, actually invest their savings in brewery and distillery shares, that very naturally the 'drunkards' themselves despise such hypocrisy and double-dealing! I say, and I will always maintain, that there would be few 'drunkards' if honest liquors were sold to the people instead of noxious drugs."

Sebastien Douay heard him attentively.

"That is your theory,"—he said—"You may be right. Again—you may be wrong! I know men—and women too—who love poison! It is to them what you call ambrosia. No

one can do anything to stop this craving. All the kings—all the popes—all the preaching—all the prayer——no use! No use, my friend!" and he laid one hand kindly on Everton's arm,—"Once upon a time the leetle priest—like myself—could do something. The Church Catholique had its terrors. It could frighten the bad man. Hell on one side—Heaven on the other! Now—all no use! No one believes any more in Hell or Heaven! Each poor ignorant man makes his 'new theology' to his own liking. The only God that is served in to-day's Church, press and politique is—Self!"

His voice quivered—and his features grew dark with a shadow of stern sorrow.

"Mistaire Everton," he continued, raising his eyes with an almost pathetic wistfulness—"I have known what it is to love my little parish—my small village in France, to which I shall return no more. I loved the men and women—the leetle children,—my heart opened over them like the wings of a bird that would shelter its young. I prayed day and night that I might help to make them as God would have them to be,—the men noble, the women pure,—the maidens innocent,—the children happy! See how my prayer is answered! I am turned away from them altogether—I wander here in England where I am told the Catholique faith will again rule as of old—but I much doubt it!—and maybe they will give me a leetle church presently. But it will not be my home—and they will not be my people. And I have no more hopes of doing good—no, none at all! I will not expect to reform the drunkard—my good sir, that is imposs-eeble! Nor will I expect to make the brewers and the spirit distillers honest men—that is more imposs-eeble still! I have tried many ways of serving the people—all no use!—now I am content to do very little—scarcely nothing at all—I say my prayers—I look at nature—I hear the birds sing—and I have pity—ah, mon Dieu!—what pity I have for every living soul!"

There was something quite thrilling in the intense melancholy of his tone as he spoke—and Everton was strangely moved.

"Yet we must believe,"—he said, slowly—"that all will be well!"

"Yes—we must believe!"—and Douay's face brightened once more into a kindly smile—"We must believe—you in your way, and I in mine! And not till some great sorrow breaks our hearts shall we know how much our belief is worth, my friend! Good-bye! We must meet again!"

"We must indeed!" replied Everton eagerly—"I shall call and see you——"

"Do! You will always find me in at the hour of the Angelus—for then I say a prayer for my little parish in France,—so far away!"

He smiled again, but there was a suspicious gleam of something like tears in his eyes. Another cordial pressure of Everton's hand and he had gone,—walking briskly down the road into the village between a double row of leafless elms which made Gothic cathedral arches of their brown branches against the now cloudless blue of the quiet sky. Everton looked after his retreating figure for some minutes, absorbed in thought. A curious sudden sense of desolation oppressed him,—a dreary conviction of the futility of things—of the waste of honest effort; of the vanity and folly of trying to do good when good was so often swept away and overcome.

"Now there is a man,"—he said to himself, reverting to the disappearing Douay,—"who evidently loved the work he had to do in his own country. He was satisfied with his little parish—he was not for ever asking, as I am, whether a little parish was wide enough for his energies;—he loved his people, and he was no doubt a friend to them—and yet—apparently his efforts are all so much lost time! And I—am I any better than he? Suppose I were to wear out my heart and brain to shreds in trying to purge this one village of its besetting evil, drink—I should never do it—never! I am no worker of miracles, and all the odds are against me. What use am I? Will God ever give sufficient power into my hands to save a single human creature? Almost I doubt it!"

He turned and walked slowly back to the Vicarage, and as he entered the hall, his wife tripped forward to meet him.

"Oh, Dick, what a funny looking little foreigner that man was!" she exclaimed—"I saw him gesticulating beside you in the churchyard. Is he a clergyman?"

"Yes—but not one of our faith,"—Everton replied—"He is a Roman Catholic priest."

"And whatever is he doing here?" queried Azalea, slipping a coaxing hand through her husband's arm—"I don't believe there's a single Roman Catholic in Shadbrook."

Richard smiled.

"Well, it's not likely he came to look after any stray sheep on the Cotswolds,"—he answered—"They're too scattered for that. He had some interest in seeing the church—which, of course, used to be a Roman Catholic one. He is exiled from France—or at any rate he seems to consider himself exiled—he has lost his living out there, and I suppose he is, like so many 'vagrant' priests in England just now, waiting orders from his superiors. He's a very good chap—and really, Azalea, if you had not made such a point of my not doing so, I should have asked him to luncheon."

Azalea made a round O of her pretty mouth.

"A Roman Catholic priest!" she echoed, wonderingly—"Would you *really*, Dick?"

"Why, of course I should!" and he laughed—"A Roman Catholic priest wants his midday meal as much as any Protestant parson, doesn't he? This man interested me very much—I should have liked a good long talk with him."

Azalea made no remark. She knew that her husband's lack of companionship with his own sex was one of the great drawbacks to his position as Vicar of Shadbrook,—and there was a little twinge of self-reproach in her heart, as she thought that had it not been for her remark on what she considered to be the deficiencies of the prospective luncheon, he would have had some slight relaxation from the monotonous routine of his daily life in exchanging ideas with a possibly amusing and intelligent stranger. And she watched him with an odd

expression of childish penitence as he glanced at the clock.

"Half an hour yet before we sit down to the cold mutton!" he said cheeriiy—"Just time to wrlte a few letters. No more news of the Kiernans, I suppose?"

"No—none,"—she replied, conscious of a certain inward thankfulness that her domestic peace had not, so far, been again fluttered by the worrying complaints and demands of troublesome or refractory parishioners.

Thereupon he went into his study, shutting the door gently behind him, as a sign that he wished to be leît alone and undisturbed.

CHAPTER VI

WITHIN the solitude of his own room Everton gave himself up to a spell of quiet thinking. There was time, as he had said to his wife, to write a few letters,—but he did not so much as take pen in hand to commence them. Seated in his desk chair, he looked almost unseeingly out on the fair garden prospect in front of his windows, and began wondering, as lately he had often wondered, what had come over the spirit of the Church of Christ, that it should apparently find itself unequal to stand against the storm of materialism and atheism which, with shock upon shock, had of recent years begun to batter down the formerly strong citadel of Faith. With an acute morbidity of memory he counted up the dozens of modern 'sects' and 'societies' and 'theologies' which nowadays assume to be the most reliable and accurate expositions of the 'Truth,'—and with a deep sigh, wrung from his very heart's core, he realised that Pilate's famous question to the Divine Crucified, was not yet answered.

"We are a thousand times less devout and less earnest than the early Christians,"—he said, speaking half aloud, as though to some invisible companion of his meditations—"Instead of growing stronger, we have grown weaker;—instead of keeping Christ's teaching pure and undefiled, we have overloaded it with our own foolish systems till it is like a grain of gold lost in a million tons of clay. Happy were those who in the past could suffer for Christ's sake, and testify their love to Him by the witness of their lives laid down for the honour and glory of His Holy Name!"

He rose and paced the room slowly. 'How few there were, he thought, in the present times, who would endure the slightest personal pain or inconvenience with joy because they believed Christ had ordained it! Like a visionary pageant passing before the eyes of his fancy, he saw the proud and self-confident Heads of the Church—both Roman Catholic and Protestant—arrogating to themselves something of Divine authority,—elated with their own importance in the world of politics and society,—eager to obtain as much money as possible for the furtherance of their own several systems, and heedless whether such money were wrested from the pockets of the poor or the coffers of the rich,—indiscriminately using for their own purposes the supernatural terrors of hells and heavens of their own invention to scare the ignorant or flatter the vain —and he asked himself with a kind of passion in the demand, "*Is* this Christ? Is it what He came to teach—what He died to emphasise and enforce?" And the answer came ringing clear and true from the innermost depths of his conscience—

"No! The Creed of the Churches is not the Creed of Christ! It is man's work, formulated to suit the craving of man's egotism—and from it spring a thousand weed-like sprouts of mysticism and so-called 'scientific catechisms' which merely confuse the poor human soul and lead it deeper and ever deeper into the mire. We have deserted the plain and simple teaching of Our Lord for a tangle of perplexing and opposing doctrines,—and instead of helping to guide us out of the various misrepresentations that tend to disguise His Divine command, our bishops and archbishops sit silent and inert amid the clamour of conflicting argument, and not one of them has the courage to pronounce in his own person one straight convincing word which might silence the *un*-Christian uproar. Surely the days are upon us of which our Saviour spoke when He said:—'He that is an hireling and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming and leaveth the sheep and fleeth, and the wolf catcheth them and scattereth the sheep.' And in this sense our archbishops and bishops are 'hirelings'; for the wolf is devouring the fold!"

He threw himself again into his chair, and his mind reverted to the little priest, Sebastien Douay, who had said so lightly that the name of Christ nowadays was 'une convenance—c'est tout!'

"He must think it,—he must know it—or else he would not say it,"—murmured Everton—"For he seems a simple-hearted man who seeks to do his best, and who probably *has* done his best in his service to his own Church. And it is evident that he feels the futility of it all,—the impotence of his own efforts—as keenly as I do!"

Here the flitting memory of a girl's face floated before him; the brilliant, beautiful face of Jacynth Miller, with her mutinous eyes and curved red mouth—and he gave an impatient gesture as he asked himself whether he could, as the Vicar of the parish, honestly say that she was a lover of and believer in Christ. He knew he could not. Yet she attended church regularly,—and in outward Sunday observance at least, she was a follower of the Christian faith. But in her inward nature she was a positive pagan, whose 'creed' was that of beauty, sensuality, and the purely animal enjoyment of life. How many of his parishioners were, according to their several tastes and inclinations, in a precisely similar condition? How many, if put to the test, would be willing to suffer for Christ's sake? Nay—how many—to put it quite roughly—would be ready to forego even a glass of beer, if asked to do so for the honour and dignity of their religion as Christians? Probably not one! He smiled rather drearily at the thought. For his difficult task was to be the minister of the most noble and perfect Gospel ever enunciated for the needs of man, to a village community whose dearest aims in life were high wages for as little labour as possible, and as much drink as could conveniently be swallowed in the twenty-four hours of the day!

"I shall never move them to a higher view of things,"—he said—"Nor will any one. Not only in Shadbrook, but all over the Christian world, the same indifference prevails—and unless the 'hirelings' rouse themselves from their shameful lethargy to give some sort of an honest warning cry, the

wolves will have their way. Oh for the power of a far-reaching eloquence!—a fiery tongue of the first Pentecost such as should not only warn, but most convincingly persuade! —and oh, that God would only help me in my task and let me understand to the full the meaning of His 'Holy Orders'!"

His eyes flashed and his face grew warm with the light of a sudden hope and inspiration,—then, as was usually the custom whenever he yielded to any touch of exalted or impersonal emotion, the Commonplace asserted itself in the ringing of the luncheon bell. It made such an incongruous clashing with his thoughts that he laughed at himself for having, just for one moment, dreamed of great things that might be done were he only given the chance to do them. And then with a serene step and cheerful countenance, he went to his cold mutton refection and listened patiently for more than an hour to his wife's light chatter about various domestic affairs which to her were the principal aim and end of existence. For she made no secret of her dislike to what she called 'soul talks.'

"I know it's very wrong,"—she would declare, with a charmingly repentant look at her husband from under her soft, up-curling eyelashes—"But I don't really care a bit about anybody's soul, because I can't understand what it is. If it were a hand, or a foot, or a nose, I should, of course, want to take care of it and not lose it, but a 'soul'!—now, you know, Dick, you don't know very well yourself what it is! It's so vague—so—so—*uncatchable*!" She laughed, and was not at all checked in her merriment by Richard's serious glance at her. "It's so nice,"—she went on—"to look at the picture of Psyche, and see her holding the little butterfly in her hand, —she *did* catch it!—she *must* have caught it!—but even in the picture or statue, or whatever it is, the poor 'soul' is half dead and she's warming it up to life again——"

"I think you mis-read the allegory," said Everton, gently— "Psyche herself stands for the Soul, and the butterfly is—I believe—I may be wrong,—an emblem of the Life which the Soul makes immortal."

"Oh, but fancy Life itself being no more than a butterfly!"

Azalea exclaimed—"That *can't* be right, Dick! Anyhow, whatever it is, I can't feel very great interest in the souls of people — I'm not much taken with their bodies, you know!—their bodies are *too* awful, sometimes,—and their souls —well!—oh! I'd rather not think about them!"

No theological argument could possibly arise out of these easy, inconsequent statements,—and Everton had learned by experience not to expect from his young wife what was not in her nature to give. Sometimes he wished that she would interest herself more sympathetically in the troubles and needs of the very poorest and most ailing among his parishioners,—but he found that her fastidious sense of cleanliness and order was frequently affected almost to physical nausea by the dirt and slovenliness of such unhappy human creatures as, driven by sheer incapacity to the wall, had fallen into the desperate condition of not caring for themselves or for anybody else, so that it seemed a kind of cruelty to insist on sending such a dainty fairy-like little woman into the midst of hopeless squalor which she had neither the skill nor the energy to relieve. So he spared her all the unpleasantness he could,—the unpleasantness of malodorous sick-rooms and tortured deathbeds,—and only commissioned her now and then to take a few flowers to a sick child, or go and talk to a moderately clean old woman, reserving for himself all the revolting items in the daily round of his parish duties. In his tender way he felt he had asked her to do quite an exceptional thing in visiting the bruised and battered Jennie Kiernan,—and that she had so readily and gently acceded to his wish was something of a grateful surprise to him. For he knew the truth of what she had often asserted,—namely, that she was not fitted to be a clergyman's wife,—she was too pretty. Old 'Mortar' Pike had once, in an unguarded moment, said she reminded him of a "Christmas pantomime gel—one o' them daffadown dillies as comes up through a 'ole in the stage all dressed in sparkles, a-bowin' an' a-smilin' as though the world was a box o' sweeties." Everton, on hearing this description of his wife, had emphatically demurred

to it—yet in his heart he knew there was a substratum of truth in the fanciful comparison. He could not, by way of denial, say that Azalea's looks belied her, and that her childlike and frivolous external appearance covered a profundity of unuttered wisdom. For he was perfectly aware that the pretty little creature was what her charming face and figure expressed her to be—just a pretty little creature, and no more. But he loved her prettiness with all the passion of a man in whom passion was often strongly repressed, and he found an exquisite pleasure in watching the rosy colour flush her cheeks, or the sunshine play among her gold hair,—she was all the beauty of woman for him in one dainty bundle of tender and fragrant charms,—his very own to caress and to adore,—and when the graver work of the day was done and he felt himself free to unbind his soul from its spiritual armour, it was with a speechless sense of gratitude to God that he drew Azalea into his arms and pressed her soft little head 'sunning over with curls' against his heart. Then it was that he was conscious of the joys of manhood, and frankly confessed himself too weak to be a comrade of angels.

On this day, however, his ordinarily kind and buoyant humour was not so spontaneous as usual,—and whether it was the cold mutton at luncheon or some other equally depressing influence in the atmosphere, it is certain that both he and the light-hearted Azalea herself were silent and more or less pre-occupied. Azalea was thinking of the Kiernans and of Jacynth Miller—Everton was absorbed in somewhat gloomy speculations as to the fate of the Churches in England. The cold mutton came and went, replaced by rice pudding and stewed apples,—altogether plain and wholesome fare, but of a nature scarcely tending to exhilarate the spirits. Azalea shivered a little.

"It's quite chilly!"—she declared—"Really I don't wonder that people abuse the English climate."

"I daresay every man abuses his own climate, if we only knew it,"—answered Everton, smiling—"One of the unfortunate results of the way our press is conducted is that

we always know exactly how *we* feel about rain, fog or snow—but we don't hear what the Italian or the Frenchman thinks of his particular drawbacks. For you may depend upon it there's no climate quite perfect."

"Think of sunny Italy!" she sighed, with a little sentimental uplifting of her eyebrows.

"Sunny Italy! I never felt the cold more cruelly intense than in Florence,"—he answered—"and when the east wind ran through me like a knife, while the sun blazed down on me like a furnace, I felt that I had been distinctly cheated by all the poets and romancists that ever made Italy a peg to hang their ragged enthusiasms upon! I believe Italy had a lovely climate once, before her foolish people took to cutting down the forests and clearing the wooded summits which broke the force of the wind—but now!—my dear Azalea, believe me, you are ever so much warmer in England than you would be in the misnamed 'City of Flowers.'"

Azalea played a dumb tune with her fingers on the tablecloth.

"I should like to travel a little,"—she said, suddenly—"I wonder if I could find some rich woman to take me with her as a companion for a couple of months?"

A coldness fell on his heart. He was curiously astonished and vaguely hurt that she should entertain even the idea of wishing to go away from him. But he gave no sign of his inward pain.

"What of Baby Laurence?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, Nurse could manage him splendidly,"—she replied merrily—"He's too young to miss me,—and she knows more about him than I do."

He was silent, controlling the desire which impelled him to press his own personal claim on her thought. At that moment the servant entered bringing a note marked 'Immediate.' He opened it and read:

"Come at once to Hadley's cottage. Bob is dying. He can't last out an hour.—H. BRAND."

With an exclamation of pity, he handed the message to his wife and rose at once from the lunch table.

"Poor Bob!" he said—"Perhaps it is as well for him that the end is near. He has suffered cruelly."

Azalea made no reply. Her cheeks had suddenly paled, and her lips trembled. Whenever her husband was called to attend a deathbed, she grew frightened and full of nervous terrors. She hated the very suggestion of death, and recoiled from it with all the shrinking hesitation of a timid child who fears to enter a dark room without a candle. Just at this moment she felt she ought to say something compassionate and sympathetic, but no words would come. She could only follow Richard meekly out of the dining-room into the study, and watch him with large scared blue eyes as he made the necessary preparations for his mournful task, taking up his Testament and Prayers for the Dying. With these in his hand he came and kissed her.

"Good-bye, darling!" he murmured, fondly—"Now don't look so wretched! You know I *must* go and try to give comfort to this poor departing soul——"

She hid her face against his arm.

"Yes—I know!"—she answered, with a kind of half sob—"But—but I always feel the same about all these kind of things—it's so *awful*! And—and—sometimes consumptive people like Bob Hadley die very hard—and struggle so much!—it's so terrible for you to have to watch him——"

He stroked her soft hair caressingly.

"No, dear, it's not so terrible as you think,"—he said gently—"God is very good,—He will not let the dying suffer more than they are able——"

"Why does He let them suffer at all?" she demanded, almost angrily, raising her head and flashing a defiant glance at him through her tear-wet lashes—"It's all so absurd and *cruel*! None of the poor people in this world ever *asked* to be born—and they're all so ignorant they don't know what to do for the best, and I think it's hard to make them suffer for what they can't help!"

"Dear little woman!" he said, soothingly—"You mustn't talk so wildly! Of course I know it's all your kind heart—

you are such a tender, affectionate little mortal that you can't bear to think of any one in pain. But everything is for the best, Azalea!—even suffering. As a true Christian, you must believe that."

"It's horrid for you to have to go and see Bob Hadley die!" she replied, inconsequently.

He had nothing to say to this. Stooping, he kissed her again and left her.

"It *is* horrid!" she repeated emphatically to the empty room,—and, running to the window, she watched him walking quickly through the garden on his way to the village—"I don't care what anybody says! It's horrid to be a clergyman—for nobody ever believes he thinks or lives according to his preaching. He's looked upon as a humbug all round, no matter how true and sincere he is. If I had been a man I would never have gone into the Church—never! I'd have been a soldier or a sailor!"—here she clenched her little fist and looked exceedingly pugnacious—"It's much more natural to fight people than to go about trying to love them, when they are most of them as distinctly *unlovable* as they can be! Look at Shadbrock! There's not a creature in it worth seeing twice! And I'm sure—*quite* sure—that when Dick knows what has been going on between Dan Kiernan and Jacynth Miller, and how all the village has kept him in the dark about it, he'll be disgusted—simply disgusted with the whole parish! And no wonder!"

This little soliloquy over, she felt relieved,—and presently reflecting on the nature of her husband's immediate errand, she came to the conclusion that certainly it was a good thing Bob Hadley should die and cease to be a trouble and expense to his mother.

"For consumption *is* infectious, and it might spread through the village if he were not taken away as soon as possible,"—she thought—"And I shall not know much about it all—for Dick never tells me anything that is *really* unpleasant, because he knows I don't like it."

This was quite true. Whatever scenes of wretchedness

Everton was confronted with in the exercise of his duties, he never allowed his wife to hear anything that might put her to unnecessary pain, or cause her possible distress of mind. In his extreme delicacy or thought for her he forgot, or rather he had never realised, that she was not of a temperament to feel pain where it did not personally concern her, and that she was the very last of creatures in the world to suffer from mental anxiety on behalf of any one outside her own small domestic circle. She had all the pretty egotism of a kitten which thinks that every ball of worsted in the world is made specially for it to play with,—and it was just this kittenish charm that saved her from being called openly selfish.

Everton meanwhile made the best of his walking speed to arrive as quickly as he could on the scene to which he had been so hastily summoned. 'Hadley's Cottage,' as it was commonly called, was situated at the extreme end of 'old' Shadbrook, and stood somewhat removed from the high-road with its back set against the green slope of a wooded hill. Two of its small latticed windows were open, and through these there came a dreadful sound of incessant groaning, broken by sharp fierce cries of,—

"Jacynth! Jacynth! Hold her! Keep her fast where she is! Don't let her go!"

The Vicar heard,—and his face grew very grave. He knocked at the door, which was opened for him at once by a grey-haired woman whose eyes were red and swollen with crying, and who at the mere sight of him broke into fresh tears.

"Oh, Mr. Everton, my boy!" she sobbed—"My poor, poor boy! He's going fast!—oh, he's going away from me! And he doesn't know me—his own mother!—he won't look at me—he only calls for Jacynth, Jacynth all the time! And she came to see him last night and stayed with him an hour,—and he's been like mad ever since—just like mad! And early this morning he broke a blood-vessel with coughing—and we sent for the doctor and he's been, and he's coming back again directly—but it's all no use—no use! Oh, what shall I do!—what shall I do!"

Everton pressed her hand gently, but said nothing. He was accustomed to scenes of despair among the poor; and he knew by sad experience that though, when in health, they have the habit of talking about death when it comes to others, as though it were the most congenial of themes for conversation, they are invariably taken aback and shaken from their ground altogether when the real Terror visits their own homes. Quietly he entered the cottage and stepped into the little room where the dying man lay—a room that had grown sadly familiar to him during the past six months, for in the round of his ministrations to the sick he had never missed a daily visit to Bob Hadley, partly on account of the hopeless nature of the sufferer's disease, and partly because the poor fellow had shown so much patience and courage in combating with the inevitable. He was only twenty-two years old—and through much pain and mental anguish, had displayed a martyr's quiet heroism and resignation—never complaining of the fate that was relentlessly cutting the thread of his life ere he had time to weave it into a useful pattern, and always expressing such a cheery faith in God and a future immortal existence, that Everton had grown to look upon him as a kind of lesson to himself and others,—a model example of the strength which is spiritually bestowed on those who in the crucial moment of adversity fix their faith unswervingly on the saving power of the Divine. Therefore he was painfully startled when, instead of the humble and docile youth who had listened for many weeks so gratefully to his kindly teaching, and who had repeated prayers after him with all the devout simplicity of a child, he saw before him a gaunt spectre with a face of desperate agony—a strange distorted creature, sitting half upright on a bed that had become a mere tangled heap of clothes in the tossing to and fro of the feverish body upon it,—a wild non-human thing with blazing eyes and raving mouth which shrieked incessantly,—

"Jacynth! Jacynth! Hold her! See where she goes! Will no one stop her? Running, running, running—look—look!—running straight into Hell! Jacynth! Jacynth! All

the devils at her!—tearing her lovely body—her lovely body that God made! God! Ha-ha! I like that! God! There's no God! There never was! It's all a lie!"

Pale to the lips, Everton moved close up to the bed and tried to get an arm round the writhing, twisting form.

"Bob!" he said, in a low, kind voice—"Bob! Don't you know me?"

The wild eyes rolled round in their sockets—presently they fixed him with a glassy stare.

"It's the parson!" and, with a supreme effort, Bob Hadley flung out his gaunt arms and hands as though to keep Everton off—"You've come to see the last of me, have you? Well! I'm glad! I'm glad you've come!"

Exhausted, he sank back upon his pillows, breathing hard and fast. His mother stood at the foot of the bed watching him in speechless terror.

"I'm glad,"—he repeated, thickly—"I'm glad you've come! I—I want to speak to you—alone! Mother!"

Thankful to be recognised, the poor woman hastened to his side. With extreme difficulty he lifted his head and kissed her.

"That's the last good-bye!"—he said—"Take it! I'm sorry not to have been a more useful son to you. Now go! I want to be left alone—alone—with *him*!"

He indicated the Vicar by an imperative sign. With a wild outbreak of pitiful sobs and tears, his mother turned and tottered out of the room, and Everton, deeply moved, and feeling that the final moments of this poor fighting life had come, knelt down by the beside. Scarcely had he done so when a burning hand caught him by the shoulder.

"Get up from that!" said the dying man, in a weak, fierce whisper—"Don't pray! It's no use!"

There was something so intensely horrible in the manner of his utterance that Everton could find no words wherewith to answer him, and could only gaze at him in stupefied amazement.

"It's no use, I tell you!" Hadley went on—"With my last

breath I want to make you remember that! *It's no use!* I want—I want to ask you why you have told me so many lies? Get up from your knees! Stand like a man and answer me!"

Slowly, and as if impelled by some stronger force than his own, Everton stood up. A vague impalpable Shadow seemed rising before him—a dumb, recording witness of his words.

"I have told you no lies, Hadley,"—he said, in a voice of steady tenderness and sweetness—"I have never tricked you! I have taught you to the best of my poor ability the truth of Christ's saving message to mankind, and I have striven to express to you the blessing of His love and pity for us all. Your mind is clouded by physical pain, my poor boy, or you would never say there is no use in prayer. Let me try to prove to you how very close God is to us both at this moment—so close that He can make death itself seem easy——"

"Death! I care nothing for that! I *want* to die!" and Hadley's features hardened, so that the pallid skin of his face looked like an ivory mask carved into a frown of reckless despair—"Death is the end of all things, and I *want* all things to end! I want to get out of the ruck for good and all! It's life that matters! Jacynth's *alive*!" His eyes protruded in a kind of fury—he struggled for breath. Everton supported him in his arms, and he fought inch by inch for the power of speech.

"She's *alive*!—she's all soft flesh and blood, and lovely to touch and to look at—and I've prayed for her—prayed—prayed—prayed!—and the tyrant you call God is deaf and blind and impotent! He has done nothing—He has looked on and laughed while she went to her damnation!" His weak voice rose to a kind of scream. "And you say God is good! That He loves us? It's a lie! No good God would have left Jacynth alone—He would have saved her!—He would have saved her—from——"

His voice stopped,—his whole frame was shaken by an agonised convulsion. He mastered the paroxysm by an almost superhuman effort, and went on talking, or rather muttering in fitful gasps—

"A world—a world!" he said—"A world to live in like this, where men are made to *feel*!—to feel their hearts cry out for love—love—love!—and then—then—*you* come along—you and your kind,—preaching Christ,—and telling us that our passions are sins! Sins! Why then, the beasts and the birds are better off than we are,—no one curses them for mating—and the God you talk about seems to care for them even more than He cares for us, for they're ever so much freer and happier! Love, I say!—love!—it's what the Lord Christ never knew—it's what He missed—love for a woman!—and there He fails to be our brother in sorrow!"

Everton tried to speak, but Hadley's desperate struggle with his own rapidly increasing weakness was so terrible to witness that he was held silent despite himself.

"Don't preach, but listen!"—went on the thin, wild voice—"You'll have years of talking yet—I've only got minutes. Jacynth—she came to see me—last night—I touched her hair—her face—I held her in my arms—that's all the Heaven I want—and I'm willing to go to Hell for it! But she—she's lost—lost!—try if you can do anything—save her from herself—from the shame——"

Writhing out of Everton's arms he fell back on his pillows, and a strange awed stare froze within his eyeballs and turned his features to the semblance of grey marble. Moved by a speechless pain and sorrow, the Vicar once more dropped upon his knees.

"O merciful Father!" he cried aloud—"Let Thy light shine upon this passing soul that it may see the glory beyond the gloom, and know Thee as Thou art in all Thy love and wisdom! Say unto this storm of life: 'Peace, be still!' and let there be a great calm!"

The stony face upon the bed seemed to fix him with a last entreating look—the ashen lips moved.

"Save Jacynth!"—and the words came feebly like a breath upon the air—"Give her—give her—my love!"

A tense stillness followed,—and Everton, burying his face in his hands, prayed long and earnestly. When he rose, he

knew he was alone with a dead man. Reverently closing the glazing eyes of the corpse, he went out of the room and gently told the weeping mother that her son was 'at rest.' His lips trembled as he uttered the words, for in his own heart he felt they were scarcely true. Young Hadley had passed from life to death in a condition of mind which religion itself had no chance to improve or sustain—and Everton was too honest with himself to disguise the fact. Every grain of faith and resignation and hope had been swept away like dust before the wind by—what? Merely the beauty of a woman! The loveliness of smiling flesh and blood, which the dying man had coveted to the last moment of his conscious existence—and there was no sort of 'heaven' in the craving—only a very real and positive hell.

"I did wrong,"—thought Everton, miserably—"I did a very wrong and foolish thing in persuading Jacynth to go and visit the poor unhappy fellow—I ought to have known better; the mere sight of her completely unsettled his mind."

Unable to bear his own reflections, and distressed beyond measure by the hysterical break-down of Mrs. Hadley, who, like the woman in the Testament, was a widow, and her dead boy 'the only son of his mother.' he soon left the cottage, and resolved to take a brisk walk of a mile or two before returning home to show a more or less grieved countenance to his wife who could not patiently endure even the shadow of trouble. He had scarcely gone a few yards beyond the village, however, before he was met and confronted by the very person who, despite himself, was uppermost in his thoughts,—Jacynth Miller. She was a little breathless, as though she had been running, and her cheeks were beautifully flushed with the delicate pink of an opening rose.

"Mr. Everton,"—she began—and then stopped, checked by the stern gravity of his expression. A warmer crimson reddened her face and her eyes flashed a sudden challenge. "Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing,"—he answered coldly—"Only that I have just come from Bob Hadley's deathbed."

She looked puzzled for a moment. Everton found himself studying the droop of a few flowers which were carelessly pinned at the open neck of her blue bodice—a bodice too blue, so he thought, and much too open for day wear on a March afternoon. She caught his glance, and a wavering smile trembled on her lips.

"Is Bob dead?" she then asked, with sudden pitifulness—"Really dead?"

He bent his head silently.

"Did you see him die?"

Again he made a dumb affirmative sign.

"Poor Bob! I wish I had been there!" she said, and an odd expression of self-rapture illumined her features—"He was so fond of me, that I am sure he would have taken me for his guardian angel just come to fetch him to Heaven!"

She uttered these words in the most natural way in the world, and for a moment he gazed at her in mute wonderment. Then he spoke, and for once his usual sweetness of manner failed him.

"No doubt he would!"—and his voice shook,—"Sick men are often the victims of delusion!"

She laughed softly.

"It's nice to be deluded!"—she said—"It's pleasant to be told pretty things, especially when one's ill. I'm sure poor Bob died hard,—and I would have made his death quite easy! It seems so strange to think that he's gone!—I was with him last night for an hour—*you* told me to go and see him!—and he was ever so happy, and he asked me to kiss him, and I did. He wanted to die then—just that very minute!"

Everton took a sudden grip of his own mental forces.

"I am sorry,"—he said—"very sorry, Jacynth, that I asked you to go and see him. For I think your visit was the immediate cause of his death. And when I went to him to-day, it seemed to me as if he had lost all faith in God——"

"Because he was leaving me?" queried Jacynth, with demure simplicity—"Poor Bob! He said last night he should meet me in Heaven,—but I told him no, I was not going that way."

"Jacynth!" Everton's accents were sharp and stern—"I cannot permit you to talk to me like this. You are a mere girl—a headstrong, foolish girl—and you should know that your words are wicked and unworthy of you as a Christian. I thought you were going to try and please me——"

He broke off, vexed to see sudden tears in her eyes.

"I can't please you, Mr. Everton,"—she said, slowly—"It's not in me to do it, and I'm not going to try. I shall never be good—goodness bores me. I can only be myself. See!" and with an unconsciously effective gesture she swept one hand round, expressively indicating all the landscape—"Here are trees and grass and flowers, and birds—I love them all! None of them have any churches or clergymen to teach them,—and yet they all make their own happiness their own way. They all die,—of course everything dies,—but not till they've most of them had a good time. I want *my* good time, and I don't care how I get it. I like to be admired—I like every man who sees me to want me more than anything else on earth—for the moment!—it is never more than for the moment, you know!"—and she shot a glance up at him from the shadow of her curling lashes. "But—it's always a grand moment! I kept away from Bob Hadley, because he was ill, and I thought I did him harm—but when you said: 'Go and see him'—I went—though I knew it would be the death of him. Put yourself in his place, Mr. Everton!—suppose that you loved a woman more than God, and that death was taking you away from her altogether,—would you not curse and swear just as Bob did?"

Completely taken aback by the confident effrontery of her speech and manner, he looked at her for a moment in grave, reproachful amazement. She met his look with a smile of perfect sweetness—but he set his lips hard and faced her resolutely, as though she were a fair fiend sent to tempt his soul.

"I do not understand you, Jacynth,"—he said coldly—"You talk in a way you should not—and I think you know it. I cannot for a moment imagine myself or any man loving a woman more than God."

She opened her dark eyes, showing him a luminous world of wonder in their depths.

"You cannot? Oh!—but—of course you cannot—you're a clergyman. I forgot! I thought——"

She drooped her head, and it seemed to Everton that her bosom trembled with suppressed laughter.

A sense of anger burned within him;—was he,—the Vicar of the parish,—so powerless, so wavering and indulgent and weak, that he could do nothing to convince this girl of her vanity and folly, and lead her out of the error of her ways?

"You thought what?" he asked, sternly.

She glanced at him demurely.

"Only—that you were perhaps like other men,"—she said.

At this he smiled—and there was a touch of scorn in the smile.

"I hope and think I *am* like other men,"—he said quietly—"Other men who know that the greatest happiness on earth is to serve God faithfully, and for His sake to fight against the evil things that strive to separate our souls from Him——"

"Am I an evil thing?" she interrupted him, suddenly.

"Pray God you are not!" he said, simply.

She was silent. Two bright tears rolled down her cheeks and dropped among the flowers at her breast. He was touched, despite himself. It was well nigh impossible not to feel a certain compassion for this wayward beautiful creature, fatherless and motherless as she was, and left to the casual protection of an aged relative who only sought to make use of her as a 'handy' girl to fetch and carry,—and he began to think again as he had often thought lately, whether he could not find some means of placing her in some establishment where she could be trained to suitable employment that should occupy her mind as well as procure her a means of livelihood.

"If she were not so lovely,"—he mused—"it would be easy."

That was just the difficulty—'if she were not so lovely.' And he caught himself studying every line of the 'difficulty,'—the hair, the eyes, the figure, the exquisite rose-leaf skin—and then, as his mind dwelt persistently on these varying

charms, he pulled himself together, and decided that it was not a man's business to manage the girl at all. His wife,—Azalea must be called upon to take her in hand,—and yet, as this idea crossed his mind he knew how absurd it was for him to entertain it for a moment. Azalea and Jacynth! As well seek to bring the opposite poles together, or ask fire and water to mingle in unison!

"Jacynth,"—he said, at last—"I should like to have a quiet talk with you——"

She looked up quickly.

"Now?" she asked.

"No—not now,—in two or three days' time—after poor Bob Hadley is buried. Come to the Vicarage——"

"What will Mrs. Everton say?"—and she smiled the question, rather than spoke it. Something in her tone annoyed him. He drew himself up a trifle stiffly.

"Mrs. Everton will say as she has always said"—he replied, "that she hopes I may persuade you to be reasonable and gentle—to be more careful of your conduct——"

Jacynth laughed lightly.

"I don't think she hopes anything of the kind," she said—"She knows I'm past all that. I can't be reasonable—not in the way you mean,—reasonable people are always so dull. I ate being dull! But I won't be a trouble to you, Mr. verton—I promise that! I'll make a change! See here," with an impetuous movement she laid one hand con- ntly on his arm—"You're a good man, I'm sure,—at least now you're trying to be good! You're trying to be better wiser than the birds and the animals—I'm not. The stament tells us that God cares for the sparrows and the lilies of the field—I don't presume to be more valuable than a sparrow, and I'm certainly not half so nice as a lily of the field. If God looks after me as much as He does after those two things, I'm all right. I don't mind the rest. But I swear to you"—here she spoke with extraordinary vehemence, and her great eyes glittered like stars on a wintry night—"that next time you see me I'll be different. I will!"

Her manner startled him a little. She looked at him so straightly, and withal so defiantly, that he was at a loss what to reply. After a pause, he said, gently—

"Is that a promise, Jacynth?"

"That's a promise!" and with a sudden desperate gesture she flung up her arms to heaven—"Do you hear it, Almighty God? It's a promise!"

He recoiled from her with a kind of nervous dread upon him. There was something so wild and reckless about her that he wondered—with the usual despairing sensation that always affected him when he thought of the one great curse of his parish which he was powerless to remove—whether she had been drinking? She caught his look,—and, understanding it, laughed aloud.

"I know what you think!" she said—"If one of the prophets who raved about God in the Bible were to stand here now and begin to rant and scream, you'd say he was drunk! Isaiah wouldn't get a hearing at any price!"

"Jacynth!" And his utterance of her name was like a sharp exclamation of pain.

"Jacynth!" she echoed, half sadly, half mockingly—"Poor Jacynth! A girl with only a face for a fortune! That's the trouble! Well, good-bye, Mr. Everton! I've made you a promise—and you'll see I'll keep it! Good-bye!"

Before he could utter a word in answer she had gone, running past him over the old stone bridge into the village with the flying fleetness of a bird. He turned to look at her as she fled, and all at once, as though a chord had been struck in his brain, he heard the frantic cry of the dead man who had loved her—"Jacynth! Jacynth! See where she goes! Will no one stop her? Running, running, running—look—look!—running straight into Hell!"

Everton shuddered as with an inward cold.

"Something must be done for that girl,"—he said—"Something must be done before it is too late!"

CHAPTER VII

TWO or three days passed, and during this interval Shadbrook took upon itself a curious aspect of bland and decent dejection,—an aspect it always assumed whenever there was a death in the village. Everybody had known for a long time that young Hadley's illness could only have one possible termination,—and when that fatal end arrived no one was really surprised or very sorry, yet all thought it the 'proper' thing to affect an air of gentle resignation, as of persons who were unjustly maltreated by a cruel and untoward destiny. Blinds were drawn in the cottage windows of both 'old' and 'new' Shadbrook—and even the venerable 'Mortar' Pike sat obstinately in his chimney-corner, refusing to move, and apparently considering himself a more or less injured party because he was not yet 'laid out' as a corpse.

"For," said he—"that there Bob Hadley worn't three-and-twenty, an' look at me, goin' on for ninety-three this August! Seems to me the Lord don't want me nohow. I'm sort o' left stickin' in the furrow while the plough goes on."

As long as this state of things lasted, Everton rather avoided the village, for experience had taught him that the rustic mind revels in the affairs of death, and that when country folk are preparing for a funeral, it is a kind of personal festivity for them in which they resent all interference. He knew, or rather he imagined, that if he were wanted, he would be sent for. He had yet to learn that under certain circumstances of difficulty occurring to what are called the 'common' people, the very last person they think of consulting, is the Vicar of the

parish. It ought not to be so, but so it is. And the cause is not far to seek, for in nine cases out of ten the Vicar of the parish is so centred in himself and his own concerns that he has no sympathy to spare for any wandering or wounded member of his flock. "I do not wander,"—he says,—"Why should *you* pursue so undesirable a course? *I* am not wounded—why do *you* bleed?"

Everton, however, was not one of the priestly egoists of whom there are so many abusing the world nowadays in the name of Christ,—and had the poorest or most erring of his parishioners sought his aid in trouble, he would have given it with all his heart and power, no matter at what cost or pain to himself. Unfortunately, his flock did not entirely grasp this fact. He had only been with them a little over three years,—and though they were all decidedly impressed in his favour, yet the memory of at least two past vicars had made it difficult for them to understand that a man may be a parson and honest at one and the same time. So they were cautious —not to say secretive—in their dealings with him,—or perhaps it would be better to describe their general attitude towards him as one of reticence mingled with respect. He himself was sorrowfully conscious that there was an invisible wall between his personality and their humble lives,—a wall which he had now and then looked over by chance, but which he had never been able to scale. Nevertheless, he bore his isolation very peaceably,—he was patient-minded, and hoped almost against hope that some day—a day no matter how distant, provided it should come at last,—some day they would realise that he was truly their friend, faithful in purpose, and loving in intention, seeking to live the Christ-life to the best of his human ability,—a life easy to preach of, but more difficult to practise than any ethical theory ever propounded to the world by teachers un-Divine. And in his instinctive knowledge of the fact that when one of their little community was 'taken' as they put it, they preferred to be left alone to manage their own peculiar ceremonies of 'laying out' and 'watching' the dead without the intrusion of one who, though

the head of the parish, was more or less a stranger to their habits and customs, he kept away from them during the time that he knew they were all, like children at a fair, enjoying the lugubrious preparations for the funeral of Bob Hadley. The Kiernans made no sign,—and on the strength of the idea that no news was good news, he supposed all was well. Once or twice he felt strongly inclined to call at Dan Kiernan's cottage and make enquiries as to the condition of that redoubtable drunkard's ill-used but uncomplaining wife,—but remembering Dan's fierce anger at his "busy-bodyin'"—decided to leave matters as they were for the present. Once he asked Azalea if she had heard anything about Mrs. Kiernan, and that charming little lady had given her shoulders a most expressive shrug as she replied—

"No—not a word! You know, Dick, they don't *want* us —especially when we notice their domestic quarrels! They quite *hate* us, then!—they really do! And perhaps, after all, they are right. If *I* quarrelled with you, or *you* quarrelled with me, I shouldn't like *anybody* to come and ask me about it!—I really shouldn't—not even a Bishop!"

He laughed at the open roundness of her child-like blue eyes.

"My dear, I only wanted to know if the poor wretched woman had recovered,"—he said, lightly—"Dan Kiernan had undoubtedly hurt her very much——"

"Oh, but she *liked* it!" declared Azalea—"She wouldn't hear a word against him! And, Dick, you ought to remember that if women *like* to be knocked down by their husbands, you really *can't* prevent it! If Mrs. Kiernan were any worse, the doctor would have sent us word,—I'm sure you needn't be at all anxious on that score! Nobody in the village is bothering about her at all,—they're all quite taken up with that poor dead man,—and they won't think of anything else till he's buried. Dear me!" and she heaved a little sigh—"I do wish it didn't remind me so of wasps!"

"Wasps!" he exclaimed—"Azalea, what do you mean!"

"Oh, I know it sounds dreadful and irreverent and all that!" she said, with a dimpling smile—"but I really can't help it,

Dick! Haven't you *ever* seen a wasp's funeral? *I* have! I saw one not long ago in the garden. The dead wasp was on the lawn,—and there came a whole lot of other wasps buzzing round it and making the most awful fuss—and the crowd got thicker and thicker, and each wasp seemed to have something to say about the body—and then they settled in a mass upon it,—and I watched the whole business, till suddenly they all flew away—and—there was not a vestige of the wasp corpse left! It was gone!" Here she put on a face of the greatest seriousness. "What do you suppose became of it?"

"Can't imagine!" and Everton laughed again—"Have you any idea?"

She raised herself on tiptoe, and with a coaxing touch pretended to arrange his tie more becomingly.

"Yes, I have—but I don't like to say it," she answered—"I think it was eaten up! I do! I believe that's the way wasps get rid of their defunct friends and relatives! Of course I'm wrong,—and some dreadful spectacled old entomologist would tell me I'm a perfect fool. But that's how the thing appeared to me. And when I see all the villagers of Shadbrook swarming round Mrs. Hadley's cottage and wanting 'to look at the corpse'—that's what they say, you know!—it makes me *feel* wasps all over!"

Everton struggled with his feelings; he tried to check his mirth and to look serious, but it was no use. Azalea was perfectly incorrigible. To her there was nothing of grave import in life or death,—persons and events presented themselves to her in a manner which to him was incomprehensible and yet comical,—he could hardly reproach her, and yet he knew well enough that the way in which she viewed the sorrows of others, proved her to be lacking in that delicate sympathy which poets in olden time used gallantly to maintain was the best charm of a perfect woman. She had indeed a faculty resembling that of the halfpenny modern press, which chiefly rejoices in its ability to make a jest of everything, even of the honour and renown of the country on whose too easy tolerance it battens. There is a strong taint of the monkey in all semi-educated men and women

—a tendency to grin and chatter and throw nutshells at the sun. The mongrel man, who is a cross between an ape and a savage, cannot be expected to appreciate the highest and purest things of life,—and it is just because the mongrel breeds are gaining undue ascendency in human affairs that poetry has been killed outright and all the sister arts are slowly dying. Too many mongrels are in control of our press, our finance and our government,—and it is possible we may have to wait a couple of centuries yet, before with fire and sword we cleanse our Augean stables and recover the true types of noble Manhood and Womanhood for the grace and the glory of England. Meanwhile it is the fashion to 'sneer down' warmth of heart and sentiment,—and Azalea, though she had a certain amount of tenderness and feeling in her dainty composition, was so far from wishing to give way to such 'weakness' that she preferred to laugh at a serious subject rather than take time to consider it. Her husband looking at her now, as in all her pink and white prettiness she smiled up into his face, realised in a flash of comprehension how utterly futile it would be to talk to her about the spiritual and moral needs of Jacynth Miller. For a moment he had thought that perhaps he could persuade her to have the girl at the Vicarage for a day or two so that she might talk to her and reason with her 'like a sister,'—so he had said to himself in the simple, foolish way of a perfectly guileless man who is generally hopelessly ignorant of the complex nature of a woman. But somehow after her story of the wasp's funeral, he felt that he could not speak to her at all on the topic which just now was uppermost in his mind. If the loneliness and sorrow of a broken-hearted widow deprived of her only son, could not move her to any sense of real compassion, then the uncertain prospect of a girl's life—especially when that girl was as beautiful as Jacynth—would scarcely appeal to her interest. Teased by his own thoughts, he gave a slight sigh. His wife put her fair arms caressingly about him.

"You're vexed, I'm sure!"—she murmured—"You don't like my 'wasp' way of looking at funerals! I know it's quite wicked of me, but——"

He interrupted her with a kiss.

"You have a merry heart, little one,"—he said, tenderly—"And may you always keep it! For myself I'm afraid I feel the griefs of others rather keenly—and I can't forget poor Hadley's tortured eyes, or his mother's despair——"

"I *knew* it would be disagreeable!"—and drawing herself away from him she gave a tiny shake of her skirts expressive of defiance—"And you didn't do him any good by going and praying at his bedside—I'm sure you didn't!"

He was silent.

"Sometimes," she went on—"dying people get worse directly they see the clergyman. *I* should, I'm sure! Though, of course, it will be all right when *I* die, because you're my husband, and there you are, all ready——"

With a sudden passionate exclamation he caught her in his arms.

"Azalea, my darling, don't talk like that! *You* die! *You!* Oh my love, my wife!—don't you know I couldn't live without you! Do you think I could pray by *your* deathbed?"

She clung to him, trembling a little.

"Couldn't you?" she whispered—"Why not?"

His hands closed jealously over her little golden-curled head, and he pressed her almost roughly to his heart.

"Don't ask me!" he whispered back—"It's too hard a question!"

A silence followed—a silence in which love, and love only, held them both in thrall. Everton almost heard the strong pulsation of the warm life-blood in his veins,—while at the same time his spiritual inward self shuddered as it were, on the brink of an abyss of eternal cold. Azalea's query had for the moment startled him with a kind of terror. For—if he could not pray by the deathbed of one whom he himself loved, where was his professed faith in the great Creed of Christ with which he sought to console others? He dared not pursue the thought. The exquisite undefinable emotion he felt in the mere act of holding his wife in his close embrace was but a part of his ordinary earthly experience and existence

—a bodily ecstasy with which this world alone was connected, and which certainly was not promised in the world to come. For there, according to Scripture, both marrying and giving in marriage are at an end; and redeemed souls are 'as the angels of God in Heaven.' Whether those angels, as in the poem of 'Annabel Lee,' covet the love of human beings on earth, is a fantastic point only fit to be argued by dreamers and romancists—but so far as Richard Everton was concerned, he would not at that moment have exchanged the delight of his own personal passion for all the glory of an impersonal paradise. Of course the ardent glow of feeling was brief,—it always is. No human being can stand too long upon the topmost peak of joy. It is always necessary to come down,—sometimes to fall off precipitately,—but Azalea managed to make a more graceful descent by slipping gently out of her husband's arms and shaking her pretty head at him as though he were a naughty boy.

"We've been quite sentimental!" she said—"And—oh, Dick!—how you've rumpled my hair!"

He smiled, and going to his desk began to turn over papers mechanically. His nerves were quivering like harp-strings swept by a storm,—and every touch upon them awoke a tone of melody or discord. In days to come he was destined to remember those few moments fraught with meaning, when the overwhelming knowledge of his own weakness as a minister of Christ, had borne down his imagined spiritual force with a sudden chill blow,—when he had realised that the dying Hadley's words might yet challenge him from the grave as to the use of prayer,—and when for the first time he had felt like 'a reed shaken in the wind' by the mere dread thought of being called upon to pray for his own wife's departing soul. A witty French philosopher assures us that there is nothing which we can bear with greater equanimity than the misfortunes of others,—and no one is more frequently called upon to display this heroic form of endurance than a clergyman. Often he becomes so accustomed to it that he forgets he is not

absolutely safeguarded himself from affliction, and when he is made the object of a 'visitation' in the way of suffering, he is not only surprised but frequently offended. He considers it unjust that God, whom he serves according to orthodox Church rule, should retaliate upon him with any rods in pickle. Yet such rods are often laid sharply across his back, and if science be correct in the assertion that nothing *is* without a cause for *being*, then we must presume he has deserved the castigation, even though his faults be not publicly apparent. And so, truly did Everton grasp the sense of his own unworthiness, that in a kind of semi-conscious way, he mentally sought to punish himself for enjoying too much happiness.

"I am really one of the most fortunate men in the world," —he argued—"God has showered benefits upon me,—and yet how many times a day lately have I not grumbled at the limitations of my life at Shadbrook! I ought to be ashamed of my discontent. I am not half grateful enough for all the blessings I have,—for my wife and child—for my house and all its comforts—for the peace and health of a country life,—for the chances of helping and comforting my parishioners,—why, there are a thousand things which should move me to hourly thanksgiving! And yet I am often churlish aud dissatisfied. I have even imagined that I deserve a wider sphere of intellectual effort than my present charge,—what insufferable conceit on my part! Evidently I must take myself strongly in hand. I need to learn the lesson of gratitude—the one least known by all the world of men!"

And even as he thought, so he acted, and set about all his duties with a patiently renewed and earnestly re-considered zeal. When the day came for Hadley's funeral, he performed that last sad religious rite with a gentle tenderness and compassion for the deeply distressed mother of the dead lad that did not fail to impress all those of his parishioners who were present with a sense of something like surprise that a parson should deem it worth his while to be so brotherly and kind to

the merely 'common' folk. There were, however, very few that followed the corpse to the grave,—and these few were, or appeared to be more uneasy than grieved. Everton, always keenly sensitive to impressions, caught one or two of their shifty glances at him, and wondered what they had in their minds. When all was over, and the poor weeping Mrs. Hadley had thrown a small bunch of white narcissi upon the coffin that held everything that was mortal of the son she had brought into the world for no greater end than this,—he waited a few moments in the churchyard, while the small group of mourners slowly dispersed; and an uncomfortable feeling came over him that there was something wrong, but what it was he could not determine. He watched the sexton casting spadefuls of rich brown earth into the open grave, and presently spoke to him, though he knew there was nothing in the way of information to be got out of a man who had won for himself the nickname of 'Silent Stowey' on account of his extreme taciturnity.

"Poor Hadley seems to have had very few friends,"—he said.

Jacob Stowey, verger, sexton, bell-ringer and general useful man about the church, looked up for a second, then down again, and went on with his 'shovelling in.'

"All the village knew him, and knew how long and patiently he had suffered,"—continued Everton—"I should have thought——"

"That all the village 'ud be 'ere!"—interrupted Stowey—"But it ain't."

He moistened his hands and worked with fresh energy.

"The people seemed so sorry about it, and so sympathetic," here Everton, despite himself, thought of Azalea's description of the 'wasp's funeral'—"They must be able to forget very quickly, or some other event must have happened of greater interest——"

Stowey turned his head and weather-beaten visage slowly round, and surveyed the Vicar with a pair of very vague, filmy grey eyes.

"Mebbe that's it,"—he said—"Mebbe."

He threw more spadefuls of earth over Hadley's now invisible coffin. Everton hesitated another moment, standing by the grave like an almost supernatural figure, with the wind blowing his surplice about him in snow-white folds, as of the mantle of a saint or a martyr.

"But there's nothing,"—he began tentatively.

"Nawt's told *me*, an' I knows nawt,"—said Stowey—"I bells an' I buries—but I doan't clapperwag. Clapperwaggin's for maids an' fools, an' I bain't naither."

He continued his work, and Everton, feeling it would be useless to ask him any more questions, presently bade him a cheery good-day and left him.

All the rest of that afternoon he happened to be particularly busy; there was a great deal of correspondence to clear and accounts to make up, so that he did not go out, but remained for the most part of the time in his study. Not a single caller came near the Vicarage, and the hours lagged slowly and somewhat heavily away. With the fall of evening he put by his books and papers as usual, and gave himself over to the quiet joys of domesticity, which for him were very few and simple. Chief among them was the privilege of seeing his small son 'tubbed' and put to bed—a function in which Master Laurence displayed himself to the best advantage, kicking out his well-knit little limbs in every direction and positively revelling in every splash of the sponge in the water. No angel ever smiled more divinely than he did, when, nude as a cupid and only lacking wings, he sat on his nurse's knee waiting for his clean night-gown to be put on,—he was all radiant with comfort and good-nature, and it was difficult to realise that such a beautiful, innocent little being was destined to become that too often sad and weary thing, a Man. It was a point on which Everton often dwelt with a certain wistful and tender solicitude.

"Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof!" he mused—"Only—the cruellest part of it all is that the evil is sure to come!"

That night he sat in the drawing-room reading, or rather pretending to read, while his wife sang to him,—another of

his purely 'domestic' pleasures. Azalea had a very small voice,—there was not a thrill of emotion in it, but it was pretty and bird-like, and sounded particularly sweet in a more than usually senseless song about "Meet me in de corn when de wind am blowin'." There was no real sentiment in the thing, but somehow, as he heard the clear, light, child-like soprano warbling the 'coon' nonsense which passed for a love-ditty, he was touched to a feeling of something like tears. He laid the open book he held gently on the table, and looked lovingly at his wife's dainty figure seated at the piano. The lamplight gleamed on the gold of her hair, twisted in its many shining love-locks, and flashed on the white roundness of her arms.

"Dere's a breakin' in de clouds an' de stars am showin',
Oh meet me in de corn when de wind am blowin'!"

she sang in quaintly tender little notes of level tune—perfectly monotonous and passionless, yet effective in their way, and sufficient to charm any man who was not too captious a critic. A knock at the drawing-room door broke the spell—the music ceased, and a maid-servant entered.

"Dr. Brand would like to see you, sir,"—she said.

"Dr. Brand!" The Vicar echoed the name in some surprise and glanced at his watch—"Why it's nearly ten o'clock."

"Yes, sir, but he said it was urgent."

"Somebody dying again!" sighed Azalea.

Her husband made no answer to this, but quietly left the room. Brand was awaiting him in the study.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so late in the evening, Mr. Everton," he said—"But I thought I'd better come and tell you myself. Mrs. Kiernan——"

"Is she worse?"

"She's dead."

"Dead!" Everton stood amazed. There was a shock in the brevity of the announcement. "Dead! Why I thought she was getting well——"

So she was,"—and 'Dr. Harry' took two or three turns

up and down the room in rather a perturbed way—"There was nothing at all in the nature of her physical injuries that should have killed her. It was worry—the woman fretted herself to death."

"When did she die?"

"Just now,—half an hour ago. Mr. Everton,"—and the doctor spoke with sudden and emphatic earnestness—"We mustn't think of charging Kiernan with having caused the death of his wife. One would be strongly inclined to do so,—but knowing all the facts——"

He broke off, and again paced up and down restlessly.

"It's a wretched business!" he said irritably—"I wish to God you had known the whole thing from the beginning,—then your wife would not have been mixed up in it——"

"My wife!" The Vicar's voice and face expressed utter and genuine bewilderment—"My wife!"

"Well, it was your wife who told Mrs. Kiernan all about Dan's fooling with Jacynth Miller, and of course it got on the poor creature's mind—then, when Jacynth went away from the village the day before yesterday, Dan behaved like a madman and made a scene——"

"Wait!—wait a minute!" and Everton put his hand to his forehead in a dazed way—"I don't understand you. You say you wish I had known from the beginning. Known what?"

Brand looked at him for a moment hesitatingly.

"It's not a pleasant story, Mr. Everton,"—he said, at last—"and I wish I hadn't to tell it. The villagers have all been trying to hide it and hush it up—honestly I believe, only for the sake of the poor woman that's gone, who was a decent, hard-working body. But here it is. Dan Kiernan has been Jacynth Miller's lover for the past six months——"

"Jacynth Miller! Kiernan her lover! Good God!"

And Everton stared before him with strained unseeing eyes.

"Naturally the women knew,"—went on Brand—"With all her cleverness Jacynth could not hide her guilt from *them*,—and Mrs. Everton was aware of it,—but I daresay she did not quite like to tell you. Anyhow, after Kiernan's drunken

attack on his wife, when Mrs. Everton went to visit her, she found—so I heard from Mrs. Adcott—that Jacynth had been up all night with Dan in the kitchen next to the room where Mrs. Kiernan lay ill. And she was so horrified and indignant that she told the truth to Mrs. Kiernan then and there—which *I* think was an unfortunate move."

Everton had been listening as though he were lost in a dream.

"And then?" he queried, in a level tone of voice—"What happened?"

"Nothing—except that Mrs. Adcott begged her not to mention the miserable scandal to you, till Mrs. Kiernan got well—and she promised. But the trouble of it is, Mrs. Kiernan never really rallied thoroughly—she was sometimes better and sometimes worse—and the finish of it all came when it was known that Jacynth had gone——"

"Gone!" repeated Everton—"She *has* gone?"

"Yes,—no one knows where."

There was a brief silence. Then the Vicar spoke.

"I am sorry,"—he said gently,—"very sorry I did not hear, or find out all this for myself, before. I should—I should have understood better how to act. It is very difficult for the clergyman of a parish to make his influence felt, or his presence useful, if he is purposely kept in the dark concerning matters which ought, rightly, to be brought to his attention. I do not easily suspect evil"—and a slight flush warmed the pallor of his face—"and it may be that I,—I myself, am possibly to blame for the incident of Jacynth Miller's staying the night in Kiernan's cottage while his wife was ill,—for I chanced to meet her in the village on the day the assault took place, and she told me she could and would keep Dan away from the drink——"

"Of course she could and would!" interposed Brand, grimly, "As long as he had *her*, he wanted no other poison!"

"I had no idea,"—went on Everton, rather sadly—"I could not have possibly imagined or thought for a moment that a girl like Jacynth,—for, with all her recklessness she seemed to

me to have some refinement about her—would have allowed herself to be compromised by such a man as Kiernan——"

"There are certain women who love brutes,"—said Brand—"And Kiernan is a brute. But he is a fine brute, and that's all that Jacynth Miller cares about. She has no sentiment of any kind. I daresay that type of woman is new to you,—but it's common to me. Doctors see more than clergymen. And as for 'refinement'—well!—if Jacynth has any of that about her it's the refinement of vice, which is particularly odious. Perhaps I ought to have told you what was going on——"

"I wish you had," answered Everton, gravely.

The doctor looked at him meditatively.

"Well, I don't think it would have helped the situation," he said—"And it isn't my business to report the moral backslidings of the Shadbrook people. They're no better and no worse, so far as I can make out, than other folks in lonely country villages, and from a perfectly common-sense and matter-of-fact point of view, I don't believe any very great harm would have been done, if Mrs. Everton had not, most unluckily, spoken to Mrs. Kiernan of her husband's infatuation for the Miller girl. Nobody would have said anything—Jacynth would have gone away, as she has gone now—she always wanted to go away, and it was what she was planning and intending to do—not out of shame for herself or sorrow—oh no!—don't think that at all!—but merely because she was tired of Dan and his amorous jealousies, and thought she would like a change. Mrs. Kiernan would have recovered I'm sure,—and Dan might have still made her a fairly good husband, as such husbands go. But now I expect there'll be mischief."

"Simply because my wife did what she thought was her duty to do?" queried Everton, with coldly sparkling eyes.

'Dr Harry' smiled somewhat sadly.

"Duty—or what we sometimes call duty—is not always a safe guide,"—he said—"We sometimes—even the best of us—mistake it. I'm sure that Mrs. Everton meant to be kindness itself when she warned Mrs. Kiernan of what was going

on,—but it would have been better to have left the poor creature in ignorance. As matters stand—I'm afraid——"

He broke off, and walked up and down reflectively.

"You're afraid—of what?" demanded Everton.

Brand stood still and faced him.

"Well, I'm afraid things may be made unpleasant for your wife,"—he said—"She's not a fit person to contend with rustic boors, and if I were you I should not let her go alone into the village for a while. She might get insulted——"

The Vicar looked, as he felt, completely bewildered.

"Insulted?" he echoed—"What do you mean?"

"Simply this. Dan Kiernan is a brute, as you know, and in his brutish fury, which is more for the loss of Jacynth Miller than anything else, he swears that Mrs. Everton has killed his wife, and that he'll have vengeance for it."

"Killed his wife!" exclaimed Everton, aghast—"What! Azalea? Azalea, who would not hurt a fly? The man must be mad!"

"Probably he is,"—answered Brand—"But madmen are dangerous. I assure you, Mr. Everton, Dan is an ugly customer. Leave him alone. Don't offer him any condolence on his wife's death—he won't understand it. If,"—here the doctor folded his arms and looked Everton squarely in the face—"if you could realise the condition of a tiger deprived of its mate and its prey together at one and the same moment, you might have some idea of Dan Kiernan's present humour. He's on the drink too—and there's no one to keep him away from it. If you decide to see him yourself, that is, of course, your affair, though I think it will be most unwise—but for Heaven's sake don't let your wife go anywhere near him!"

Everton's eyes expressed a great wonder and sorrow.

"My wife!" he said, pitifully—"Poor little woman! She has done him no harm!"

"He thinks she has,"—and the doctor looked away for a moment from the clergyman's pale, puzzled face,—"And thinking, as we all know, is more than half believing. He has

made up his mind that if she had not told his wife about Jacynth and himself, nothing would have happened. Mrs. Kiernan would have lived,—and Jacynth would have stayed on in the village. Of course it's true enough that there's often an extraordinary lot of mischief caused by talk,—no end of trouble might be avoided by keeping a still tongue in one's head——"

"Dr. Brand," interposed Everton, with gentle dignity—"I am quite sure my wife had not the slightest idea of causing any mischief or distress to poor Mrs. Kiernan or to any one. I don't know what she said,—she has not told me a word about it—but I am sure she meant everything in the best and kindest manner. She never gave me the least hint of what you tell me concerning Kiernan and Jacynth Miller—and, naturally, I myself should never have suspected it——"

He paused, moved by a sudden revulsion of feeling. For one fleeting instant Jacynth's beautiful face and brilliant eyes flashed before him like a picture in a dream,—and the thought that she—she with all her youth and winsome loveliness should have consented to become the wanton partner of Dan Kiernan's vices, revolted his every sense to the verge of nausea. He steadied his nerves by an effort.

"I am very sorry for all this trouble,"—he went on quietly, "Sorrier than I can express in words! I suppose I am very dense,—but I have always believed in the goodness rather than the badness of my fellow-creatures,—and I had hoped to see even Dan Kiernan turn out a nobler fellow than he seemed. As for Jacynth Miller—I knew she was vain of her beauty, and heartless to the corresponding measure of her vanity—but I never thought she was,"—he broke off,—then with a slight sigh, continued—"Perhaps I had better not speak of her. I will tell my wife what you say,—I shall understand the whole situation better when I have talked it out with her,—but I shall let nothing interfere with the course of my duty—you may be sure of that."

The doctor looked at him kindly.

"Well, don't *exceed* your duty, that's all, Mr. Everton,"—

he said—"Leave well—or ill—alone for the present. Don't in this case offer your sympathy or service till you're asked for either. Let the storm blow over first,—or, in other words, let Dan Kiernan drink himself to death if he likes!—don't interfere!"

"Rather singular advice!" murmured Everton, faintly smiling,—"And not in keeping with Christian charity."

"Christian charity is out of place in some quarters,"—answered Brand, gloomily—"So is Christian forgiveness. General Gordon forgave the treacherous rascal who afterwards trapped and killed him. Certain races don't understand forgiveness, or kindness either. And drunkards are not, in my opinion, of any race at all. They are an artificial, monstrous spawn of the bottle and the beer-cask, and the less one has to do with such microbes of disease, the better." He paused,—then went on in a cheerier tone—"Well, good-night, Mr. Everton! I'm sorry I had to come up at so late an hour, but I thought it would be the wisest course to tell you myself just how things stood——"

"It's very kind of you,"—said Everton, shaking hands with him—"Forewarned is always forearmed, and though I do not anticipate any serious trouble with Dan Kiernan, still I shall keep an eye on him. I'm sure my wife will be quite shocked to hear of poor Mrs. Kiernan's death—we had no idea her condition was so serious——"

"It wasn't serious,"—said Brand—"Not really serious in the way of actual danger to life till—till she *knew*. Good-night!"

In another couple of minutes he had left the house, and Everton, with a slow step and troubled countenance, returned to the drawing-room where his wife was still at the piano singing 'coon' songs. She saw by his manner that something was wrong, and springing up from the music-stool ran two or three steps to meet him.

"What's the matter——?" she began.

He took her hands gently in his own.

"My dear child,"—he said—"Why didn't you tell me about Jacynth Miller and Dan Kiernan?"

A hot blush crimsoned her face and neck.

"I couldn't, Dick! It seemed *too* horrid! And you were so unsuspecting—and you thought the girl had some good in her——"

He sighed heavily.

"I did,—I certainly did think so!" he said—"But, Azalea, if you couldn't tell me, your husband, was it quite necessary for you to tell Mrs. Kiernan?"

She opened her eyes in genuine wonderment at his question.

"I thought so, certainly,"—she replied—"Under *all* the circumstances, I felt it was the proper thing to do! But I promised the woman who was nursing her—Mrs. Adcott—that I would not say a word to you about it till she got better——"

Again he sighed

"She will never get better,"—he said, sorrowfully—"My dear, she is dead!"

"Dead!" The delicate rose-tint of the pretty face so close to his own, paled into sudden whiteness.

"Oh, Dick! I'm—I'm so sorry!"

And like the emotional little creature she was, she began to cry.

"I'm sure," she whimpered, "I'm sure I never thought she was so ill as all that! I wouldn't have told her——"

He drew her into his arms, and stroked her shining hair soothingly.

"That's just it, darling!—of course you wouldn't have told her! I know you wouldn't. Forgive me if I say you *shouldn't* have told her. I don't often scold you, little one, do I?—and this is my only word—you shouldn't have told her! But you didn't think—you didn't think——"

He kissed her and held her tenderly, while she wept and rubbed her eyes and made her little nose red, after the fashion of a vexed child. And half vaguely he wondered how many troubles in the world could be set down to that first cause 'Didn't Think.' In nine cases out of ten, the statesmen who have led their nations into war 'didn't think,'

—the millions of bitter and slanderous tongues that have broken millions of loving hearts had 'Didn't Think' behind them,—and half the mistakes, cruelties and evils of mankind could be put down to 'Didn't Think,' if all the truth were known.

"When—when did she die?" murmured Azalea, presently.

"To-night Dr. Brand came up here to tell me—and—to warn me——"

"To warn you?" She looked at him with startled wet eyes.

"Yes. To warn me against Dan Kiernan. He is on the drink again—and is dangerous,—more dangerous than ever, so it appears, now Jacynth Miller has gone."

"Jacynth Miller gone? Where?"

"No one knows."

Here he released her from his arms and walked slowly up and down the room. Presently he stopped again and faced her. "It seems an awful thing to say to you, Azalea, but I suppose you must know it,—Brand wants you to keep away from the village just now—for a few days at any rate."

"Wants me to keep away? *Me?*" she exclaimed—"But why?"

"For a reason that is almost too horrible and unnatural to think of!" and Everton's voice trembled with indignation as he spoke—"Dan Kiernan says you have killed his wife—*you*, my poor little Azalea!—and swears he'll have vengeance for it——now there!——don't look so frightened!"

For at his words, she had dropped on the sofa in a small huddled heap, her dainty tea-gown falling about her in cloudy folds, from which her face peered pallidly like that of a ghost.

"Killed his wife!" she whispered, with white lips—"He says I——I have killed his wife! Oh, Dick, Dick!" And she stretched out her arms to him—"Let me go away! Don't let me stay here! It's too *awful*!"

She seemed about to faint, and the terrified expression of her eyes alarmed him.

"My dearest, you mustn't take it in this way,"—he said,

sitting down beside her, and putting an arm round her waist—"The man is an habitual drunkard and doesn't know half his time what he's talking about. The fact is he killed his wife himself—no one else had any hand in it——"

"I'm not so sure—oh, I'm not so sure!" and she shuddered violently—"She had not a word to say against him—she loved him! Even when I told her what I had heard, and what I knew about Jacynth Miller, she wouldn't believe it—oh, Dick! It's my fault!—it's my fault, really!—I know it is!—it *is* through me that the poor woman has died!"

And she suddenly gave way to an outbreak of hysterical weeping, uttering little gasping cries and sobs that convulsed her whole slight frame. Everton was in despair. He knew not what to say that would comfort her—he could only hold her in his arms and try to soothe her by murmured words of love, mingled with kisses and caresses.

"You must send me away—oh, you *will* send me away!" she sobbed—"I'm afraid—I'm afraid of Dan Kiernan! He'll say something cruel to me—he will, Dick!—oh, don't let him come near me—don't! I never meant any harm—but though I never meant it, I see I have done it!—and I shall never get over it, Dick, never! How can I go on living in Shadbrook after this? Oh, Dick!—to think that I—your wife—should be so dreadfully accused! I must go away!—darling, you will let me go away at once, wont you?—I and Baby and Nurse—we will all go together to the sea-side for a while till this trouble is over——" And as she spoke she dried her eyes, choked back her tears, and looked hopefully at him—"Let us start to-morrow morning!"

For a moment he was silent. For a moment the chord of Self sounded in his soul, suggesting the query—"Is this the help a wife should give her husband in hours of difficulty?" And then he bravely put the thought aside.

"You shall do as you like, Azalea,"—he said, kindly—"Only,—remember that if you go away just now it will look as if you really thought Dan Kiernan's wild and wicked words had sober justice in them. Why should you be afraid of a

drunkard? You are perfectly innocent of any harmful intention,—you spoke to Mrs. Kiernan as nineteen out of twenty women would have spoken under the circumstances,—and my chief regret is that I did not know the whole story—as I might have perhaps been able to suggest a different course for you to take. Kiernan is probably much more enraged by the loss of Jacynth Miller than by the death of his wife—and you certainly have nothing to do with *that*. I confess I don't like the idea of your going away. I would much rather you stayed at home and went on with your ordinary duties in your usual manner, like a brave little woman——"

Her lips quivered, and more tears fell.

"I'm not brave,"—she said, pathetically—"I never was and I never shall be! I think it will be simply *dreadful* if I have to go about the village hearing all the details of Mrs. Kiernan's death over and over again, and all the story of Jacynth Miller's running off with one of the other men——"

"One of the other men?" repeated Everton, surprised,—"What other men?"

"I don't know, I'm sure!" and she sighed wearily—"It's all quite strange to me, and quite horrid,—but Mrs. Adcott said, when speaking of Jacynth, that there were plenty of men who would take her, even knowing everything about her,—so I can only suppose she has gone with one of them. And I think it will be really cruel of you, Dick, if after what that awful man Kiernan has said, you force me to stay here——"

"I? I 'force' you!" he said, wonderingly—"My dear Azalea, can you imagine my applying 'force' to you in any way, save the force of love?"

She did not hear, or rather she did not choose to hear, the little touch of reproach in his accents.

"Well then, let me go!" she pleaded—"It would make me perfectly ill to be shut up here,—(for I know I shouldn't dare to go out)—while all the people are fussing over Mrs. Kiernan's funeral, and that dreadful drunkard is reeling about the village saying such horrid wicked things about me,—I'd much rather be away——"

"You'll find the dreadful drunkard reeling about just the same when you come back,"—he said.

She wiped her eyes and smoothed her hair, and the shadow of a returning smile flitted over her face.

"Perhaps not!" she rejoined, hopefully—"Perhaps he will have reeled after Jacynth Miller, and gone out of the place altogether!"

Her words annoyed him,—and yet he could not have reasonably expressed annoyance. He took a couple of minutes to consider, and then made up his mind.

"Very well, Azalea,"—he said—"Have it your own way! You shall go. You can start to-morrow morning for Weston,—that's not so very far off—with Laurence and the nurse—I daresay the change will do all three of you good——"

She interrupted him by throwing her arms round his neck and kissing him.

"Oh, you *are* a dear old Dick!" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with a sudden sunshiny gaiety that effectively dispersed all traces of her recent tears and terror—"It will be simply lovely to get out of Shadbrook for a little while,—because—well!—you know, though it's ever so pretty, it's dull—awfully dull sometimes! There are no shops, and no people worth looking at,—and when there's nothing but funerals going on, it's a *little* trying!—it is, really, Dick! *You* don't mind it, because you have such grand ideas about duty and all that,—but I'm afraid I haven't any grand ideas, and I *do* mind it, often! If this house and garden could only be moved into some nicer place——"

He looked at her earnestly.

"You don't like Shadbrook then?" he said.

She shook her fair head very decisively.

"Not at all!" she replied—"How *could* any one like a dreary little village where the people do nothing from one year's end to another but get drunk and quarrel and die?"

He smiled, a trifle bitterly.

"It's a small epitome of a very large part of the world around us, Azalea,—look at it how you will,"—and rising from

beside her, he paced the room in an effort to quiet his struggling sense of impatience — "And think how many such 'dreary villages' there are in Great Britain, where often the most promising men among the clergy have to work for the best part of their lives! Shadbrook is by no means the worst example of such lonely parishes,—and when I came here first, I thought myself a very lucky man. For the possession of the living enabled me to marry *you*, Azalea!"—and his voice trembled a little—"And—and we have been very happy!—and our boy was born here——"

"Oh, I know all that!" and she smiled radiantly up at him—"And it's all lovely and sentimental and nice to think about,—but you can't deny that it's dull, Dick, you know you can't! There are about two garden-parties a year to which one *can* go,—just for form's sake—not for pleasure, because no one *ever* goes to a provincial garden-party for pleasure, of course!—and nobody *ever* gives a nice dinner, because it's too expensive, and too much trouble to get hired waiters for the occasion—besides, there are no people to ask—and you can't set out a dinner without people to eat it! There's nothing, in fact, for *us* but the village and the church—and we must make the best of them, I know! Indeed I do make the best of them—but when it comes to a drunken brute like Kiernan saying I've killed his wife, well, really, Dick, I *do* feel that it's about as much as I *can* bear! And I don't think I'm asking too much of you to let me go out of it all for a few days!"

"My dear child, it's settled that you go,"—he answered quietly—"And there's nothing more to be said about it." He paused,—then added—"It's past eleven o'clock—fully bedtime. You'd better see Nurse Tomkins on your way upstairs and tell her of your intentions for to-morrow——"

"Oh yes,—of course! She'll have to pack Baby's things."

And without another word she ran off fleetly, full of delight at the prospect of a journey and a change of scene. No thought for her husband entered her head—no sudden tenderness moved her to look back and say: "I wish you were coming with me,"—or—"I'm sorry to leave you alone." A

man was always 'all right,' she thought, under any circumstances, and she would have been genuinely surprised and possibly distressed had she known that the heart of the man who loved her was as heavy as lead, and aching sorely in its heaviness as though a poisoned arrow had flown to its core. He went to the table where he had been reading when Brand's visit had interrupted him, and mechanically took up the book he had laid down there. Glancing casually at the open page, his eyes fell upon the words—"Love does not always lead to marriage, and marriage is sometimes the end of love. The most lasting passion is that which remains ungratified—and the truest lovers throughout all history are those that never wedded."

This passage stung him with a curious sense of personal irritation—the book was a novel, and he flung it down with a gesture of aversion.

"Ridiculous!" he said—"Wrong-sided and utterly ridiculous! No wonder modern fiction is so often condemned! The statement is utterly false, for marriage is the very fulfilment of love—and married life the perfect making of a perfect home."

And he would not allow himself to think any further as to whether 'fulfilment' did not, after all, imply an end to aspiration;—or whether 'the perfect making of a perfect home' was secured to him by his own married experience. The pursuit of a logical enquiry often leads to unexpected results; and he was not in the mood to follow out any argument suggested by Sense, preferring to remain pained and perplexed by Sentiment.

CHAPTER VIII

NEXT day Azalea went away as arranged,—and so far as her husband was concerned, the Vicarage became a dreary waste of desolation. Yet he was the embodied spirit of cheerfulness itself to the last moment of her departure, helping to place her, with the cherubic Laurence and his nurse, all comfortably together in the high dog-cart, which,—drawn by one slow and somewhat asthmatical mare and driven by the gardener's lad,—took them to the station some four miles distant from the village. Never, so he thought, had he seen his pretty wife looking prettier; she was full of laughter and sparkling animation, like a child leaving school for the holidays. 'Master Laurence' too had a new and radiant light of pleased wonder in his angelic blue eyes,—a larger world than Shadbrook was opening out before him,—and his father almost envied him the fact that he was going to look at the sea for the first time. Whether he would be impressed by it was quite another matter, for whatever his emotion might be at the glorious scene presented to his awakening intelligence, he would have no means of expressing it. Yet Everton was foolish enough to wish he could have watched his little son's face when the rolling mass of glittering waters first broke upon his young vision. Azalea's ideas on the point were what all ordinary people would have termed 'sensible' ideas,—they were limited to the building of sand-castles and the carrying about of toy pails wherein to capture specimens of the infant crab,—and of what the real effect of the grandeur and immensity of ocean might be on the mind of a more than

usually thoughtful child, she cared not to enquire. 'Baby dear' was too young to think at all, so she imagined,—a mistake made by most mothers, often to their own detriment. Anyway the little party seated in the dog-cart and drawn by the old mare, looked an irresistibly happy one, and Everton could not flatter himself that his presence was either desired or missed. Off they went, jogging down the Vicarage drive, Azalea waving her hand and blowing kisses to him till a turn in the road hid him from her sight,—and it was with a very decided sense of pain and loss that he re-entered his house—alone.

Once in his study he shut the door, and seating himself at his desk, went steadily to work, determined to think of nothing save his duty,—nothing except church and school and parish affairs. There were many trifling matters to attend to,—how trifling only the incumbent of a country living knows. The ludicrous local quarrels,—the mean and petty injuries,—the malicious attempts of one 'Christian' neighbour to annoy another,—all these things come more or less under the notice of the Vicar set in authority over a rural community, and if he be not a man as small-minded as the majority of the rustic folk around him (which he too frequently is), he must needs often be moved to a wondering and well-nigh despairing pity for the infinitely little stupidities of poor human-kind. For though large cities show precisely the same low animosities and attenuated jealousies, they are not brought so closely under the eye as in the restricted circle of a village. Mrs. Loftylids may give herself as many airs as she likes in London and London sees her not,—but Mrs. Loftylids on her high horse in the country is quite a different and much more observably odious person. The smaller the place, the more narrow the life. And so Richard Everton was beginning to find it.

He sorted the various letters and papers on his table, with a settled precision which indicated that he was forcing his attention to dwell on matters distasteful to his immediate humour, and among them he came upon a respectfully worded intimation from the village carpenter, who was also the under-

taker, to the effect that Mrs. Kiernan having died, it was proposed, 'according to the wishes of Mr. Kiernan, the widower,' to have the funeral next day, if he, the Vicar would name a convenient hour. He answered this at once, fixing the ceremony for three o'clock in the afternoon, and sent the letter to its destination straight away by one of his servants as a personal messenger. There should be no delay, he thought somewhat drearily, in burying all that was mortal of Mrs. Kiernan,—poor, long-suffering, wretched Jennie Kiernan, who had been killed by sheer brutality. The brutality of blows—or the brutality of words?—ah no, no! Azalea could never be 'brutal'—she was thoughtless, but not unkind,—she had done no harm—she had not the smallest share of blame in the woman's death—it was cruel to suggest it—cruel to say it! He shuddered at his own thoughts, which like swarming bees buzzed round the whole miserable incident,—an incident beginning more or less trivially, and deepening into something of a tragedy. And, as usual, he laid all the blame on his own shoulders. His endeavour to save Mrs. Kiernan from further assault by her drunken husband had surely, so he declared to himself, led to the present disastrous result, and all suddenly he asked:—"Is it just of the Almighty to allow a kindness to be brought back in the shape of a curse?" He recoiled from his own temerity as this demand leaped up in his brain like a flash of fire. Yet it repeated itself. "I ask"—said the vexed Soul within him—"if it is right that an honest effort to follow the teaching of the Christian Creed should be rewarded by a frightful and unmerited accusation against the innocent woman I love?" And then he paused, as though awaiting an answer. Strangely, solemnly, and as with an inward voice, the answer came in the form of another query: "Is it right that I, the Divine Crucified, should have given My life on earth for men who doubt Me and blaspheme Me even now?" And in the sudden sense of awe and contrition which fell upon him, he covered his face with his hands and prayed silently—"Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil, O Lord! Command me as Thou wilt!—send

me Thy Holy Orders, and even if they lead me to my death, I, ordained to serve Thee, will obey!"

And on this his mind appeared to pause,—till it seemed to him that his vow had been accepted. Then in a moment or two he was calm again, and went on with his usual work.

How much he missed Azalea he would not allow himself to think. Ever since he had brought her home to the Vicarage as his bride, it had been the joy of his life to know that at any moment her fair head might peep into his study or her voice call to him in the accents of coaxing sweetness to which he had grown so fondly accustomed. But now the house was empty,—bereft of light, music, laughter and love. He was alone with his own thinking Self and God,—God, that mighty Unknown Power to whom for millions of ages Creation has cried and prayed and wept,—God, that majestic Silence which is never disturbed for all the clamour of men—which creates and kills at a breath, and no reason given,—which is Light and Darkness, Gladness and Sorrow, Love and Hate in one,—and which we instinctively worship in all creeds, not so much because we WILL, but because we MUST. But it is natural to weak man to prefer the warm tenderness of a woman's arms about him to the awful coldness of a bodiless Infinity, no matter how full of exquisite promise and glorious suggestion that Infinity may be,—and it was therefore to be expected that Richard Everton, who for all his anxiety to live a purely spiritual life, had a tender, sensitive heart of his own, would, for the time being, feel a melancholy sense of solitude in the absence of his pretty wife, with a corresponding depression of spirits. There was one thought which now and then pushed itself resolutely into the cells of his brain, to be as resolutely pushed out again by the strong effort of his will,—the thought of Jacynth Miller. He hated, with an intensity of hatred that surprised himself, the memory of that girl's exquisite face, illumined by its large, star-like dark eyes, and when he asked his inner consciousness the reason of the bitterness which filled him, he had to confess frankly like a man, that it was because she had chosen Dan Kiernan for a lover. The huge, strongly-

built brute—a creature whose brawny physique might have served as a model for one of the barbaric chieftains of early Britain,—he, full of a chronic delirium of drink—he, ignorant, boorish and bestial—he, even he, had been privileged to take the kisses of that fresh, rosy smiling mouth,—he had held that light, lissom body in his coarse embrace—by Heaven!—Everton sprang up from his chair and paced the room, stung to something like fury by the horrible suggestiveness of the picture. And where was Jacynth now? With whom had she gone? He understood at last the frantic despair of young Bob Hadley on his deathbed, and his agonised entreaty: "Try if you can do anything—save her from herself—from the shame——" Shame there was none in Jacynth,—of course there could be none;—nevertheless the wild cries of the dying lad rang echoingly in his ears—"Hold her! See where she goes! Running, running, running straight into Hell! Jacynth! All the devils at her—tearing her lovely body—her lovely body that God made!" And then those awful words—"God! There's no God! There never was! It's all a lie!" With the utmost strength of his soul he fought against the storm of indignation that strove to overwhelm his habitual composure—and snatching up a book from the table he read a few sentences hurriedly to distract himself. The book happened to be Amiel's *Journal* and the passages which caught his eyes were these:

"Do not despise your situation; in it you must act, suffer, and conquer. From every point on earth we are equally near to heaven, and to the infinite.

. . . . . .

"There are two states or conditions of pride. The first is one of self-approval, the second, one of self-contempt. Pride is seen probably at its purest in the last."

. . . . . .

He shut the volume.

"Measured by that I am the proudest man alive!" he said, "For my self-contempt is almost limitless! I could whip myself with a scourge for the ridiculous mood I am in! A

mood unlike me altogether,—a paltry, raging, irritable mood which is absolutely unworthy of any being calling itself human!"

He turned towards the window just in time to see a figure passing it outside—a small, dapper, clerical figure which he at once recognised as that of the little Roman Catholic priest Sebastien Douay, who had called upon him a few days previously. Hailing his unexpected visitor as a welcome relief to his unpleasant meditations, he hurried to meet him at the door.

"And if he will, he shall stay to luncheon this time, cold mutton or no cold mutton!" he decided—"I'm a grass widower just now, and can do as I like!"

In another moment Douay was in the study, his cheery round face beaming with smiles.

"So I am come in happy time!" he said, rubbing his hands together like a pleased child—"Your wife has gone away? And why so?"

Everton explained that she needed a few days' change of air at the sea-side.

"Ah! And you are like Mistaire Adam, before le bon Dieu took away his best rib!" said Douay, his blue-grey eyes twinkling merrily—"He was no doubt quite strong and jolly till he lost that so valuable bone! He has been weak ever since!"

Everton laughed,—and Douay went on—

"I came to tell you that I have now a church—a very leetle poor church in a most sad and dirty leetle village near the place where they brew the beer for Mistaire Minchin. It is a beginning—and some of the French fathers have bought land there—but for me there is a tin chappelle and a cottage—so I shall do myself all right. I have command to start a Catholique mission—it will be something—not much—for there are so few people,—but the Church say I must do it, and one must obey the Holy Orders."

Everton looked at him thoughtfully.

"True!" he said—"But *your* 'holy orders' and mine are different."

"That is so,"—agreed Douay, cheerfully—"and the holy orders of the so respectable Buddha are again different,—and of the terrible Mahomet again different! All separate households, my dear sir!—where each poor servant must obey the master who pays the wages!"

A slight shadow crossed Everton's face.

"I do not regard it quite in that way,"—he began hesitatingly.

"You do not? But why not? You would not be singular! There are parsons of your Church who write to the newspapers—ah!—such remarkable newspapers you have in England!—to say that they shall not let their sons become clergymen as the pay is so poor! Ha-ha! That is so excellent a serving of Christ!—so true to the Gospel! And your remarkable newspapers print these kind of letters from the clergy; then is it a surprise that your people do not believe their teachers in religion and stay away from the church? There are many mistakes in the Catholique faith—but it is seldom—if ever—that you will find a Catholique priest complaining of his leetle 'pay' in a public newspaper!"

"I'm afraid you are right," said Everton, with a sigh—"There's too much talk of money in everything nowadays. But of course, even a clergyman must live——"

"And have a comfortable 'living'!" supplemented Douay, with a genial laugh—"And marry,—a pretty wife, *sans doute*!—and have children—and send these leetle ones to school! All expensive work!—and the Catholique priest must do without these luxuries——"

"Does he always do without them?" demanded Everton, with sudden boldness.

Douay smiled, in no wise disconcerted.

"Not always, perhaps,"—he replied—"Even a Catholique priest may make a fool of himself! But if he is so much a fool as to break the celibate rule of his order he is finished!—done for! I myself would go further—I would say that any minister of the Gospel who marries is finished also! Done for!—yes indeed!—quite done for!"

He spoke in such a perfectly good-natured way that Everton was more amused than annoyed.

"According to that,"—he said—"I am no use and never shall be of any use. For I am one of the married."

"I know!" and Douay nodded his head emphatically—"That is why I say my thought. Very rude of me,—but you will pardon! For what does Our Lord teach us—'Take no thought saying What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink?—or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow,—for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.' Now will you tell me, my dear Mistaire Everton, that a married man is able to take no thought for the morrow?"

Everton was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"But surely even a Catholic priest does not work blindly on, regardless of his future?"

"Ah, but that is just it! It is precisely what so many priests Catholiques do—work blindly on!—comme des moutons! 'Blindly' is very true. They do not know,—and they must not see. They obey! As soldiers obey their superior officers, so we obey the orders of Rome. We may be in one place to-day, another to-morrow. But we move under command. It is not our business to make question. Always before us hangs the Cross with the patient Saviour upon it,—it is the model of our lives. We must nail down all personal desires. We must crucify ourselves. It is hard! —sometimes!—but"—and here Douay's voice sank to a sudden tenderness—"when the troubles of youth are past,—when we can look back upon what we thought was so cruel to miss,—we find that we have not lost so much as we have gained!"

Something struggled in Everton's soul akin to a passionate pain and clamorous protest,—was this man, this priest of a

rival creed, nearer the truth of Christianity than he? And was Christianity itself such an arbitrary law after all that it forbade the love of woman? Young Hadley's words came back upon his memory—"Love, I say!—love!—it's what the Lord Christ never knew—it's what He missed—love for a woman!—and there He fails to be our brother in sorrow!" And it seemed to him that the face of Jacynth gleamed like a mirage in the air and vanished.

"You speak with a very admirable resignation to the rule of your Church,"—he said, then—"But, if Science is a reflex of Divine Law (as we are bound to think it is), then Science shows us that the union of sexes is the cause of their continuance. Without love and marriage mankind would cease to be. The birds and beasts, the insects and the flowers mate and are happy in mating,—they are God's creations and serve Him without complaint or disobedience, and surely He cares for them! It is we who complain,—it is we who disobey,—we fight against law and would upset it if we could, by training ourselves to live unnatural lives, and thinking that we serve God best by opposing ourselves to His visible governance. I do not agree with you that marriage unfits a man for devotion to the service of Christ. On the contrary, I believe it strengthens him."

Douay smiled.

"It is well for you that you think so,"—he said—"And in these matters we must not argue too far. The opinion is different, but the woman is always the same! Yes—the woman is always the mischief!" Here his smile broadened into a laugh. "Imagine! If there had been no woman in the case, this good England would still have been Catholique! But the nation ran away from the Pope all because the so affectionate Henry the Eighth fell in love with pretty Anne Boleyn! So much will hang on a leetle thread. No Anne Boleyn—no Church Protestant!"

"True!" and a sudden warmth of feeling transfigured Everton's pale, intellectual face with a light as though some fiery thought had inwardly illumined it—"A woman is at the

core of every great reform in the world of men. We may affect to despise women and make light of their power,—we may even in the fullness of our masculine self-sufficiency strive to avoid them as obstacles in the progress of our own well-being—but they conquer in the end! You say 'No Anne Boleyn, no Church Protestant.' My thoughts go further,—and I say with all reverence: No Virgin Mary, no Christ!"

Douay gave him a quick, surprised look.

"A la bonheur!" he exclaimed—"We agree so far! Let us now cease to be serious! Let us talk of something droll—of this village, for instance—this leetle parish for which you are too big!"

"Too big?" echoed Everton—"Not I!" and he sighed involuntarily—"I'm afraid I'm too small and too weak altogether to manage even this poor handful of souls. I feel my limitations bitterly. You see there's not much to be done in a place where the love of drink is the people's chief passion. The Church and the public-house are rivals for the favour of Shadbrook, and naturally the stronger wins."

"And the stronger is?"—hinted Douay.

"Can you ask? The public-house, of course!"

The little priest was silent, and took one or two turns up and down the study, with his hands clasped in meditative fashion behind his back. And presently Everton found himself telling the story of the Kiernans, though he carefully refrained from mentioning the share his wife had unintentionally taken in its development. Douay listened with keen and attentive interest. At the end of the narration he gave an eloquent gesture with his shoulders and hands.

"But then the man is a murderer!" he exclaimed—"he has killed his wife! Must there not be an enquiry and a punishment?"

Everton's eyes grew sadly troubled.

"Well, the doctor does not think the poor woman died of the physical injuries her husband inflicted on her,"—he said—"It was worry that did the mischief. She was getting well—till—till she heard about the girl in the case——"

"Ah, the girl!" and Douay nodded—"The girl to whom the husband made love! It was a pity she heard of that at all! Some idle gossiping neighbour told her, I suppose?"

Everton did not answer for a moment. His face flushed and he turned away.

"It was quite by accident she heard it,"—he said evasively, "All the village knew—so I understand; it seems that I was the only one kept in the dark."

Douay looked at him curiously, with a slight smile.

"Ah! They were afraid to tell you! You look too good to hear such naughty tales! Now there is the advantage of the Catholique confession! In my Church this wicked, pretty leetle girl would have told me all her sins—and the big drunkard would have come to me to ask forgiveness—and I should have frightened him!—oh yes, indeed!" Then, noting Everton's troubled countenance, he went up to him and patted him kindly on the arm. "Do not worry yourself, Mistaire Everton! This thing will arrange itself. It is unpleasant—it is a matter of the drink. Always the drink! I do not understand this England. Drink rules the people, and the makers of drink sit in the House of Parliament! Yet so much talk about temperance! And Government permits the poisoning of all the liquor! It is beyond me to comprehend. How wise your Shak-es-peare was! How wise when he wrote that if Hamlet should be sent to England, his madness would not be noticed as all the people there were as mad as he! So true!—true to this day!"

Everton smiled, glad of the turn in the conversation, for he did not wish to say much about Jacynth Miller. He felt that he could hardly trust himself on that subject without betraying more irritation than would seem necessary. He entered quickly into generalities,—pressed Douay to stay to luncheon—an invitation which was readily accepted,—and set about making his guest feel thoroughly at home. There was indeed something novel and pleasant to him in the society of a man who, though his theories were those of a rival creed, was at any rate of a higher order of intellect than any of the

provincial nonentities he had been compelled to meet for the past three years in and around Shadbrook, and he determined to make the most of it. A good long talk with a well-educated and intelligent individual of his own sex was a mental stimulus, and one that he was not often privileged to enjoy. The only 'gentleman' in the neighbourhood, so far as birth and education went, was the patron of the living, Mr. Hazlitt, the 'resident' Squire who was scarcely ever in residence,—and he, though good-natured and kind-hearted, was profoundly and unutterably dull, such brains as he had being concentrated on hunting, which he pronounced 'huntin',' and his outlook on the world being limited to the 'points' of a horse. Compared to him Sebastien Douay was a wit and philosopher combined—and that he was also a Roman Catholic priest, bent on fulfilling the commands of his Church by making as many converts as possible, was, to Everton, quite immaterial. For, if there was one sure foothold on which he, as a minister of the Church of England stood firmly, it was the severe simplicity of his form of faith. He could never understand any ornate or superstitious ritual as being possible to sane and thinking men,—and the *Apologia* of Newman for his retrogression to Rome, had always struck him as one of the most lamentable episodes in Church history, which could only be set down to the working of an over-excitable imagination and a want of logical balance in the brain. To voluntarily sacrifice the free, God-given force of reason for mere ecclesiastical slavery must ever be the act of a weak mind.

Therefore, he was quite at his ease with his new friend, who, closely observant of him and taking pains to draw him out, soon discovered that under his quiet, self-contained manner, which, by those who knew him not was considered 'soft' when it was merely unassuming, there was a rare and brilliant nature, quick to grasp close subtleties of thought and translate them into clear evidence,—and that this nature was strengthened by a singular force of will, all the more powerful because it was so seldom exercised. Douay was not a Jesuit for nothing. He too was a clever man, and had been trained

to recognise cleverness in others, which is one of the most valuable characteristics of diplomacy. And it was after a discussion on the laxity of the age in religious matters, that he suddenly put the very question which Everton, whenever it occurred to himself, considered the prompting of a demon:

"Are you going to stay all your life in Shadbrook, Mistaire Everton?"

The colour rushed to Everton's brows, and his eyes lighted up with a smile.

"Why do you ask?"

Douay shrugged his shoulders

"It is a narrow circle—and you should have wide influence!"

"If one cannot fill a small place successfully—and I am sure I cannot,—what should one do with a large?" and Everton looked at him questioningly—"You yourself are content with a mere handful of the 'faithful'!"

"Ah!—but I am sure of change!"—said Douay—"I may be the curé of the tin chapelle for four—five years—but scarcely longer. Rome plays a big game of chess with the world—and she is always moving her leetle pawns. When the monastery is built——"

"Oh, there is to be a monastery, is there?"

"Mais, oui! Of course! What would you? The French fathers are turned out of France—they come naturally to England. They will poss-eebly buy the so ugly brewery of Mistaire Minchin in time, when the brewing of the beer makes failure!" He laughed—then went on—"Yes—there will be a monastery on the Cotswolds—and in time—a population Catholique. I begin that. When I have done my leetle task, I go elsewhere. It is but a turn of the wheel. There were monasteries all over England once—there will be again. No one puts any stop in their way—and where there is land to be sold—well!—the Church has money!"

Everton was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"Perhaps, after all, it is a good thing that this should happen. Rome will gather together the credulous, the superstitious—and—pardon my frankness!—the cowardly, into

her fold,—men and women who are afraid of themselves and their own abominable vices,—who would rather be slaves than free—who half believe in Hell, and think payment to the Church will buy their escape from eternal torment—and we shall see them as they are—we shall know them!"

Douay smiled, and raised his eyebrows expressively.

"You are bold, mon ami! So bold that I like you!—I almost love you! For you are true—true to your own conviction!—and you are not afraid of offending one person or many persons—that is a magnificent courage to which I bow my soul!"

Everton flushed warmly, conscious that his impulsive words might have justly given his guest cause for annoyance.

"I beg your pardon!" he said, frankly and earnestly—"For the moment I forgot myself. Forgive my brusque speech!—it ought never to have been said to a minister of the Church of Rome. I did not mean to be discourteous, I assure you!—but you seem so broad-minded, and so free from the trammels of superstition yourself, that you unconsciously led me to express thoughts, which in your presence were better left unuttered."

He broke off, visibly embarrassed.

"Allons donc!" exclaimed Douay, good-naturedly—"I see that not at all! Every man's opinion is interesting to me, and I am the last person to take offence at hearing it. And as for broad mind—ah oui!—you will soon know that is very large in me! I take within my brain all creeds—all struggles for the good—all sorrows—all difficulties—and I say, alas!—poor men and poor women! So slow to learn—so hard to live—so quick to die! The great God cannot be angry long with these leetle sad mortals! It is all so trifling! See! They are born and they do not know why—they feel afraid and yet they hope—they do the wrong thing because they are not taught the right one—they cry a little and pray a little like poor children who are naughty—their good Father give them a leetle whipping and put them to bed in the churchyard—it is finish!—good-night!—and then they wake

up in the bright morning of Heaven, fresh and happy and pardoned—is it not so? Your Church and mine both teach that pretty lesson—and we shall never do better, mon ami! —with all the education and all the science, we shall never do better!"

His keen blue-grey eyes twinkled kindly, and there was a suspicion of moisture in them.

"I am sorry for everything," he went on—"and sorry for everybody! One church is as useful as another—and though I know the stupidities of mine as well as I know the stupidities of yours, I say it matters not. For all churches must move one way, — the way that shall give hope to the hopeless, that shall comfort the good, and frighten the bad, and that shall help the poor weak ones—for the strong can stand alone."

"Can any one, however strong, stand alone?" queried Everton.

Douay looked full at him.

"*You* can! And you will!"

There was something singularly compelling in his tone, and Everton was thrilled by it with a strange sensation akin to fear. To 'stand alone' had never been his ambition. He had set before him as his aim and end the quiet life of a country clergyman, established with a wife and family in a peaceful village where no disturbing rumours of the larger outer world should ever trouble his studious and contented calm,—far removed from the clamour and call of warring humanity — the struggle of nations — the rise and fall of governments,—and all other urgent things which with great pulsation of eager breath and vital stir of hurrying blood are the actual heart-beats of the world. He had attained what his dreams had pictured as the most beautiful life for any man—the life of quiet contemplation and limited influence, happily associated with the consolations of love and domestic tranquillity,—what then remained for him but a satisfaction as perfect as any that could be found on earth? What did he need that he was not possessed of? Surely nothing!—yet—

if he would be honest with himself he knew that there was a lurking restlessness in his soul to which he could give no name.

"You will not always be here,"—went on Douay, nodding impressively at him—"That is quite imposs-eeble! You will have what some of the so many religions in England say is a 'call'—you will hear a voice cry 'Go forth!' and you will go. I am much older than you,—and I have not lived so long not to know many things. I have seen the folly of trying to do good—but you—you have not learned that lesson yet—and you will try!—you will half kill yourself in the effort to do kind actions, and they will all be misjudged—they will come back as curses upon you,—they always do! Study the life of Our Lord and read the lesson! Each of His miracles was treated the same—'He hath a devil!'—and for the great crime of loving mankind, He was crucified! See you! It is the same always—it will always be the same! But you will not quite believe this—and you will try to imitate Our Lord. If you try too far you also will be nailed to the gibbet and put in the sepulchre. Perhaps you will rise again—perhaps not!—that depends on the strength of the soul within you!"

"Then, you think there is no such thing as justice?" asked Everton.

"For the good—none at all!" replied Douay emphatically—"None—not one leetle bit! Not in this world! No,—not at all—I know not why! But for the bad there is much enjoyment,—they have what they call 'great fun,' and often die in their beds quite peacefully, with the smiles of angels! And if they have much money, the clergyman say 'Ah, how good! What saintly souls are here gone to heaven!' Of course! I would say the same myself if a very bad person left me a hundred thousand pounds!" He laughed pleasantly. "Yes—that is so! The bad person does very well as a rule. It is natural to be bad, apparently—it is *un*natural to be good! Or I will put it that we have made social and moral laws into which the *natural* man does not fit. When the *un*natural man arranges himself to obey

those laws, the natural one fights against him—and so it goes on. Always trouble!—always misunderstanding! So it has been from the beginning—so it will ever be!"

"You are more of a philosopher than a priest," — said Everton, smiling.

"Exactly!—so I am! I might have been another Renan, if I had not seen how foolishly Renan himself wasted his life. Think of it! To write the *Vie de Jésus*, he went to the Holy Land—and there his sister Henriette, the most true friend he ever had, died of fever. Well!—what use was all the agony, the sickness, the weariness, the work? Does the great world in all its sections care for the *Vie de Jésus*? Not one leetle bit! All the writers may write as they please, but the Divine Personality remains Divine—and why? Because it is a simple, tender, loving Personality, uniting itself to the poor and the suffering,—there are no complex side-issues to its work—it is Love only! That is why it will remain with the world, when Voltaire and Renan are forgotten!"

They were seated in Everton's study during this conversation,—luncheon was over, and they had drawn their chairs up to the fireside, for though the day was fine and bright, a cold March wind was driving its steely whips through the air, and the blaze of sparkling coal was cheery and full of comfort. Everton was, in a vague sort of fashion, surprised to think how little he had noted the absence of his wife from the lunch table. The meal had been a simple one, but perfectly well served — no particular confusion had occurred among the domestics because the mistress of the house was away,—and the pleasure he had derived from the presence of a stranger who could talk about matters in which he was intellectually interested, entirely softened, if it did not quite obliterate, the previous wretched sense of utter solitude and desertion which, with the departure of Azalea and 'Baby. Laurence,' had fallen like a cloud upon him. And he was sorrier than he cared to express when Douay presently rose to take his leave.

"Must you go so soon?" he asked, regretfully—"I have not said half what I should like to say——"

"No—that is true!" said Douay, pressing his hand cordially—"You have been very silent,—I have done all the talking, and you have listened. That is your way just now. You are a dumb evangelist! But some day you—you also—will speak!"

They parted on the mutual understanding that they meant to see a good deal of each other in the future. Everton agreed to cycle over as often as he could to the cottage near the 'tin chapelle' of which Douay was now the 'curé'—and Douay in his turn promised to call at the Vicarage whenever he found himself in Shadbrook.

"Though, mind you, I won't have you making 'perverts' of my parishioners!" laughed Everton.

"Not even to save them from the drink of Mistaire Minchin?"—retorted Douay—"Be not afraid, mon ami! I never try to convert or 'pervert' anybody. It is too much trouble! I open my little church or tin chapelle, and let the people come, or stay away as they please. But here is the fault of what we call our Christianity. If one Church cannot make a bad man better, it is preferred that he should be left in his badness than that any other Church should make him good. Ah, bah!"—and he smiled genially as Everton uttered a few quick eager words of protest—"I do not mind—why should I?—but you know it is as I say. You speak as your training makes you speak, and you are right to do as you are told. I also—I do what I am told. But I keep my own opinion. And I say if a man is born more savage than civilised—and there are many such—it is better to soften his cruel nature by a superstition than to give up his soul altogether. You will not make him understand the grand scientific cosmos—no! You will never teach him the mathematical miracle of the solar system,—his brain will be too shallow to accept it. But he will comprehend the devil—he will be troubled!—especially in drink—by pictures of the horns and hoofs and tail! Yet the horns and hoofs and tail are quite common—we see them every day in the oxen,—and as a part of

the devil they are only the relics of an old pagan myth—the myth of the god Pan and his leaping satyrs—but no matter!—there are thousands of excellent persons calling themselves educated who never heard of the god Pan or any pagan myth at all,—and if we may believe the so wonderful newspapers, the leetle children in Australia are growing up without knowing any more of Christ than they do of Pan! It is a wonderful age!—so clever as to be *too* clever!—and Our Lord's prophecies are being so quickly fulfilled that His unworthy priests must surely tremble!"

His voice sank—and a sudden sadness darkened his features like the shadow of a cloud. Everton was silent,—and in a certain sense was astonished at the emotion evinced by this simple, ordinary-looking little man, to whom, at a first glance, no one would have given credit for possessing any great interest in things beyond the merest commonplace duties of his calling. Douay seemed to read his thoughts, for, laying one hand upon his arm, he went on—

"If I were a gitted man—a man with an eloquent tongue, and, above all, if I were a handsome man—for the *physique* is always more to the male and female savages than the *morale*,—I would be a prophet to this time of what is coming. Yes!—of what is coming! Of the terror—the doom that is coming! Not because God is angry—no!—but because Wrong must be made Right by the changeless order of the Eternal mathematics, which God cannot alter unless He would destroy Himself! There is no such thing as Chaos,—there never was. It is all Law! And we must obey—if not—then gare à nous! Yes!" and he smiled strangely—"If I were a gifted man—a man like *you*!—I would be something of an apostle!"

"Like me!" exclaimed Everton—"My dear sir, you overrate my powers altogether! I am a nothing! the most incompetent of preachers and teachers,—and though I deeply feel the things you say, I cannot express them——"

"Not in Shadbrook!" said Douay—"No! *That* I understand! To Shadbrook you must talk as to a leetle child—

but there is a world outside Shadbrook—and to that you will speak,—when the time is ready!"

He shook hands again and went on his way,—and Everton, left alone, busied himself among his books for the rest of the afternoon. Douay's words troubled him, and made him dwell more or less irritably on remote possibilities in the future,—therefore he sought to cool his mind by plunging it, as it were, into a deep well of study. A telegram from Azalea announced her safe arrival at Weston-super-Mare, and her delight at being by the sea,—and, satisfied that she was evidently perfectly happy without him, he tried for the time being, to imagine himself unmarried and free from all the responsibility of having other lives dependent on his own. What would be his purpose in life now, under such circumstances?

The answer came at once. To resign his living and go to London. London, the mighty fermenting mass of good and evil,—London with all its deep-centred horror, beauty and vileness,—London, the Lost Soul of a vast section of humanity—a Soul that is sinking so surely and swiftly into choking quicksands of vice that not even the outstretched beams of the Cross seem able to bear it up from destruction. Yet what should he do in London? Preach 'the wrath to come'? It would be called 'ranting' by the halfpenny press; and the public, or such portion of it as swears by its lying daily newspapers, would be induced to jest at and condemn him. Well, what then? Did that matter, he asked himself? Did not the ancient Jewish precursors of the modern press cry in the same mocking spirit: "If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the Cross!" And "He saved others: Himself He cannot save!" With a quick impatient sigh, he walked up and down his room like a trapped animal in a cage, not in any way realising that his whole nature was panting for freedom. Even if he had thought it, he never would have entirely admitted that he longed to break through the narrow circle wherein he was pent, and escape from the small and mean concerns of low rural life—life in which the mating of man and woman reaches no higher plane than that of moth

with moth, and yet is considered the chief business of living—life, out of which children are born merely to drudge and die,—life which is made up of such weary and monotonous nothings that one can but marvel at the dogged patience and stolid endurance with which it is lived.

Pausing in one of his turns to and fro, he stood at the window and stared out into the garden. The sun was sinking in a dull crimson glow behind a clump of short fir trees, and their branches looked black as ink stretched stiffly out against the lurid western light. Something like a pale fiery reflection seemed cast up from the ground to mingle with the stronger glare in the sky, and Everton caught himself thinking, he knew not why, of the first murder as chronicled in Genesis, when the Lord said:—"The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me from the ground!" How many such voices of blood had cried to the Lord since then! Millions upon millions of them, shrieking through tortured mouths red with human wrong!—red as the ground there, which the scarlet sun flamed upon silently without any pitying touch of golden tenderness—as silently as the Lord Himself now watched all the accumulating crime of the world! Everton shivered with a sudden sense of cold, and turned away from the garden view, which to him had become unaccountably gloomy. At that instant there was a knock at the study door and the parlourmaid entered.

"If you please, sir,"—she said, somewhat nervously—"there's some one wants to see you—a man from the village——"

He looked at her, and noticed that she seemed a trifle scared.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"It's—it's Dan Kiernan, sir."

He waited a moment, considering. Then he said quietly:

"All right! Show him in."

The girl lingered hesitatingly—and added in a low tone:

"I think he's quite sober, sir."

Everton nodded.

"Good. I'm glad of that. I'll see him at once."

She disappeared then, and there came a pause—a pause in which Everton tried to get a firm hold of his thoughts and so steady them that he should betray no sign of the hatred—yes, hatred!—that he bore to the man who was not only a vile accuser of the innocent, but also—the lover of Jacynth. Then came the sound of heavy, clumbering feet in the outer passage; the feet of the rustic boor which always tread with the same uncouth awkwardness whether on carpets or clods of clay,—and in another few seconds a shadow loomed on the threshold of his quiet room—a huge, brawny, bulky figure that seemed to suddenly create an obstruction in space and a darkness in light. Everton looked steadily at this slouching form as it appeared, mentally measuring it in its gross material mass of man,—he watched it enter his study and shut the door,—then he stood up and faced it. But he said nothing. And for one long minute there was a tense stillness, in which only the slow ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece could be heard. Both men met each other's eyes with equal recognition and antipathy,—both men knew, albeit obscurely, that the same passions animated them, though the one was an educated minister of Christ's Gospel, and the other an ignorant, drink-sodden ruffian,—and both were conscious of a certain fascination in each other's personality. So they stood, each waiting for the other to speak,—but both with the same name ready to spring to their lips at the first provocation—the name of Jacynth.

CHAPTER IX

KIERNAN was the first to break silence.

"I want a wurrd with ye, Mister Parson,"—he said, gruffly.

"Certainly!"—and the Vicar, moving to his customary desk chair, seated himself—"I know of your great trouble——"

"Oh, ye knows of it, does ye?" and Dan glowered sullenly at him from under his heavy black brows—"Well, that'll save some talkin'. Anyway ye doan't need tellin' that my wife's dead."

"I heard of her death last night,"—said Everton, as gently as he could—"And I am very, very sorry."

"Very very sorry won't mend it,"—retorted Kiernan—"She's gone, and very very sorry woan't bring her back. She was a good wench to me, Jennie was,—an' ef it 'adn't bin for you, Mister Parson, meddlin' an' muddlin' round with what worn't yer bizness, an' interferin' with a poor man's 'ome, she'd a' bin alive now!"

The Vicar sat rigidly in his chair, quite silent.

"Ef it 'adn't bin for you," went on Dan, in a louder tone—"you an' yer mincin' smirkin' dolly wife, Jennie would a' bin livin' yet, strong an' 'arty. She never minded a bit o' my fist, didn't Jennie—she knew 'twas all right an' what she'd got to xpect from a man with a drop o' drink in 'im, an' she didn't go fur to blame me neither. She worn't no darnation preacher! She was that fond o' me that she took the hull o' me for better an' worser, drink or no drink, as the weddin' words bound 'er o do, and ef one parson marries a man to a woman with them words, I'd like to know 'ow any other parson dare come

interferin' between 'em! 'Ow dare he? Come! Tell me that!"

Everton lifted his calm clear eyes and looked full at him.

"If you mean that for me," he said, slowly—"*I* never came between you. I only tried to save your wife from you when you were too drunk to know what you were doing—and when you might unintentionally have murdered her. I also tried to save you from yourself!"

Kiernan gave a short laugh.

"Fine talk that is!" he exclaimed—"Reg'lar pulpit jabber! Save me from myself! What d'ye mean? I *am* myself, an' there ain't no me outside myself. Any fool knows that! An' it's me myself that sez Jennie would a' bin all right ef she'd a' bin left alone—she was a-gettin' on fine an' comin' round as well as could be, till your wife, Mister Parson,"—here he thrust his dark face forward with a threatening movement—"your lady wife with 'er airs an' 'er graces an' 'er mean gossipin' tongue came in tellin' tales, an' killed 'er!"

Everton rose suddenly and walked straight up to him.

"Dare to speak of my wife again and I'll put you out of the house!" he said, in low, perfectly even tones—"I don't want any quarrel with you, Dan Kiernan, but if you force one upon me it will be the worse for you!"

Kiernan stared,—for the moment completely taken aback by the Vicar's rapid movement and resolute expression. Then he gave vent to a hoarse chuckle.

"So you've got a bit o' pluck about ye, 'ave ye!" he sneered. "Can't 'ave *your* wife touched! 'Ow about *my* wife then? My wife as is lyin' dead? S'pose *your* wife was a-lyin' wheer mine is? S'pose you was a-goin' to shovel 'er into the ground to-morrer? 'Ow would *you* like it? One man's no worse an' no better than t'other, if we goes by Church preachin', an' poor's as good as rich—so I doan't s'pose *your* feelin's 'as any speshul right to be took care of more'n mine! An' ef ye knew that your wife 'ad bin killed by a lot o' cursed gabble an' mischief-makin', m'appen ye'd feel like killin' the man or the woman what done ye the bad turn!"

He chuckled savagely again as Everton moved away from him with an involuntary gesture of repulsion, and added :—

"You knows that's right enough! Bein' parson doan't save ye from bein' a man. You preaches justice an' ekal rights for rich an' poor, but when it comes to tryin' the game on square, you doan't want your own wife blamed though mine's lyin' dead! An' wheer's the right an' justice o' that?" He threw up one hand with a defiant snap of his fingers, adding—"An' all the bloomin' fuss about a gel too! By the Lord!—as ef gels worn't as cheap an' common as blackberries on a hedge, waitin' for men to gather 'em, an' turnin' sour too ef they *ain't* gathered when ripe! What's to do with 'em, I say? Let 'em rot? Or take 'em when they're offered free?"

Everton stood still and listened. There was a curious tension in the air like the oppressive sense of heat before thunder, and he waited with an irritated sense of impatience for the lightning-flash of a woman's name.

"Some gels likes men, an' some doan't,"—went on Dan—"Them as doan't keeps off clear—them as does comes to the first whistle. An' there's gels as turns yer 'ed silly more'n the drink, wi' their looks an' their smiles an' their 'dears' an' their 'darlin's,' an' I doan't mind tellin' you an' everybody else in the hull village that I went fair 'mazed an' crazy over Jacynth Miller."

Here he paused and seemed to gather himself into a black brooding cloud of anger. Everton remained standing in the same position and place, coldly attentive.

"What the h—ll was it to you,"—burst forth Kiernan again, "whether I 'ad the gel or she 'ad me? What call 'ad your missus to go muddlin' an' meddlin' an' tellin' tales to mine? I've as good a right to 'ave a gel as any man, an' I ain't bound to ask leave of the parson neither!"

Everton's lips were dry, and he found it difficult to speak.

A feverish tremor ran through his veins,—savage instincts such as he hardly knew he possessed, stirred within him, urging him to throw himself upon this boorish brute and shake him into utter speechlessness,—and it was only by the strongest possible effort that he maintained his self-control.

"You are certainly not bound to ask a parson or any one else for leave to do anything,"—he said, at last, slowly, in accents of irrepressible scorn—"You are a free man in a free country, as men and countries go. You can commit as many sins as you like,—you can disgrace yourself and others—you can indulge in every sort of vice and abomination—you can drink yourself to death, if you decide to do so—and no other man can hinder you. But you are answerable to God for your conduct!"

Kiernan laughed insolently.

"God! Oh, that's all right! I doan't mind God! He doan't interfere. He's made men to mate wi' wimmin, an' wimmin to mate wi' men, an' 'ow they do't doan't matter to 'im as long as 'tis done! God didn't look out o' the sky an' say 'Jacynth, doan't ye go wi' Dan!'—or 'Dan, doan't ye go wi' Jacynth!' not 'e! There ain't no nonsense o' that kind in all creation 'cept wi' parsons an' district visitors! Mind though, I woan't say but that of Jacynth 'ad a' bin a straight gel I'd a' left 'er alone—but she was born a reg'lar bad 'un, as sweet as 'ony an' as coaxin' as a kitten, an' she'd a' took any man she wanted. It 'appened to be me—but it might a' just as easy 'appened to be you!"

The Vicar drew his breath quickly and his eyes grew dark with repressed pain. But he said not a word in reply.

"It might just as easy 'appened to be you,"—repeated Dan, taking a sort of stupid satisfaction in the assertion—"One was as good as t'other to Jacynth. She'd a' took any one she 'ad a mind to. She fancied me—an' I was the fust one—yes! —I was fust!" and he gave vent to a low snigger—"She can't get over that whatever she doos an' wheerever she goes. An' the actor fellow she's gone with now is the second,—much good may it do 'im! But ef she'd stayed on in the village, she'd a' got every man she wanted, an' she'd a' 'ad you as sure as you're alive! She said as much to me once when she wanted to rile me. 'I'll make love to the parson some day, Dan, see ef I doan't!' sez she, an' she pulls the pins out of 'er 'air an' lets it all fall about 'er, enuff to drive a chap silly—'I'll look at

'im so!' an' she makes a cherry of 'er mouth, an' twinkles 'er big eyes—'An' I'll ketch 'old of 'im so,'—an' she puts 'er arms round my neck—'An' when 'e goes to read the prayers in church, 'e'll see nothin' but my face at the altar!' That's what she said, Gospel true! An' she'd a' kep' 'er wurrd!"

Still Everton was silent. He was very pale, but he stood motionless. He had nothing to say. No argument was possible with such a man as this.

"No one carn't swear as she worn't the finest gel anywheers on the Cotswolds," went on Kiernan—"As pretty as the devil could make 'er, an' as skeery an' gay as a young colt thoroughbred. An' ef it's agin God's will that a gel should take to a man an' a man to a gel, why doan't 'e show it? Why doan't 'e talk to the birds an' the beasts an' tell 'em they're all a-goin' to 'ell? They doos what we're told not to do,—an' it's all rot an' mawky stuff so far as a man's consarned, for a man's a man wi' the ways of a man, an' ef you worn't a parson, you'd be 'onest an' say the same. I ain't done no more 'arm than a burrd what picks out a new mate every spring."

He paused, waiting for Everton to speak, while Everton himself vaguely wondered what he was expected to say. At last he forced himself into utterance.

"When you married your wife," he said, coldly—"You swore before God to be faithful to her, did you not?"

Dan's eyes shifted to and fro uneasily.

"Mebbe I did,"—he answered, sullenly—"But there ain't no man in the hull wurrld as sticks to one woman." Then, meeting the Vicar's straight, accusing glance, he burst out, savagely: "There ain't, I say! Ay, ye may look an' look at me till yer eyes falls out o' yer 'ed an' it woan't make no difference to my way o' thinkin'! There's not a man alive, low nor 'igh, as ever kep' to 'is wife all 'is days, year in an' year out. I doan't care who 'e be,—mebbe the Squire or mebbe Mister Minchin,—they'se all made o' the same stuff, an' Jennie she knew that well, bein' a sensible wench all along. Jennie knew it—an' so does all wimmin know't, onny they jest pertends they doan't unnerstand it. But they do! Ah, an' parsons

ain't no exception—they goes for the wimmin more'n most, an' many on 'em 'ud risk 'ell for a gel like Jacynth,—that they 'ud, an' small blame to 'em! I'd take the chance of an everlastin' burnin' in the next wurrld cheerful an' willin' so long as I could 'ave Jacynth in this one! An' now, thanks to your missus interferin' where she 'adn't no business, I've lost Jacynth as well as Jennie. O' course I know'd that there actor fellow as was a-tourin' round Cheltenham way 'ad got 'is eye on 'er—a smooth, sleek-faced devil old enough to be 'er father, wi' grey 'airs an' a made-up skin—but 'e pertended to be a gentleman 'e did, an' that's what Jacynth wanted. She allus told me she'd be a lady somehows. Sez she: 'I'll be a lady in a theatre like what we reads about in the 'apenny *Mail*, as spends 'eaps o' money she ain't got, an' 'as thousands o' pounds worth o' debts for the clothes she wears, an' marries a rich 'usband an' lives with ever so many lovers, an' is took about by duchesses, an' goes on board the King's yacht. That's bein' a real lady, that is!' So she sez, an' that's what she's after, an' by G—d, she'll 'ave 'er way! Look 'ere, Mister Parson, you talks o' the drink, an' the 'arm the drink doos to the workin'-man, but ef you wants to put a stop to real mischief, you'll 'ave to stop the 'apenny papers!—that's your ticket! Stop them comin' into the village wi' the marnin's London tales o' what the dirty sassiety folks is a-doin' wi' theirselves—for those tales drives more country gels to the bad than any lot o' men makin' love to 'em. The 'apenny paper doos more 'arm than all the publics put together!"

Everton heard this harangue with attentive patience. The coarse eloquence of the man moved him to a certain surprise,—he had not thought Kiernan capable, even when sober, of expressing himself so forcibly. For there was truth in what he said,—truth that could not be denied. And his thoughts wandered to the 'actor fellow' who had taken Jacynth,—he caught himself wondering whether he could be traced, and the girl rescued;—rescued? But to what purpose would the rescue serve? The world has grown apathetic and indifferent to the ruin of women! He sighed impatiently, and seeing that

Kiernan was watching him, he said in accents of studied gentleness :—

"You may be right. No doubt you are. But the existence of the cheap newspaper evil does not lessen the drink evil. Drink is your curse, Kiernan—fight against it if you are a man! Drink has brought you into your present trouble, and drink will bring you to a wretched end if you don't pull up in time. I'm not 'preaching' or giving you what you call 'pulpit jabber'—I'm speaking to you as"—he paused,—he could not say 'as a friend'—and he finished the sentence slowly—"as your Vicar."

Dan gave a contemptuous gesture.

"Oh, are ye? Well, ye woan't be my Vicar arter to-morrer!" he said—"I ain't a-goin' to stop in Shadbrook now Jacynth's gone an' my wife's dead. There ain't nothin' to stop for. I've got a better job, an' I'm off."

Everton was quite still for a moment. His heart was full of a smouldering anger, and he could feel it beating quickly.

"You follow Jacynth, I suppose?" he said, meaningly.

A tigerish gleam leaped into Kiernan's eyes.

"No, I doan't!" he answered, sharply, and with fierce emphasis—"So ye supposes wrong! As long as she was mine I'd a' gone with 'er to the devil!—but I doan't take another man's cast-off!"

A silence followed, in which the measured ticking of the clock became painfully obtrusive. The sun had sunk, and the room was filled with dense shadows. In the wavering uncertainty of the semi-twilight, Kiernan's bulky form loomed larger, darker, and more aggressive, and Everton, with a sense of vague disquietude upon him, moved to his desk and lit the two candles which always stood there, in order to relieve the obscurity. Then he turned again towards his undesired visitor.

"Have you said all you wish to say to me?" he asked.

Dan gave him an ugly look.

"Not quite all, Mister Parson!" he said—"Not quite all! There's a goodish bit yet between you an' me; 'owsomever, I'll

not 'ave it out wi' ye while Jennie's above ground. But I'll jest tell ye this much, that ye'll not see me at the buryin' to-morrer. I ain't a-goin' to stand by an' see Jennie put into th' yerth—not I, by a long ways! An' 'ave all the neighbours a-starin' an' a-whisperin' round, an' a-sayin' as 'ow I'd broken Jennie's 'art by reason o' Jacynth; when ef it 'adn't been for the meddlin' o' your missus comin' into my 'ome wheer she 'adn't no business to be, Jennie 'ud never a' bin a bit the wiser nor the worser. So you'll do the buryin' this time without the chief mourner, Mister!—for I'll say good-bye to Jennie lyin' in 'er coffin to-night afore they screws 'er down,—an' as for mournin', I've got a mournin' way o' my own,— an' that way your wife 'ull find out sooner or later,—by G—d, she shall!"

Everton glanced him up and down in utter scorn.

"You threaten a woman!" he said, contemptuously—"A bully is always a coward!"

Kiernan made one heavy stride towards him.

"Come, I woan't take that!" he exclaimed, fiercely—"I woan't take it, I say! No damn parson shall call me a coward!"

"You *are* a coward!" and Everton stood his ground firmly, looking unflinchingly into the savage face that so closely confronted him,—"You talk like a coward, and you behave like one! If you have a grudge against me and want to avenge yourself, why don't you do it here and now? I am alone,—why don't you knock me down if that will be a relief to your feelings? I shall neither resist nor retaliate. You know I can't raise a hand against you in self-defence, not because I fear you, but simply because I am a minister of Christ. Take your chance, therefore, and do what you like to me,—but for the sake of common manliness, if not for very shame, leave women out of the quarrel!"

For a moment Kiernan stood confounded, staring stupidly at the pale, delicately built man who, with a perfectly grave and quiet demeanour, thus offered himself for attack. Then he fell back a few steps, and a slow, cunning smile darkened rather than brightened his heavy features.

"Leave wimmin out!" he muttered—"No—that woan't do! —that woan't do! Wimmin was the beginnin' an' wimmin 'll be the end! You're a peart man, Mister Parson, an' I ain't a-goin' to touch ye! 'Tain't my game to get into trouble on your score, though I make no doubt ye'd like me to do it! But I'm a-clearin' out o' this part o' the parish an' I'll go quiet. I doan't intend to lose the place I've just took at Minchin's all for the pleasure o' givin' ye a knock-me-down,—thank'ee kindly! I'll settle up some other time!"

Everton still kept his eyes upon him.

"Are you going to work at Minchin's Brewery?" he asked.

Dan nodded his bullet head a great many times.

"I am," he answered, with a kind of surly triumph—"I've got a good job there an' good pay."

"God help you, man!" said Everton, abruptly—"You go from bad to worse!"

He turned away and sat down at his desk. The clock ticked off two or three minutes with uninterrupted distinctness. At last, oppressed by the stillness and the weight of Kiernan's hateful presence in his room, he said:

"I think your business with me is finished? I understand you will not be at your wife's funeral to-morrow and that you are leaving Shadbrook. That's what you wished me to know, isn't it?"

His curt matter-of-fact tone seemed to bewilder Kiernan for a second. He put his hand to his head, and rubbed his thick stubbly hair in a meditative way.

"That's it,"—he replied, slowly—"That's it, Mister Parson, —for the present. But doan't ye leave out the best part o' my bizness with ye—an' that's what I said about your missus, an' it's what I stick to. My Jennie's death lies at 'er door—an' for that matter Jacynth's goin' off sudden-like lies at 'er door too—and I'll—I'll"— here he raised a clenched fist in air— "I'll have it even with 'er yet! She's runned away—I knows she's runned away this marnin' afraid to 'ear of all the trouble she's brought upon a poor man's 'ome—but she'll have to

come back — an' I can wait patient — I can bide my time!"

Everton made no answer. He was inwardly quivering with suppressed rage—but he knew it would be worse than useless to continue arguing with a man for whom there was no God and no conscience. He drew some papers towards him and feigned to be busy examining them.

"D'ye 'ear me?" said Kiernan, in a louder tone—"I can bide my time!"

Everton turned a calm pale face upon him.

"I hear you!" he rejoined, quietly—"And I say—God forgive you!"

His eyes shone steadfastly and clear, despite their strained look of suffering;—they were eyes that expressed a soul braced to the performance of duty, no matter how difficult or galling such duty might be. Never was a braver 'God forgive you!' uttered than by the lips of this country cleric, whose passions as a mere man were all on fire,—whose lithe hands longed to be at the throat of the sodden brute whose threats were so vague and yet so suggestive of uncompromising cruelty,—and who would have given every penny he possessed to be permitted to kick the cowardly accuser of his wife out of the house. No early Christian martyr saying 'God forgive you!' to his Roman torturers merited more praise for self-restraint and heavenly patience than Everton at that moment, for he showed no sign of what was passing in his mind, and so immovably tranquil did he seem, that Kiernan, dully staring at him, began to be angrily conscious of his own inferiority as boor to gentleman. He gave a coarse laugh.

"That's all ye sez, is it—'God forgive ye!'" he sneered. "That's all ye've got to say?"

Everton looked straightly at him.

"That's all!" he said.

There was a pause,—and for one moment the two men gazed full at one another as though each sought to drag forth some prisoned thought in both their souls. Then Dan Kiernan opened the study door roughly, went out, and banged

it after him. He was gone. With a deep sigh of relief Everton sprang up and threw back the lattice windows, admitting a rush of fresh, cold air.

"I don't think I could have stood it a moment longer!" he said half-aloud—"Pah! The room reeks of the pot-house! Good God! Is the soul of a man like Kiernan precious to the Infinite and Divine Powers? Does it deserve to be? Can it be honestly considered as more valuable than the soul of a beast of the field which has the virtues of temperance and humility? And if it is so considered, who is to save it? What force on earth or in heaven could stop this churl from drinking himself into madness,—save death? None—surely none! It is his own choice—and no one can hinder him, least of all the 'parson' whom he despises, and whom others like him equally despise, because religion is brought into contempt by the very laws of the land. Such laws! They would punish a newspaper for printing insults against the King—but they leave it unscathed for publishing the vilest blasphemy against Christ! We, the clergy, preach,—and though there are bad amongst us, the good predominate—the good who faithfully try to do their duty—but what is spoken from the pulpit is contradicted by the press,—the whole country swarms with pernicious and filthy literature which so-called 'reviewers' praise—and the ministers of Christ's Gospel appeal in vain against the wickedness and corruption in high places, because these are grown so strong and are so well-established by actual Law that it will need a second coming of Christ to cleanse the foulness of the social hive. The second coming of Christ! When will that be! God knows I would it were soon!"

He paced up and down his room, and his glance presently fell on a pretty photograph of his wife that stood on a small table near his desk. The sweet young face smiled at him, and he paused in front of it, looking at it long and earnestly, till suddenly he found his eyes suffused with tears.

"Poor little woman!" he murmured, tenderly — "Poor innocent little woman!"

And then he thought of Jacynth Miller. He remembered

every detail of her appearance the last time he had seen her,—he knew the exact and particular shade of blue she had worn —he could almost see the fashion of her bodice, open at the throat to show the whiteness of her skin, and the drooping petals of the flowers she had pinned just above the full curve of her bosom. And she—even she—had come fresh from the embraces of Dan Kiernan! A shudder ran through him,—a kind of nausea, such as might possibly affect a sensitive man if he were told that a delicately plumaged bird had fallen into the gutter and been trampled by a routing swine. Could she not have been saved from such a fate? Bob Hadley's dying cries: "Save Jacynth!" rang in his ears with haunting persistence. If he had only known! But he had never even suspected that she could, or would have had so much as a passing fancy for such a brutish creature as Dan Kiernan. Accrediting her with no more evil than an excess of vanity and heartlessness, he had thought of her as a wild, half-educated girl, endowed with an extraordinary beauty which in her case amounted to a misfortune,—a girl who needed to be dealt with firmly, yet kindly,—and he had hoped that in time, with care and teaching, he might have helped to mould her character, and fit her for some useful service. As this reflection crossed his mind he felt his face grow hot with mingled anger and shame. For while he, like a fool, had been meditating on possible ways and means for her better training, she, if her boorish lover might be believed, had merely been vowing to number him, the Vicar of the parish, among her conquests! The whole episode worried him,—he would have given a great deal had he been able to forget it. But it was just one of those uncomfortable happenings which, in the whole length of a lifetime, refuse to be forgotten.

That evening he found the Vicarage very lonely, and himself very restless. It was a fine night, though cold,—the sky was covered with masses of dense cloud which drifted along so slowly as to almost appear motionless, and now and then a solitary star gleamed forth like a spark glowing through smoke, to vanish again as soon as it appeared. A touch of frost made

the air keen and bracing, and deciding that a walk would do him good before retiring to rest, he put on his hat and overcoat and went out. As he shut his house door behind him, he stood for a moment in the garden listening, as it were, to the silence. It was a silence heavy and intense, yet suggestive of an under-current of sustained sound that sullenly refused to make itself audible. One heard nothing, yet felt that there was everything to hear. Oppressed and saddened by his own thoughts, he went quickly across the lawn and through the dark winding shrubberies to the gate which opened upon the high-road, and there leaned for a moment looking at the dim twinkle of the lights in the village of Shadbrook—very few and uncertain in their glimmerings, like glow-worms shining in a moist tangle of green.

"A handful of souls!" he mused—"Just a handful—scarcely enough to make the merest infinitesimal speck of molecular dust in the whirl of the cosmos! And yet—we must believe that God cares for even this handful!"

He unlatched the gate, and passing out, walked on down the road towards the bridge. From that point he could command a view of both 'old' and 'new' Shadbrook, and here the solemn stillness of the night was broken by the noise of the little stream running along, no doubt with quite as busy a cheerfulness as when the Romans built their durable arch of stone across it. On either side of the bridge,—to the east on the one hand, to the west on the other, a strong flare of light shone forth with a vivid yellow brilliancy, and Everton sighed impatiently as he looked at what he knew was the fiery Pharos of Drink flaming from the two public-houses, which, so far from being rivals, were jointly concerned in making as much as they could for themselves and for Minchin to whom they were 'tied,' out of the bodies and souls of the hapless villagers who ignorantly consumed the deadly poison they were licensed to sell.

"All the mischief is centred there!" he said half aloud—"In the drink, which it would seem that Heaven itself is powerless to fight against. If by some miracle of intervention those

two public-houses could be closed, or done away with, I should have more hope of the men and women committed to my charge,—but while the actual laws of the country permit so many blood-poisoners, masquerading as brewers and spirit distillers, to make utter havoc of the moral and physical condition of the people, what can I or any member of my calling do? Our remonstrances are met with derision, and we ourselves are looked upon as fools for our pains. Even the teaching of Christ Himself hardly touches the Drink question, for he preached His Gospel in the East, where drunkenness is not a national vice. I have heard special pleaders quote His own words and actions as arguments in favour of the public-house,—because He praised the publican more than the Pharisee in the parable, and also because His first miracle was to turn water into wine. And they recall His choice of Levi the Publican, whom He commanded to follow Him, and they relate the story of how Levi 'made Him a great feast in his own house, and there was a great company of publicans and others that sat down with them.' Therefore, so they would argue, the Founder of the Christian Faith would seem to have rather favoured than blamed the sellers of drink to the people. It is all very difficult and very perplexing; the evil is one which we clergy ought to fight, but we lack both the means and the authority for combat."

Just then he heard a confused din as of shouting and laughter echoing out on the air from the public-house which was nearest to where he stood,—the 'Stag and Crow,' with whose proprietor, Mr. Topper, he had ventured to plead against the sale of more drink to Dan Kiernan on the day of that misguided man's assault on his wife. He walked towards it, halting immediately opposite its brightly lit up windows, two of which were open at the top, though the blinds were all drawn to prevent any stray passer-by from seeing what was going on inside. One blind, however, was not quite down,—between its lower edge and the window-sill there was about an inch of clear glass,—and through this some half-a-dozen small boys of the village were earnestly

peeping, all holding each other by the arms and pressing their noses against the pane. The tin-like tinkling of a bad piano badly played struck the quietness of the outer air with a rough blow of vulgarity, and every now and then the roar of men's rowdy laughter, capped by a feminine scream or hysterical giggle, outraged the peaceful hush of night. The boys who were spying through their inch of window-pane were frequently convulsed with mirth,—at certain moments they bent and doubled up their childish figures with such an excess of laughter, that as they stood outlined in the darkness by the flare of the lights within, they suggested to the mind a band of fantastic gnomes, engaged in watching the progress of some devil's mischief to humanity. Everton looked at them scrutinisingly, but though he knew every boy in the village, he could not immediately identify them,—presently, however, when he saw them rolling together, as it were, one upon another, in a prolonged and united fit of ecstasy, he went straight up to them.

"Boys, what are you doing here?" he asked, gently.

They all turned, and stared at him. One of them, a rosy-cheeked little urchin with a tangle of fair curls falling over his innocent blue eyes, answered shyly:

"We was watchin' the droonk folk!"

Everton patted the small upturned head.

"And do you think they're worth looking at?" he asked.

Another bigger boy spoke.

"They'se like the clowns at the circus!" he said—"All a-toomblin' over each other an' a-grabbin' at chairs an' tables to keep steady-loike—an' there's gels as is pullin' all their 'air down an' larfin' theirselves silly!"

Everton, recognising one of his Sunday-school lads, took him gently by the arm.

"I wish you'd all go home,"—he said, kindly—"It's not a pretty sight. It's a shocking, horrible sight!—try to forget you've ever seen it. Or, if you must remember, let it remain in your mind as something to be feared and avoided. There's

nothing so vile and ugly in all the world as a drunkard. You know I'm right, don't you?"

They peeped up at him submissively. A faint chorus of small voices answered:

"Yes, sir!"

He smiled, and led them along in a little group away from the scene which had so fascinated them.

"Run home, like good children!" he said, cheerily—"Home to your mothers, and to bed! It's time for you all to be sound asleep. Good-night! God bless you!"

Off went all the little caps in a row.

"Good-night, sir!"

Everton lifted his own hat and stood bare-headed in the quiet gloom for a moment, while these small scions of future manhood went their way in obedience to the impression his kind voice and manner had made upon them,—and there was a stinging moisture in his eyes as he watched them disappear.

"Poor little souls!" he murmured—"Who can blame them if their early conceptions of life and the things of life are dark and crooked? Man's wilful degradation of himself is bad enough—but when he degrades his children, and through them spreads the contamination of his own disease to future unborn generations, surely no estimate can sufficiently gauge the enormous extent of his selfishness and crime! It is not of ourselves we should think, for ourselves are always too much with us;—it is of others—others upon whom our conduct and example may have a lasting good or evil influence."

At that moment a yell of hysterical laughter pierced the air, and through the open doorway of the 'Stag and Crow' some eight or nine men and women came reeling out into the road. The piano went on tinkling brassily inside, and two women, with their hair tossing loosely about their faces, and their tawdry 'scoop' hats falling off like battered lamp-shades on their backs, began to dance wildly opposite each other in the fantastic gyrations common to the gutter music-hall stage and known as the 'cake-walk.'

"Come on, Dan!" they screamed—"Come on, an' show us a bit o' yer quality!"

And roars of laughter went up from the whole group, as Dan Kiernan, in a condition that can only be described as 'dead drunk,' suddenly staggered forward, hatless, and coatless, his face swollen and blurred out of all intelligent human semblance by the red fire of the corroding liquor that inwardly ravened and consumed him, and his massive figure swaying with an unwieldy helplessness like a drifting log swirled to and fro in the strong cross-currents of a swift stream. The women rushed at him and seized him—one on either side and each gripping an arm,—and so between them the wretched fool was made to caper heavily backwards and forwards like a clumsy bear in chains, amid repeated shrill yells and hoarse guffaws of idiotic laughter.

"Step it out, Dan!" cried one man, stumbling back against the public-house door—"Step it out! I'd dance all night if my old 'ooman was dead!"

Another roar of laughter hailed this witticism, and the insane 'cake-walk' went on with redoubled vigour, improved and sustained by sundry fits of hiccoughing on the part of Kiernan, which were loudly applauded by the clapping of hands and stamping of feet. All at once and quite quietly, Everton stepped out from the shadows which had till now concealed his presence, and stood for a moment in full view of the dishevelled company. There was a sudden pause—an equally sudden silence. Then one of the women who held Kiernan's arm burst into a tipsy laugh.

"It's the parson!" she yelled—"Lordy-dordy me! It's the parson!"

Kiernan stopped in his Bruin-like shuffling, and tried to steady himself.

"The parson!" he stuttered—"Wot's 'e a-doin' of 'ere? Turn 'im out! D'ye 'ear, boys? Turn—turn 'im out! We doan't want no parsons 'ere, talking 'igh an' mighty an' interferin' wi' the poor man's 'ome!" Here he gave a heavy lurch forward and would have fallen, but for the women, who,

giggling crazily, still held him up. "We doan't want no parsons!" he repeated, raising his rough voice to a savage roar—"Damn 'em ail, I say! Eh, boys? Damn 'em all!"

Without a word or further look, the Vicar turned and walked away. As he disappeared, the dapper, self-important proprietor of the 'Stag and Crow,' Mr. Topper, suddenly showed himself at the threshold of his 'licensed premises' and smiled benevolently on the group of his recent customers, who were, together with Dan Kiernan, whom they still escorted, beginning to roll and stagger and straggle away in the various directions of their several homes. With the pleasant smile still on his fat face, he carefully shut the door of the bar, and locked and bolted it with much emphatic noise, while some one within extinguished all the lights, exactly as the church clock struck eleven.

Everton, reaching his own house again, heard the chime pulsate in musical beats through the silence, like a sweet voice made tremulous by tears. His nerves were throbbing—his mind was weary—and a fatigued protest rose up within him against the apparent uselessness of effort and the vanity of all toil. Kiernan's coarse words echoed in his ears with the pertinacity of an unavenged insult. "We doan't want no parsons! Damn 'em all, I say!" To this end an irresponsible and unlicensed Press was bringing the People!

"And to this end,"—he thought, "Education without Religion will rear its Christ-less human brutes of the next generation!"

CHAPTER X

THERE are what may be called 'grey days' in every human life—days of mental mist and drizzle, when the heaven of thought is overcast and no glimpse of brightness breaks upon the soul,—days which leave a dark blur upon the mind too deep to be erased or forgotten. One of the worst and dreariest of such days was that on which Richard Everton performed the last rites of the Church for the ill-fated Jennie Kiernan. Never, to his own thinking, had he conducted a more melancholy funeral. Pitiful in its plain poorness, it was nevertheless rendered impressive by the crowd of mourners following the coffin—for the village had turned out nearly all its inhabitants, many of them giving up a day's work and wage in order to pay a final tribute of respect to the mortal remains of a woman whose chief claim upon the regard of her neighbours had been her long-suffering and always uncomplaining patience. They gathered round the grave in massed groups, their stolid faces guiltless of any expression,—and listened in heavy silence while their Vicar solemnly enunciated the too familiar 'ashes to ashes—dust to dust' phrase, which by constant repetition had become almost meaningless to their ears, —and it was only now and then that Everton caught a few furtive glances from eyes that were suddenly lifted to his face, as though in wonder or enquiry—glances that set his nerves quivering and made the blood rise to his brows. For he understood the meaning of those covert looks which expressed yet concealed an unspoken doubt,—he saw that in each of those ignorant, narrow and prejudiced minds, one idea had

been implanted, and that idea was, that 'if the parson's wife hadn't gone meddlin' with what wasn't her business, Jennie Kiernan wouldn't have died.' Instinctively he felt the atmosphere of a dull resentment rising against him—resentment that was as reasonless as it was obstinate. And his speech faltered a little as he read of the 'voice from heaven' which promised the dead 'rest from their labours.' Rest just now seemed to him the sweetest and most desirable thing in the world, for he was weary in heart and spirit. The strong consciousness that his ministration of the Gospel was, to a very great extent, utterly futile, weighed upon him heavily. In this one poor parish of Shadbrook he could count nothing but failures. His influence had worked no good—it had neither checked drink nor immorality. Even young Hadley, who, for the greater part of his last illness, had shown a wonderfully docile and Chrisitan spirit of resignation and patience, had died raving for the love of a woman, and blasphemously denying the existence of God. And Jacynth Miller—she—but of her he would not allow himself to think. He was thankful when all was over, and when, having seen Jennie Kiernan's coffin lowered into the ground, the villagers slowly and silently dispersed. One woman lingered behind the rest, and curtseying respectfully, spoke to him in a hushed voice with tears in her eyes—and this was Jennie's loyal friend, Mrs. Adcott.

"I'm right sorry it's all happened as it has,"—she said—"It's cross work and cruel,—that it is, sir,—but Jennie, for all that she was a hard-working woman, had a lovin' heart, an' it just broke when she knew Dan worn't true to her. She'd a' borne anything else—ay, if Dan had a' kicked 'er to death, she'd a' taken it thankful an' died blessin' 'im, so long as he'd been *her* man, but when she heerd 'im ravin' like mad because Jacynth had left 'im——"

"Yes—yes, I know!" interrupted Everton—"I know it all,—don't speak of it any more! The whole affair is most unfortunate. I could perhaps have saved her if I had been told in time——"

"Well, sir, it wasn't for the like of us to tell you,"—and Mrs.

Adcott wiped her eyes—"You see Jacynth, she went to church reg'lar, and took the Lord's bread and wine——"

Everton turned very white.

"Yes," he said, with sudden stiffness—"I am aware of all the facts—*now*. Don't let us talk of the miserable story *here*!"—and he pointed to the open grave—"It is not the time or the place."

Mrs. Adcott curtseyed again meekly, and went away with bent head, crying softly. For a moment the Vicar stood inert,—for a moment he lifted his pale face to the lowering sky which darkly threatened rain, as though in mute appeal,—then he signed to Stowey the sexton, who advanced at once and began the work of 'covering in,' or, as he himself was wont to express it—'putting a warm quilt on a cold sleeper.'

"There worn't no chief mourner to-day,"—he said, as he cast the loose earth rattling down upon Jennie Kiernan's coffin; "Dan, he wor up an' away 'fore 'twas dawn, an' his sticks o' furniture went arter 'im at ten o'clock. There's a men's dinner on at the Brewery, on account of it's bein' Mr. Minchin's birthday. Dan wouldn't miss that if 'e'd got twenty wives bein' buried—he's a new 'hand' at the Brewery, an' of course they'll drink 'is 'elth!"

Everton said nothing. 'Silent Stowey' was not usually so communicative.

"Mr. Minchin's birthday it is!" he went on, with a kind of inward chuckle—"That's a fine thing for rejoicin', ain't it!" And he threw an extra large shovelful of earth into the grave. "He drinks 'is own 'elth in water, an' he's kind enough to let his Brewery men drink it in poison!"

The Vicar let this satire pass without comment.

"Dan Kiernan has left the village for good, then, I suppose?" he said.

"Or for bad,"—retorted Stowey—"Ay! It seems like it."

With this last remark he relapsed into his usual taciturnity. Everton watched him working for a while, and then rain beginning to fall, returned to the Vicarage and to the quiet of his own study. Here he made combat against his own sense

of utter depression by writing a long letter to his wife, though he was not at all sure she would read it through. The charming Azalea was fond of asserting that letters 'bored' her, especially when she was expected to answer them. But he felt the necessity of expressing his thoughts to somebody, even though that somebody might be, as far as mental receptiveness was concerned, the merest nobody—so he penned an eloquent, tender, graceful, and affectionate epistle, telling her everything he imagined she might wish to know,—softening all that was gloomy or unpleasant in the Kiernan incident,—and only dwelling particularly on the fact that Dan himself had now left the village to work at Minchin's brewery, ten miles off, so that she need not fear any personal annoyance from him in her daily walks at home.

"Don't stay away now unless you like,"—he concluded—"Think that a day without you and Laurence is to me longer than a year, and come back soon, for I am very lonely. I want you every minute, for life itself is too short a span in which to express how much I love you." And he signed himself as usual her 'devoted husband,' feeling satisfied that his appeal would bring her back at once. In fact, when his letter was posted, he began to look up the possible trains by which she could return the very next day.

"She will be sure to come," he said to himself—"When she knows Kiernan is out of the village, she will want to get home as quickly as she can."

But in this he was mistaken. Azalea did not want to get home quickly by any means. He was indeed altogether unprepared for the ease with which she managed to exist without his company. She answered his letter and told him she was '*so* happy' at the sea-side, and 'Baby was *so* well, that it seemed *dreadful* to have to return to Shadbrook *too* soon!'

"I'm so glad, darling," she wrote, in her pretty, characterless running hand,—"that the dreadful man Kiernan has gone out of the place—he was a *horror*! But he's just the sort of brute that Minchin would like to have in his nasty smelly yards,—

rolling casks about or driving a dray along. I should say he would do very well as a brewery hand, and as he will always be drunk, he will be quite a nice advertisement for Minchin's Ale! Won't he? Baby is so *brown* and lovely!—he makes the most beautiful sand forts, and actually finds *shrimps*! Just a few days longer, dear old Dick, and we *will* come home!"

He sighed as he finished reading the light, inconsequent school-girl sentences,—then he smiled.

"Poor little woman," he murmured tenderly—"I daresay it's very dull for her here—very dull! Even love itself is not always sufficient to lighten monotony. Love itself——"

Here he paused, and began to think introspectively as to the nature of love. Scientifically, it has been defined as 'the law of attraction between the sexes,' and if any estimate is to be formed by the conduct of the present-day man and woman in their marriages, it seems no more than this. But to Richard Everton it was much more. To him, love meant the sanctification of life. It does not mean this to the majority of men. Once, now and again, the Beatific Vision of the Ideal shines into the soul of a poet or other world's dreamer,—but that it should descend from the high empyrean and dwell with a plain country parson, is a strange and unusual circumstance. Yet so it was,—and the perfect conception of perfect love which he cherished with such tender tenacity, made him a much greater man than he realised himself to be. Heroisms and martyrdoms in embryo were hidden beneath this central pure flame which dominated his existence, and the intellectual power that lay dormant within him was being steadily nourished and strengthened by many springs of bitter-sweetness which, unconsciously to himself, flowed through his whole being, though they often poured themselves to waste on the very small and limited plot of love's garden-ground which his pretty wife with her graceful figure and charming face represented. And, moved by the unselfishness which always led him to consider her happiness more than his own, he resigned himself cheerfully to the loneliness her absence imposed upon him, determining to let

her enjoy herself at the sea-side as long as she liked, without obtruding any personal complaint. Meanwhile, he went about his ordinary duties with redoubled energy, believing that if he mingled familiarly with his parishioners and showed no sign of constraint or embarrassment, they would open their hearts to him freely on the matter of the Kiernan episode, concerning which he felt there was much more to learn than had yet been told.

But in this expectation he was disappointed. The villagers were sad—not to say sullen. They received him everywhere civilly enough—but they were distinctly not in the humour to volunteer any confidences. And when Sunday came round he noticed that the attendance at church was much smaller than usual. This pained him considerably,—the more so as he felt himself to be innocent of any offence against his 'little flock.' In the vexation of his heart he spoke about this sudden failing away of his congregation to Dr. Brand.

"I cannot understand it,"—he said, wearily—"What have I done?"

Brand looked at him with a touch of compassion.

"Nothing!" he answered promptly—"That's just it! You have done nothing! But the rustic, or let us say, the bucolic mind, has ideas of right and wrong which are completely the reverse of right and wrong as you and I conceive them,—and the result of this topsy-turvy view of things is that Shadbrook considers Dan Kiernan a deeply injured man!"

Everton gave a kind of hopeless gesture.

"So!" he ejaculated—"Is that the latest?"

"That is the very latest!" and Brand, who was thoroughly kind-hearted as well as eminently practical, laughed a little—"Don't look so down in the mouth about it! You can't weave fine silk out of raw hide, and these people's sense of justice is as primitive as are their passions. They say Dan is a man, and can't help being a man—Jacynth is a girl who likes men, and she took Dan just because he came handy—and why not? And they kept silence while the mischief went on, thinking that 'least said, soonest mended.' I confess I thought so

myself. Then when—when,"—here 'Dr. Harry' hesitated delicately—"when it became necessary to tell Dan's wife of her husband's infidelity, why then—well!—then the poor woman died and got out of her trouble, and Jacynth ran off with another fellow, as was to be expected,—but Dan—Dan remains to bear the burden of having lost wife and sweetheart both at once and together! Don't you see? And thus, comfortably following their own line of argument, they conclude that after all Dan, with all his faults, is the one most to be pitied!"

The Vicar sighed. He was troubled,—but could not find words to express exactly the nature of his trouble.

"Nothing can convince these sort of folk of the true character of sin";—went on Brand—"They are for the most part more barbaric than civilised, and their notions of life are not much higher than the notions of savages concerning their squaws and wigwams. No one realises the utter impossibility of reasoning logically with them so well as a country doctor. When any affair occurs among them like this of Dan Kiernan and Jacynth Miller, it would be no use for me to tell them that it is a bad and immoral affair. They would only laugh at me. Some of them have no sense of morality or immorality —and you might talk to them for a year, and you would never make them understand. If you were to take the statistics or standard of morality in every village all over the British Isles, you would, with your idealistic views, be simply appalled at the result. Rural life is not always the most innocent—and the 'sweet sylvan maid' of the poet's line may be, and often is, a very impudent minx. You must remember that in these later years, the current press has made a mock of marriage,—and as the daily halfpenny papers circulate everywhere, it is not surprising that the vices of the country keep pace with those of the town."

Everton turned upon him quickly.

"Are you speaking seriously?" he demanded, with eager and sudden vehemence—"Do you mean to tell me that the teaching of the Gospel has *no* influence?"

Brand's eyes grew sad and stern.

"I will not say it has no influence,"—he replied—"But it has not so much as it might have. We are living in very evil days,—and the Church does not seem strong enough to cope with its adversaries. Honestly speaking, I pity the clergy! For many years past they have been lax in their duties—they have taken things too easily — and the consequence is that they now find themselves unprepared for difficulty. Look at them! Men, educated at Oxford, Cambridge, or other of the Universities, and brought up without the slightest intimate comprehension of the real, suffering, heart-broken world around them——"

"Heart-broken world!" echoed Everton — "That's a melancholy phrase!"

"It's a true one!" said Brand—"The only really happy human creatures in it are very young children, and even they are not exempt from pain. But for grown men and women who have to face all the countless miseries and struggles of life, what else is it but a heart-broken world? Especially if it is robbed of faith in God. The Christian religion was given to us to help mend the heart-break—has it done so? No—because its ministers will not allow it to do so. They construe its simple tenderness by the light of their own narrow and prejudiced minds—and those who should be comforted are left comfortless. In my profession I meet with cases of utter mental, moral and spiritual despair every day,—cases where both the Church and the resident clergyman have done their little best."

"You are very eloquent,"—said Everton, with a touch of surprise—"You have evidently thought a great deal on the subject——"

"Pretty much so! Doctors think more than you might perhaps suppose. But in all my experience, I'm bound to say I have never had a dying patient whose condition was not made worse by the ministrations of the clergyman. Now"—and the doctor squared his shoulders and looked full into the face of his quietly attentive listener—"I tell you this un-

pleasant fact, plainly and bluntly, because I can see you're a different sort of parson to most of your class. Holy orders are really 'holy' to you—and you evidently want to do the right thing. Well!—do it!—and never mind if you're called names. It's still possible to preach Christ to humanity in the *true* way."

"A way I hope I may find,"—said Everton, gently—"I shall not forget your words!"

"As for the villagers falling off in attendance at church," went on Brand—"pay no attention to it. They'll only sulk for a week or two. Like children, they'll soon come out of the corner. The chief element of trouble has left the place—Jacynth Miller——"

"Yes—I wonder where she has gone?" Everton put the question quickly and with eagerness.

Brand glanced at him.

"Does it matter?"

"Oh, it matters nothing—but—the wreck of a young girl's life——"

"She has wrecked it herself, if it *is* a wreck,"—said Brand—"*You* may consider her as ruined,—but *she* considers her fortune made. She has gone off with an actor—a fellow pretty well known for his questionable character and insufferable conceit—he gets up provincial 'amateur' dramatic societies, and touts for 'county' bumpkins that will fee him for training them to make asses of themselves on the stage. He snapped up Jacynth for her face and figure, and has got her a place, so I hear, at some London theatre as a chorus girl. I shouldn't wonder if she ends by becoming a peeress!"

"You jest," and Everton's brows darkened—"She has gone to a life of shame!"

"*You* think so—of course you *would* think so,"—here Brand smiled indulgently—"*She* doesn't. Anyway she began the life of shame here—here, in apparently innocent-looking little Shadbrook. And I repeat,—with her beauty and her cajoling ways, she will probably marry one of our jejune peers, who has no idea of a woman beyond her body. Virtue is out

of date,—the odd marriages made by some of our modern men show that they have apparently ceased to care whether a woman is good or the reverse. Only the other day, a girl, who was brought up before a magistrate on a charge of wilfully murdering her illegitimate child, had five offers of marriage before she left the court! What can you make of that? I know plenty of good honest girls fit to be excellent wives, and never a breath of scandal has touched them—yet they don't get one offer of marriage—much less five! What of a certain Duchess, none of whose children were born in wedlock,—and who, nevertheless, is a 'leader of society'? The times are corrupt—and the best and most patient of us can only pray that some great revolution will break out upon us before it is too late, and cleanse the nation of its accumulated filth!" He spoke with strong feeling—adding—"It's no good my getting on these topics—my thoughts brim over and I talk too much. But the days are ripe for another Peter the Hermit to preach a new and higher crusade. Of course if such a preacher came he would be laughed at,—he would be made the butt of the cheap newspaper, and the joke of the stable and the green-room—but if he were a strong, and above all, a sincere man, he wouldn't mind all that,—and he might turn back the tide of national disaster—even now!"

Everton thought over this conversation for days after it had taken place,—days that were rather more than usually productive of meditation, owing to his being so much alone. The little Roman Catholic priest, Sebastien Douay, came over to see him several times, his visits making a pleasant break in what to him was a long and irksome solitude—and the at first merely congenial acquaintance between the two men, began to ripen into a warm friendship. Douay was not only tactful and kindly, but he also was gifted with a cheerfulness of disposition so great as to make his presence eminently welcome and desirable in dull weather, a fact which he himself appeared to recognise, for he generally chose cold, blustering east-windy afternoons for cycling over to the Vicarage, sometimes in the very teeth of a strong gale blowing hard against him.

"I love the cold!" he would say—"I love the cross wind! They are good to fight with! Often I have much quarrel in my mind—quarrel with the world—quarrel with wicked human nature—quarrel with myself! And it is better to use one's angry force against bad weather than against bad men! That is how your Mistaire Gladstone did,—he was often very angry, *sans doute*!—he must have wished to chop off heads—instead of that he chopped down trees! So wise of him!—to get rid of hot blood! It is what you call to 'let off steam'!"

Everton was often amused at the little man's unruffled philosophy.

"I believe you are never out of temper!" he said to him one day—"You never seem to be annoyed or anxious or sorry about anything!"

Douay spread out his plump hands with a deprecatory air.

"Ah, you mistake!" he answered—"I am not of stone, my friend!—not all indifferent—no! But to be annoyed—why should I be? At what? For whom? For some one who thinks he troubles me? Then I give him a pleasure by showing that he is of importance to me! Then again,—to be anxious will make me that I am not at all sure of God. This would be wicked—for I *am* sure of Him!" Here he shook his finger emphatically in the air—"Sure! Remember, in this age of mockery, to put so much to the credit of a leetle priest Roman Catholique. But,—to be sorry—ah yes! I am sorry all the hours of all the days!—sorry for others!—never for myself."

"Never sorry for yourself!"—repeated Everton, thoughtfully, "You mean you have nothing to regret or to desire?"

"Nothing!"—and Douay's eyes shone with a steadfast light—"Not now! In the old days, perhaps,—when I was young—then it may be that the love of God seemed cold and distant—and the love of life—and woman—seemed too near and dear!—but now—now I would not change my lot with that of any man! No—I have no desire and no regret—exeept sometimes for my leetle French parish, where I trained the children to love their prayers and their sweet thoughts of

Heaven—for by-and-bye there will be no children left who will know how to pray—thanks to modern Governments!—but after all!"—and he shrugged his shoulders lightly—"They will continue to do without me—no man is missed anywhere more than a few weeks,—if so long!"

Everton was silent. His thoughts had jumped to a purely selfish and personal consideration—for he wondered if Azalea, supposing he should be parted from her for any great length of time, would miss *him*? The answer to this question in his own mind was so decisively in the negative that he almost recoiled from its emphasis. He would miss *Her*—he missed her now—every moment of every hour—but he could not flatter himself that his feeling was reciprocated. Yet she loved him—certainly she loved him. Then—what was love——? The agreeable voice of Sebastien Douay interrupted his brief meditation.

"And when does your wife—the angel of your paradise—return?"

A slight flush of colour warmed the Vicar's pale face.

"Soon—very soon!" he replied hastily—"The sea air is very good for her and the child——"

"I see—I understand!" and Douay nodded amicably—"And do you hear any more of the drunkard who was so much cause of trouble? Shall I tell you some news of him?"

"You?" exclaimed Everton, with interest—"Do *you* know how he's getting on?"

'I know!" and Douay nodded again a great many times—"I know that Mistaire Minchin gives him free beer! Free, my friend!—think of it!—nothing to pay for drinking as much poison as he likes! All day long, all night long, he can drink, if he so desires! He has a certain wage a week, free beer, and a cottage on the brewing estate of the excellent Minchin. He is what you call 'in clover.' He is drunk every night—his cottage is, unhappily to say, quite near to mine,—and he is to me a noisy and disagreeable neighbour. So, one day I go to Minchin—I say with all politeness—

'Monsieur, one of your men comes home every night drunk, and makes so much noise near my windows that I cannot sleep! Mistaire Minchin look at me with a grin—he has the face of a fox and the eyes of a wolf,—and he reply:—'I am sorry! But I am not responsible for my men's actions when they are off duty. What man is it?' I name Daniel Kiernan. Mistaire Minchin offers me another grin. 'An excellent fellow!' he say—'excellent! He has recently lost his wife—poor woman!—she was worried to death by the Vicar of Shadbrook, who is always interfering with his parishioners——'"

Richard uttered an indignant exclamation. Douay held up a pacifying hand.

"Be patient, my friend!—be patient!" he said—"I am only telling you the liar's way of lying—you do not expect truth from Minchin?—then why trouble yourself? 'Dan Kiernan is a most valuable hand'—he say again—'I respect him very greatly. I have never seen him drunk—and I think you must be mistaken. In any case, I can do nothing.' So he give me a bow and one more grin—and I go. Eh bien!—that is all. Except this"—here Douay folded his arms and looked defiant—"Suppose I try and reform this madman of drink—this Kiernan—suppose I make him Roman Catholique?"

Everton stared—then smiled.

"I should think you would have a poor convert!" he said.

"Or 'pervert,'" retorted Douay—"Now listen, my dear Protestant friend!—which will you prefer? That the man Kiernan remain as he is—a drunkard—or that the Church of Rome shall take hold of him and make him sober?"

"If the Church of Rome can do that, she will perform more than many of her boasted miracles,"—said Everton, with a sense of pain and irritation which he could not quite control—"It is not for me to say a word in the matter. If you think you can succeed where I have failed——"

"Attention!" and Douay shook a forefinger in the air again; "This is what I will point out—for of this I have cause to complain. Here is a man—bad, villainous, dangerous—and

so far as we can see, the Church Protestant can do nothing with him. You are, for the moment, in Shadbrook, the Church Protestant. I am the very poor leetle *avant-courier* of the Church Roman Catholique in a neighbouring parish. I say always 'Roman,' because some of your what you call 'High' Church parsons say they are 'Catholique' without the Roman. Now to my mind this cannot be. The Christian Church first began to form itself in Rome—or at least that is how I take it,—and we look back so far down the ages—so far!—and with all our faults—crimes if you will—our human mistakes and follies and cruelties,—our creed is older than the divorce of Henry the Eighth from Catharine of Arragon. Ah yes!—we count among us the early saints and martyrs!—my friend, we have great ancestors! But now see!—the priest of the Church Protestant will rather let a man's soul perish altogether in wickedness than he will see a priest of the Church Roman Catholique save him! And I say to you—Is that Christian?"

Everton had risen from his chair during the last two or three minutes, and was now standing facing his companion with a look of very real distress in his eyes.

"Do you—can you—think me so narrow—so bigoted?" he began.

Douay was beside him instantly, tapping a friendly hand on his arm.

"No, no! I do not think that you—the man—are so,—but you, the priest, the parson of the Church Protestant—is it not your duty to keep all your own sheep in your own fold?"

"It is so certainly—but——" Everton hesitated, pained and perplexed.

"But!—ah, it is a but! Now I will tell you what your business is, my friend! It is to say at once that you do not think the Church Roman can save the soul of the drunkard, or any soul whatever,—that you do not believe that any Church has any good in it but the English Church Protestant. That is what you should say to me. Why do you not say it?"

He looked up with a bright questioning glance. Everton was silent.

"Let us be men, you and I!" went on Douay—"Let us say what we think, and be honest before all things—for the good God is surely looking at us! Let us bravely confess that neither of us are at all sure whether we, or our different churches are strong enough or pure enough to save *any* soul,—and so, in our different ways of teaching, let us do our leetle best without quarrel! It is quarrel that makes all the mischief!—quarrel that again nails our dear Lord to the Cross! We must not grudge one another our very small victories!"

And with a quick impulsive movement he held out his hand. Everton pressed it warmly.

"You are right!" he said—"And I certainly shall not grudge you any victory you may win over Kiernan. But I think you'll have to conquer Minchin first!"

Douay laughed.

"Ah! That I will not try. A brewer is worse than a drunkard—when he does not drink his own beer! He then calls himself 'respectable'—and Monsieur the Devil begins to love him! The Church may have some power over a really bad man, who knows he is bad and confesses it—but never over a 'respectable' fraud!"

That evening the little priest remained to dine and sleep,—and what with the pleasure of an intricate game of chess, followed by an examination of certain old books and manuscripts which Everton possessed and of which Douay was an able and intelligent judge, the time passed so quickly and agreeably that all depression and dullness were banished, and for one evening at least, life at Shadbrook Vicarage ceased to be tedious and the Vicar's 'parochial' outlook seemed to have insensibly widened. So much so indeed that he was in a manner startled when shortly after Douay's departure next morning he received a telegram from his wife announcing that she was returning home that very day. Surprise, however, soon gave way to delight—and his spirits rose to an almost boyish pitch of excitement, as he went about the house, putting bunches of such flowers as he

could find or procure, on the various tables in the different rooms,—urging the servants to make everything look as bright as possible for their mistress's home-coming, and all the time feeling in his own mind that the best he could do was but poor service for so fair and winsome a creature as Azalea, who, so he romantically imagined, should have had a palace to dwell in, with gaily-attired 'vassals' at her beck and call, rather than an old-fashioned country parsonage, with only an old-fashioned country parson to place his heart under her little feet and thank her for trampling on it.

"For I *am* old-fashioned!" he argued with himself—"There's not a doubt of it. I'm old-fashioned in my opinions and my ways, and I'm dull. I don't wish to disguise it. I'm certainly dull. I wonder how Azalea can put up with me sometimes. For if I find life in Shadbrook rather slow, what must she, with all her grace and beauty, find it? Poor little soul!"

And yet no prettier, cosier home ever threw open its doors to any woman than Shadbrook Vicarage when, just as evening was closing in, Azalea arrived, and springing lightly out of the old dog-cart which had been sent to the station to meet her, laughingly submitted to be caught in her husband's embrace and kissed with all a lover's ardour.

"Oh, Dick!" she exclaimed, as she entered the house—"We have had *such* a good time! Look at Baby! Did you ever see such a brown darling?"

The 'brown darling' here handed over by Nurse Tomkins to receive his father's caresses, was indeed the picture of health, though he was only very slightly 'brown.' The sea had certainly given a warmer, ruddier tinge to his fair skin, and his eyes were more wonderful than ever—or at least, so Richard thought, as the little fellow raised them to his face with all the serious, divinely contemplative sweetness that Raffaelle painted in the eyes of his child-angels at the feet of the Virgin. It was difficult to imagine a child with such eyes ever growing up,—for eyes so pure and brilliant are never seen in the head of an adult man. Evil thoughts and gross desires soon darken the first heavenly clearness of those 'windows of the soul,' and such

men and women as possess any heart, conscience or feeling must surely, when looking into a child's eyes, feel something of regret, even of shame, that such beautiful trust and candour therein expressed should be destined to betrayal and disappointment. Everton himself was often troubled by such an emotion—and at times he would even think whether—the world being what it is—it is right or just to inflict upon any innocent spirit the doom of mortal life? Especially if, as advanced scientists maintain, life is only another name for death. "I am thankful,"—said a philosopher once—"that I have no children. I could not have endured the terrible responsibility of bringing more sufferers into such a hell as man has made this world for his brother man."

At the present moment, however, the glamour and gaiety of Azalea's bewitching presence drove every other thought out of her husband's head, and the happiness he felt in having his wife and child, the two treasures of his heart, safely home again under his own roof-tree, was too great to be clouded by so much as the briefest foreboding. And how the little woman chattered to be sure!—chiefly of the shops in Weston-super-Mare—and of the 'fashions' in that far from fashionable sea-side resort, where the 'tripper' is the principal personage in evidence, and where the weirdly-attired *élite* of Bristol take the air much more frequently than my lady Tom Noddy of London Town. But such 'stylish' modes as Weston could display were, of course, positively dazzling to the fancy of a pretty feminine creature whose purchases had often to be made at the small 'general store' in Shadbrook village, where a mild, fat man dispensed gammon of bacon and plain calico with equally zealous and unwashen hands. Occasionally, but only occasionally, Azalea went to Cheltenham and even to Gloucester to buy little fineries for herself and 'Baby dear,' but Cheltenham shops were expensive, she said, and Gloucester shops a little 'behind the time,' and as for Birmingham—well!—no self-respecting woman would ever descend to such a level of costume as that set forth by Birmingham models! Weston seemed to have fitted itself into a blank place in her

affections — and she babbled of dress continuously, in a running, rippling way that was quite bewildering to Richard, though he did his best to understand it all and to sympathise with the ardent feeling which no mere husband's love could rouse in her,—the thrill of the lace blouse—the joy of the crazily-feathered hat — the dreamy delirium of the chiffon tea-gown.

"I wish I were rich enough to buy such pretty things for you!" he said, gently, as she finished a cooing rhapsody on the glory of a blue silk frock embroidered in silver—"You ought to have them——"

"Of course I ought!" she agreed, merrily, as she came and seated herself like a child on his knee—"I ought to have the most beautiful clothes, for I *love* them! I do! And Baby ought to be dressed like a little prince! But you're only a clergyman, poor dear Dick!—and I'm only a clergyman's wife—and there we stick! Don't we? Here she kissed him lightly. "And, after all, it's no good having nice clothes when one lives in Shadbrook. There's nobody to dress for."

"No—I suppose there isn't,"—Richard sighed—then his eyes sparkled with a kindly, mischievous little smile—"There's only Mrs. Minchin! And you can always make *her* jealous if you only wear a cotton frock!"

Azalea nodded her fair head very decisively.

"Of course! I always do and I always shall! But that's such easy work! She's so 'horsey,' and she hasn't a particle of taste. She ought to have married Dan Kiernan!"

Everton was silent. He held his wife's left hand in his own, and his eyes rested on the wedding-ring that encircled her tiny third finger. What a symbol it was! 'Till death do us part.' Till death! The thought of death gave him a pang, and he folded the warm little hand closer.

"You're glad to be home again, darling?" he asked, wistfully—"Glad to be with me?"

She looked at him, smiling.

"Of course I'm glad to be with you, Dick! I'm *not* quite

glad to be home—because—well, because it's a bit dull,—and the Shadbrook people are so stupid—and the villagers drink so dreadfully——"

His kind face clouded a little.

"Yes, I know!—I know it must be dull for you—I wish I could change the character of the place and the people altogether for the better,"—he said, rather sorrowfully,—"But you will have no more very great annoyance—Kiernan never comes near the village——"

"Oh, I'm not afraid of him *now*,"—she said, carelessly—"It's all over, you see. His poor wife is buried—I'm sure she must be glad to be out of her misery!—and that wicked girl Jacynth has gone away, nobody knows where. And we shall have peace, except when more drunken men knock their wives about as they're sure to do—for the whole neighbourhood simply swarms with drunkards. However, even peace is rather tame when one gets too much of it, isn't it?"

"Some people find it so,"—he answered, slowly—"till they make war. And then they crave for peace again."

"Never satisfied!—just like me!" laughed Azalea—"But I'm going to be very good, Dick, I promise! I'm going to visit all the old crippled men and women, and take cans of soup into all the stuffy cottages, and enquire after the pigs and the poultry and the babies, and I'll leave tracts all about everywhere! I will! There! And the people shall show me all their bad legs and sore toes, and ulcers and other horrors—and I'll look at them, because though I *don't* think God wants me to look at them particularly, still I suppose it's my duty to do so. And I'll be ever so prim and proper!" She broke into a silvery little ripple of mirth, and threw her arms coaxingly round his neck—"You wait and see! I'll wear an old woman's bonnet if you like! I'll try and be very matronly and prosaic—in fact, you won't know me, I'll be so good and quiet!"

Her gay laughter rang out again, and Richard, half pained, half amused, was fain to laugh with her. But that night as she lay sleeping on his arm, her lovely gold hair falling loosely round her like a shower of sunbeams round a rose, he looked

at her with a strange dawning sense of complete isolation. The pale glimmer of the night-lamp showed him the whiteness of her throat and bosom—the long fringes of her eyes sweeping the delicate bloom of her cheeks—the crimson of her slightly-parted lips through which the breath came and went evenly—all this beauty of body was his, he thought, and yet—yet he had somehow failed to possess the soul that surely was contained like a jewel in that exquisite casket of pearl and ivory. It was an elusive soul,—the soul of a butterfly rather than the soul of a woman—but this he would not admit even to himself. No man cares to realise that his wife is of all persons in the world the one least sympathetic to him, for he has generally made both his own choice and his own mistake. And Richard Everton was, for the immediate hour, no stronger or wiser than most of his sex, and therefore satisfied himself with the outward loveliness of the woman he adored, accepting it as the reflex of an inner nature which he was not pure enough to fathom. So he soothed and tranquillised his restless mind with the gentle balm of humility and self-depreciation,—while the dumb, mysterious forces that secretly work in unison with natural laws to mould the character of a human being of whom the world has need, gathered closer together around him in light clouds of premonitory counsel—clouds which were destined to darken and break over his devoted head in a resistless storm of command.

CHAPTER XI

TIME passes slowly in an English country village,—so slowly indeed that to active and ambitious minds the lapse between one Sunday and the next seems more like months than days. The smaller the community of persons the narrower is their outlook on life, and the more self-centred do they become. The infinitely little matters of a provincial town loom large to the restricted brain of the provincial town-councillor, and still more important are the ethics of the village pump to a handful of villagers. Such people know and care to know nothing of the larger world; whether kings or republics handle the reins of government is a matter of indifference to them, provided their own cabbage plots are prospering. Seasons come and go,—the sharp inclement spring offers them just sufficient matter for grumbling till summer arrives to be grumbled at in its turn as being either too moist or too dry or too windy or too 'muggy,'—summer passes into autumn, which brings them their annual burden of cherished complaints,—colds, rheumatism and divers other aches and pains,—then the long winter darkens down over them with its mornings and nights of black frost, and its pale cold noons of utter cheerlessness, when nothing occurs of any interest from the beginning of the day to the end of it,—nothing to rouse the dormant intellect or give the slightest impetus to the vital forces—and no reason is apparent why such lives should be lived at all, unless it is necessary to remind man that in his bucolic type he is not much higher in the scale of creation than a beetle. Of course, for those whose minds are 'tempered to fine issues,'

and whose brains are not rendered numb by the constant pressure of solitude and monotony, there is much pleasure to be found in the rural life so bepraised by certain poets who have never lived it; for the intellectual eye perceives beauty everywhere and in everything—in the hectic red of dying leaves at the damp fall of the year—in the sparkle of frost on the window-pane—in the thousand and one small things that help to strike harmonious vibrations on the strings of emotional sentiment: but even to a cultured intellect, no matter how well controlled by a philosophic spirit, a rural district which is wholly lacking in refined or intelligent society is apt to grow more difficult to live in as the time goes on. For intellect is like steel—it must strike against something of the same resisting quality as itself, before sparks of fire can be generated. Thus it happened that the Reverend Richard Everton, shut, as it were, within himself, ceased to struggle against what appeared to be his life's destiny, and unconsciously, but none the less surely, became more and more of a silent, reserved and almost shy man, quite unintentionally managing in this way to widen the breach which had been so unreasoningly created between himself and his parishioners by the Kiernan episode. It was a breach that he could not help,—his gentle efforts to build up harmony again out of what had been a discord in the parish were not appreciated; and Dan, drunken, foul-mouthed and villainous,—Dan, in a place of trust at Minchin's Brewery —Dan, earning good wages every week and drinking two quarts of 'free' poison every day, one quart in the morning and one more in the evening, besides a number of other 'drinks' at his own expense, was spoken of by the Shadbrook people as something of a hero, while his dead wife was reverenced as a martyr to 'church' interference. Jacynth Miller's name was seldom mentioned, though rumours were about that her portrait as one of the chorus girls in a Greek classical play, had been seen in a London pictorial. It was Mrs. Moddley who heard this piece of news, and she repeated it to Mortar Pike.

"She was took with no clothes on,"—and Mrs. Moddley

in announcing the startling fact, sniffed meaningly—"Which is to say just a shift droppin' off 'er an' 'er 'air down. That 'ud be Jacynth all over!"

The aged 'Bricks and Mortar' chuckled.

"So it 'ood!—so it 'ood!" he averred—"An' mighty fine she'd look in a shift!—mighty fine! Wouldn't she now? Just the shape for a shift! I'd give a bob to see her like that myself!"

"Mercy on us!" Mrs. Moddley shot this exclamation at him as from a pop-gun—"An' you totterin' on the brink o' Kingdom Come! Well, Mr. Pike! I 'ad thought better o' you!"

Pike shook his grey head to and fro like the movable porcelain figure of a Chinese mandarin.

"Wheer's the 'arm?—wheer's the 'arm?" he demanded, pipingly—"If we b'leeves the Bible, the Lord made us at the first wi' no clothes on, an' we was all good and 'appy as babes in the wood then. 'Ow d'ye get out o' that?"

Mrs. Moddley made no attempt to get out of it,—she simply gave another portentous sniff and retired into obscurity.

Nothing, however, of the supposed public pictorial representation of Jacynth reached the ears of either the Vicar or his wife. So far as they two were concerned, the villagers seemed to be banded together in a conspiracy of silence on the subject, and once when Everton, seized by a sudden restless desire to know or hear something of the lost girl, called at the miserable and ill-kept cottage where the old woman lived who was understood to be Jacynth's aunt or great-aunt, he was met by a torrent of vituperation from the bent and wrinkled crone, who, like one of the worst-looking of Macbeth's witches, shook her skinny fist in the air and bade him 'get off her doorstep.' She was half dressed and more than half drunk, and her voice rang sharp and shrill, acidulated by what was familiarly known in the neighbourhood as 'Minchin's brew.'

"Git off my doorstep!" she yelled—"You black sneak of a parson, you! Comin' round to worrit me inter my grave as ye worrited Jennie Kiernan, are ye! Not for me, thank'ee!

You've drove my gel away from me, an' me without 'elp to do my work an' my washin'—a pore old soul like me with the rheumatiz,"—and here maudlin tears made furrows in the dirt on her face—"an' wot did it matter to you whether she was one man's sweet'art or t'other? An' the kid as was a-comin' would a' bin rare an' useful to me, speshul if 't 'ad bin a boy! Git off, an' git out wi' ye! Dan Kiernan's worth a dozen of ye!"

It was impossible to speak with the old creature in her tipsy fury, and Everton, shuddering inwardly at her words and all they implied, made no attempt at either reproach or argument. And the name of Jacynth Miller never passed his lips, though the thought of her lay deeply concealed in his mind.

The months moved on, slowly, laggingly, and uneventfully, bringing no very marked change to Shadbrook Vicarage, its surroundings or its inmates, save the increasing intimacy between the Evertons and their friend of an opponent Church, Sebastien Douay. Douay, on his first introduction to the Vicar's pretty wife, had made no attempt to conceal his frank admiration of her beauty and grace, and Azalea was, like many another charming woman, pleased to have her good looks appreciated by some other man than her husband. For husbands, even the most affectionate ones, sometimes forget to say the sweet nothings which came so readily to their lips when they were lovers; and wives often vainly crave for the fond observation of eye and tenderness of speech to which they were accustomed before marriage. Azalea was like a child in her eager response to flattery—she loved a compliment, and her whole nature thirsted for adulation as a river plant thirsts for water. Douay saw this and humoured her,—playfully and kindly, as a father might humour a spoilt daughter, and they became great friends. He liked the winsome little creature,—he listened to her gay prattle about 'Baby dear' and all the other small domestic concerns which made up the sum of her daily life, with the most exemplary patience, though now and then he suppressed a slight sigh of weariness and glanced curiously at Richard, wondering how it had chanced that such

complete opposites had become united in holy matrimony. And he occasionally gave secret thanks to the fates that had made him a Roman Catholic priest and a celibate, though this was a point upon which Azalea often dwelt, with delightfully earnest sympathy.

"It must be so dreadful for you,"—she would say, raising her beautiful eyes full of compassion to his face—"to have no one to love you and take care of you! I think the rules of your Church are simply cruel! Just fancy!—no one to mend your shirts and socks and things—how *ever* do you manage?"

And Douay would smile deprecatingly.

"Ah, Madame!" he would answer—"To mend shirts and socks is an easy matter!—and my housekeeper, who is as old and sad to see as you are lovely and charming, is careful of me in that regard. Then, she is a good cook,—all wives are not that, chère Madame! She wash, she mend, she iron, she sew—she work for me from morning until night for very leetle money—but she never grumble—she never scold—she do all I tell her—eh voilà! she is happy and so am I!"

"But really now,"—Azalea sometimes persisted—"Wouldn't you have *liked* to be married?"

And Douay then shook his head decisively.

"Chère Madame, I have seen the world!" he replied—"Do not be angry with me! To your question I must answer, No!"

Azalea thought this very wrong and absurd of him,—'unnatural,' she termed it, to her husband.

"He's really such a pleasant little man,"—she said—"So clever—such a good talker and all that. It *is* sad that he should be a Roman Catholic priest! Now if he were a Church of England clergyman and there were a Mrs. Douay, how nice it would have been for *me*!"

Richard smiled at this.

"It might not have been nice at all,"—he said—"You might not have liked Mrs. Douay. She might have been

jealous of you! Things might have happened that would have made our two families mortal foes! You never can tell! Douay's all right as he is—better single than married, *I* think."

Azalea opened her eyes wide.

"Better single!" she repeated—"*Better?* Oh, Dick! Would *you* rather be without *me*?"

He took her in his arms.

"Now, darling, aren't you turning the whole question round the wrong way?" he demanded, laughingly—"You know I wouldn't, couldn't be without you! You know I wouldn't, couldn't be better single! But Douay is different,—he has vowed himself to the service of God only——"

He broke off. Azalea was looking at him in surprise.

"But haven't *you* also vowed yourself to the service of God?" she asked—"Haven't *you* taken holy orders?"

A slight shadow of perplexity swept across his brow.

"Yes—of course I have—but—somehow it is different——"

"How different? Surely a married man can serve God as well as a bachelor! Oh!" and she gave vent to one of her musical rippling peals of merriment—"You might just as well say a bird can't sing when it has a mate!"

She ran off gaily, and left Richard half smiling, half serious, and not a little troubled in spirit by the lurking consciousness that, after all, the Roman Catholic Church has good authority for the celibacy of priests, inasmuch as the Founder of the Christian Faith has certainly demanded from His disciples All or Nothing. And yet—to give up the joy and consolation of human love was surely too much to ask, and against the very teaching of all Nature! But then again, what *is* the example furnished by the natural world? To eat, sleep, breed and die. Nothing further. The natural world itself voices no thought—it merely *suggests* thought to its dominant creature, Man. That dominant creature is permitted to use its vast resources—to enquire into its secrets—to plumb the depth of its hidden treasures,—and though pigmy in strength, as compared with the huge forces around him, is given the eyes and the mind to

weigh and consider not only the material and physical nature of the globe on which he dwells, but also the movements and mysteries of larger worlds beyond his ken. With such privileges as these, is there no Higher Intention for a being so richly endowed, than that of the usual procedure of animal life on the planet? There is; there must be; else Creation were little more than a cruel comedy. And Richard Everton, thinking of these things, could not but admit to himself that Christ's mission to humanity was to teach and emphasise that Higher Intention of life, — wherefore it followed that His servants and ministers should equally, both by precept and example, teach and emphasise the same principle. Now did the Roman Catholic Church work on these lines better than the Protestant? This was the question he put to his conscience,—and his reason replied at once in the strongest possible negative. Again,—did the Protestant Church, and all the sects, which like branches from a tree sprouted around it, truly and faithfully enunciate the doctrine of Christ in all its pristine purity? Here the reply came hesitatingly and reluctantly—"No!—but we do our best!" And an inward passion of regret moved him as he thought of the atheism of the modern day,—the laxity of the law, which in granting 'liberty of conscience' in religious matters forgets to set a restraint on open blasphemy against God and things divine, and which in re-constituting new methods of education, blindly prepares the way for the bringing up of a 'generation of vipers'—a generation without faith, without morals, without heart, without love, without pity—such an 'evil and adulterous generation' as is bound to be the disgrace and ruin of a once glorious empire.

"We do our best!" he repeated, sorrowfully—"We do our wretched little best! And we know how wretched and little it is! We know that the Press fights the Pulpit as Thrones fight Peoples—always under cover of sympathy and friendship —with a poisoned knife in a velvet glove! We know—even *I* know—that if the Government could stop the sale of strong drink all over the country,—it would not,—because of depletion

to the national revenues. It would rather see one quarter or one half of the population idiots or criminals through Drink, and all set free to perpetuate the race of idiots and criminals, than make any positively firm stand against the evil. It will not even frame laws that shall insist on the selling of pure, unadulterated liquors to the million. As a matter of right and justice the brewer who poisons beer, the distiller who poisons spirit, should be heavily punished, not only by a 'fine' which is a mere farce, but by several months' imprisonment, without any option of getting 'bought off,'—and in that case Government would have to imprison several members of its own House! But nothing will be done—nothing, that is to say, of any real service—and drunkards will increase and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it. Ministers of the Gospel are blamed because their teaching of Christianity cannot persuade men and women to greater self-control,—but what minister of a parish would hold the place for a week if he dealt plainly with every one in it? What preacher ever preached truth to a king or queen without receiving a polite intimation that Majesty would not again require his services? Why, if an Archangel entered the private apartment of King Edward the Seventh or the Kaiser and ventured to reproach either one potentate or the other, the heavenly messenger would be 'hustled' out of the royal presence by a valet or Court Chamberlain! For we are the veriest humbugs, after all!—we pretend to believe in God—and yet if we are told that our conduct is opposed to everything God-like, we are at once offended. No!—ministers of the Gospel can do nothing—or at least very little—in such an age as the present; all we can hope is that a change is coming—a world's catastrophe maybe—when 'the one shall be taken and the other left.'"

Thoughts such as these were often in his brain, but he gave them no utterance. Often and often he longed to preach in a way that he had never yet attempted—a way that should rouse apathy, stimulate energy, and awaken conscience,—but he knew very well that if he spoke 'with the tongues of men and of angels' he could not move the inhabitants of Shad-

brook to more than a bovine stare and dull smile. And half afraid of the combative spirit that clamoured to utter itself through his lips, he retreated, as it were, further and further into the close sanctuary of his own isolated and reflective mind, there to do battle against himself and control what he considered were the freakish fancies of an overwrought imagination.

And so the days and weeks went on, placidly and monotonously. The Minchin Brewery still prospered, and the proprietors of both public-houses in Shadbrook waxed fat and made good profit out of an increasingly intemperate community. The little Roman Catholic mission progressed but slowly,—there were barely twenty people to attend Mass at Sebastien Douay's 'tin chapelle'—but he, as its priest, was never disheartened and never complained. Full of cheerfulness and energy, his dapper figure was soon a familiar object in the Cotswold villages, and he was always ready to assist the sick and poor, whether they professed his own form of faith or not. He had made his promised attempt to 'convert' Dan Kiernan, but his efforts were wholly vain. That brutish creature, more brutalised by drink than ever, was not as he himself expressed it 'going to be a damned Pope's penitent.' Faithfully and patiently Douay tried his honest best to save what remnant of soul there was in that base ton of material man,—but he had to give up the task at last, and after a final appeal and argument, which had nearly ended in Dan's mauling him with blows in the public street, he had left him to the tender mercies of Mr. Minchin. Meeting that gentleman by chance one day, however, he was bold enough to stop him in his walk and request him to have an eye on Dan Kiernan, as the man was 'dangerous.'

Mr. Minchin stretched his wide ugly mouth into its usual wolfish grin.

"Dangerous!" he echoed, in suave tones—"Really! I don't quite understand you!"

"Do you not? That is a pity!" And the little priest planted himself still more firmly across the path along which

Mr. Minchin evinced every desire to proceed—"For you should make it your business to understand! I say the man is dangerous,—dangerous to himself and to everybody else. He has no brain left—it is all poison! He has no control of himself—he is worse than a brute beast at night when he has drunk all the beer you give him, and when he puts raw spirit on the top of the beer! Yes—that is so! He is dangerous to women—to the leetle children—you will take my word, please!—and I say that if he do something of terror—some crime—some shocking wickedness,—*you*, Mr. Minchin, will be as much to blame as he is—if not more! Yes—*you!* No one else! *You!*"

And lifting his hat in an elaborate salute, Douay went on his way, outwardly calm but inwardly trembling in every nerve with the force of his own indignation. Minchin looked after him and laughed softly. He never laughed loudly. His marriage with the daughter of a pauper baronet compelled him to try and seem well-bred despite his low origin.

"These religious fools!" he said half aloud—"Always cowards—the whole lot of them—Catholics, Protestants, Baptists, Methodists and all! That little priestly ass is afraid of Kiernan—positively afraid of poor old Dan! One of my best hands too—and I like him!" Here he gave an eel-like writhe of his body which was a movement peculiar to him in moments of self-satisfaction. "I like him! He hates the Vicar of Shadbrook as much as I do—and for that reason only, if he were drunk every minute of every day and night, I'd keep him on!"

Whereby it will be seen that the advocates of the cause of temperance in the Cotswold villages immediately adjacent to the Minchin Brewery were not likely to meet with much encouragement in their efforts to save the souls and bodies of men.

Yet the people went to church regularly enough in all their own little scattered parishes, and Richard Everton's congregation, though it had fallen off for a few weeks immediately after

Jennie Kiernan's death, rallied together again in due course and resumed its normal aspect. But the most sanguine onlooker could never have said that it was either a devout or deeply attentive congregation. The chief interest of the villagers appeared to be centred on Mrs. Everton—her looks, her manners, and, more than all, her dress. They attended the church to see her, much as the stalls and dress circle people attend certain plays merely to see the costumes. She was the principal attraction, and everything and everybody seemed to wait for her on Sundays,—even the Church service itself. The organist never began to play the opening voluntary till one of the small choir boys, sent out as scout, returned to him with the information that Mrs. Everton was 'just a-comin'.' Her slight, pretty figure, always daintily clothed—her beautiful hair, always massed in twists and curls that shone like burnished gold,—her fair face, with the dark blue eyes always demurely downcast as she entered and walked noiselessly up the aisle,—all these charms were subject for comment, and ill-natured comment, too, on the part of some of the Shadbrook rustics, who were as spiteful and cruel as most semi-educated provincial folk are who only see two ways of existence, namely 'doing' people and being 'done' by them. The village grocer's girl, a young feminine scarecrow with projecting teeth and a snub nose, tossed her head at the lovely goldilocks of the Vicar's wife, saying she never did see such 'dyed 'air and *him*pudence.' The 'young lady' at the bar of the 'Stag and Crow' public-house, who had once in the long-ago been honoured by the kisses of Mr. Minchin himself, before he married the pauper baronet's daughter, remarked that 'the wicked extravagance of Mrs. Everton was that shameful that she wondered how the Vicar could stand it! — she did indeed!' The carpenter's niece, fat, sallow and ungainly, but who despite these drawbacks was understood to be engaged to a Cheltenham tailor of distinction, sighed gently and opined that her Tom 'wouldn't look at a woman who got up her eyes and painted her cheeks like that for ever so!'

Poor little Azalea, quite unconscious of the small fires of

envy, hatred and all uncharitableness which were smouldering around her in their coarse and common breasts, imagined that her husband's parishioners liked to see her well-dressed, and that, by making herself look as bright and charming as possible, she was creating a favourable impression. She never thought that, on the contrary, if she had clothed herself like a frump, brushed her hair straight, and covered the charming contour of her well-shaped little body with an ill-cut cloak, she would have been much less harshly judged. A pretty woman is always an object of suspicion to the plain majority—and when she adds elegant attire to the attractions of form and feature, she is still more quickly and utterly condemned. Of course Azalea readily divined that she was not popular with the Shadbrook villagers, and in the real regret which she inwardly felt for the unfortunate end of hard-working, heart-broken Jennie Kiernan, she tried her gentle best to soften and remove the feeling which some of the people, influenced by the drunken ravings of Dan, appeared to cherish against her. But her timid efforts were entirely misjudged,—they merely thought that she was trying to 'eat humble pie' and 'curry favour' with them, and while outwardly respectful to her in her presence, they mocked at her behind her back. Gradually discovering this, and resenting it with all the force of a spirit which, though essentially feminine, was proud to a fault, she presently ceased to visit the people at all, and lived in her own home like a bird in a cage, avoiding the village as much as possible in all her walks and drives.

"It's no use,"—she said, shaking her little head mournfully one day when her husband ventured tenderly to remonstrate with her on the way in which she was isolating herself from his parishioners—"It's no use, Dick! The people don't like me, and I'm afraid I don't like *them*! I've never done them any harm, and I *wanted* to love them all and be a friend to them, only they wouldn't and won't let me. And I feel—oh, I feel that they just hate me because I'm not a proper sort of clergyman's wife! I'm not! You know I'm not! To begin with—I'm not tall enough!" Here she broke into a merry laugh, but there was a glisten as of tears in her eyes. "No,—don't make

fun of me, Dick!—I'm not really! A *proper* wife for a clergyman ought to be tall and angular,—her figure ought to darken the cottage doors—positively *darken* them, Dick!—and she ought always to wear tweed costumes and 'spats' in muddy weather. Now, I look simply awful in tweeds, and my feet and ankles would all go to nothing in spats—they're not big enough or thick enough. Then she certainly oughtn't to have curly hair—it ought to be the kind of hair that always looks wet near the temples, and it ought to show quite recent marks of the comb through it, as if it had just been *ploughed*! *You* know! And a good long nose is a great advantage—a nose that's thin at the end and a little bit red and scrubby,—because then it looks as if it had been poking and poking into kitchens and cupboards, as a clergyman's wife's nose *ought* to poke,—and *does* poke, pretty often!" She laughed again, and put her little hand coaxingly under his chin. "Don't be angry with my nonsense, Dick!—but you can't say that you know any other clergyman with a wife like me?"

"No, that I can't!" and he caught the small caressing hand in his own and kissed it—"That's a fact, Azalea! I don't know any man of my calling who has a wife so pretty, so dainty, so sweet, and quaint and dear——"

"Hush—hush!" she said, and her bright face suddenly clouded—"I don't like you to praise me, Dick—I'm not worth it—I'm so useless to you."

"Useless!" he exclaimed—"Useless, Azalea?"

"Yes!" She smiled at him, but her eyes were wistful—"Quite useless, dear! Really, I am. I'm only—well!—just pretty. I *am* pretty—that's the worst of it. It's so unfortunate! Because I'm the only pretty person in the place! I wish there was another one to divide the uncomfortable honour with me. But there's no one now since"—here she hesitated a second—"since Jacynth Miller went away—and she—she was not pretty—she was beautiful."

He was silent.

"I hear,"—Azalea went on—"that she has gone on the stage. Do you think that's true?"

"I should say it was very likely," he answered.

A pause followed. Then Azalea sighed profoundly.

"I wonder," she said—"whether all very beautiful women are wicked?"

Richard smiled down upon the fair face very tenderly—

"Let us hope not, darling!" he replied—"But in many cases the gift of great beauty seems to bring the worst kind of temptation in its train——"

"Temptation to do what?" she asked.

"Temptation to make the basest uses of it!" and his gentle voice grew suddenly cold and stern—"To snare and captivate and torture the souls of men to their own eternal shame! That is what Jacynth Miller has begun to do,—that is what she will continue to do till the end of her days—unless——"

"Unless—what?" And his wife's eyes were full of a vague wonder as she put the question. He answered in accents of tense passion such as he himself was unaware of.

"Unless God intervenes! Unless God Himself cuts short her career before she ruins too many lives!"

"Why, Dick!" Azalea exclaimed, in open surprise—"I had no idea you felt so deeply about it! Then you do at last agree with me that she was—and is—a hopelessly bad girl?"

"Yes, of course I agree with you!" he replied, with a touch of bitterness—"I agree with you that she was, and is hopelessly bad, Azalea! And I don't know why we think of her—or speak of her. I would rather not. I don't want to be un-Christian in my judgment—but I fear that even if she is not so now, she is likely to be one of the worst and most dangerous women ever born!"

He spoke in a thrilling tone of suppressed anger, which even to his little wife seemed strange.

"Have you heard anything quite lately about her then, Dick?" she asked.

He met her enquiring look fully and frankly.

"I have heard nothing at all, my dear,"—he said, more quietly—"Nothing. And it is not likely that I shall ever hear."

His manner implied that he wished the subject dropped, and Azalea did not pursue it.

In the short space of little more than two years long ages seemed to have rolled away since the Kiernan affair, which, however, was as fresh in the mind of every inhabitant of Shadbrook as though it had only just occurred. Dan himself never allowed it to be forgotten,—Dan, who had become a veritable demon in his drink, never ceased declaiming the story of what he conceived to be his wrongs and his injuries to whomsoever would listen to his ravings—and as everything he said was always repeated with exaggerations, the whole district for miles round was affected by a vague distrust and dislike of the Evertons and gave them what is called the cold shoulder. People said: "Oh no! There was nothing exactly *against* them—but Mrs. Everton was a mischievous woman—one could not be too careful!" And again:—"It was always a mistake for a parson to meddle *too much* with his parishioners—and Mr. Everton was rather officious in that way; and his wife was —well, really, such a very conceited little person!" And so on, and so on, with that spread of little trickling nothings which are like the outpouring of a sewer from diseased and dirty minds—little nothings which are far more wicked than open slander, because they cannot be proved sufficiently to the law to meet with the law's punishment. To say that Mr. and Mrs. Minchin did not aid and abet Dan Kiernan in his congenial task of making it difficult for Richard Everton and his wife to live pleasantly in Shadbrook, would be to underrate their undoubtedly great abilities. No two people ever lived who more honestly enjoyed the business of injuring others—and even as Mr. Minchin delighted in poisoning beer, so Mrs. Minchin delighted in poisoning reputations. This virtuous couple, however, went to church regularly—not Shadbrook Church, but another more modern one, with a 'High' ritual, situated nearer to the Minchin Brewery,—and they were also regular communicants. Respectability sat enthroned on their smug brows,—who could doubt the honesty of Mr. Minchin, with his capacious smile and wolfish eye? Who could suspect

the sincerity of Mrs. Minchin's loud laugh and frankly large feet? No one!—that is, no one who was employed by the Brewery, or connected with the Brewery. Other folks who did not depend on Brewery references and had not borrowed Brewery money, were less constrained in opinion. Mrs. Minchin was something of a 'cat,' they were wont to observe,—and Minchin himself was a hypocrite. They did not believe Mrs. Everton was such a 'horrid creature' as Mrs. Minchin made her out to be. She was too pretty and too fascinating—these were her chief faults. But the consensus of provincial feeling being always distinctly dead against pretty women wherever they are, Mrs. Everton remained outside the pale of general approval, and had as many enemies as though she were a world's reformer. And the frivolous little creature grew quieter, paler and thinner, less buoyant of step, less radiant of smile,—and concentrated all the pent-up playful tenderness of her nature more and more upon her home, her husband and her child. 'Baby dear' was indeed the very core of her existence; she adored him and spoilt him as much as he could be spoilt, which was not so very much after all. He had a rather remarkable character of his own, and commanded himself as well as others in a firm yet perfectly undemonstrative way. He was tall for his age, and had an angelic dignity of look and manner far exceeding his years;—so much so that the very servants who ministered to his needs spoke of him with a certain wondering respect. He was 'Master Laurence' with every one now,—it was only his mother who still persisted in calling him 'Baby dear.' One day he looked at her smilingly as though she were a baby herself, and said in his yet imperfect English:

"Me not baby. Me man!"

And Azalea laughed.

"You darling!" she exclaimed—"But you *are* a baby! Yes, you are! *My* baby!" And then, some inexplicable emotion seizing her, she pressed the little fellow's fair head to her bosom—"My baby!" she repeated, and tears sprang to her eyes—"Oh, my little pet! Don't grow a

man too soon! Don't, darling! You are so sweet as you are!"

He felt a warm drop on his face and put up his tiny hand to feel her cheek.

"Muzzer kyin'!" he said, gravely—"Muzzer too pitty to ky. Me go tell Dad." And he tried to wriggle off her knee. She caught and held him fast.

"No, dear—don't tell Dad. Dad wouldn't—wouldn't understand. Mothers often cry."

He studied her with a serious silent intentness. She saw herself mirrored in the depths of his large, wondering, innocent blue eyes, and all suddenly a great vista seemed opening before her in the possible future life of the child she had brought into the world. What would he be? What career lay before him when his childhood was over, his young ideals crushed out of him in a public school and his nature forced and flattened into the formal and uniform shape demanded by purely conventional education? A faint shudder ran through her and she sighed. She had accustomed herself to thinking lately—and thinking was hard work. Moreover it did not agree with her.

"There's time yet,"—she said to herself—"I shan't lose him quite immediately—and perhaps Dick won't send him to a public school, after all—perhaps—oh, a thousand things may happen!" And, with a surprised laugh at herself for her own unusual gravity, she kissed her 'Baby dear' over and over again, and said to him:

"You *are* baby! Mother's very own baby! Now and always!"

And little Laurence, seeing her smile at him, smiled also, and repeated gravely with an infinitely sweet content:

"Now and alwiss!"

CHAPTER XII

THERE came a wonderful month of April on the Cotswolds—an April all blue skies and sunshine and warm airs—an April that no one in the neighbourhood ever forgot, for reasons more significant than even the fine weather, which of itself was unusual and remarkable. It was just such a spring-time as Richard Everton loved, when the fields overran themselves with buttercups and daisies — when violets came out in thick scented clusters under the greenly sprouting hedges, and blue-bells sprang up in the moist recesses of the woods, thrusting their dark blue spikes aloft ready to burst into bell-like blossom. Azalea declared it was the loveliest April she had ever known, and she herself expanded with its cheering influence, like a rose unfurling its bright heart to the sun. On Shadbrook village and all the district around it, the influences of a warm season made an almost miraculous difference,—cottages that had for months looked bare and squalid, became transformed as if by magic into picturesque little bowers of verdure, with the glossy green leaves and cream-yellow buds of the hardy climbing Dijon rose twisting and twining itself up to the very chimneys, while on all the outlying moors and in all the adjacent woodlands, a perfect wealth of wild blossoms sprouted up through the last year's withered leaves and filled the air with delicious odour. The Vicarage garden became a paradise of floral beauty,—great clumps of lilac and laburnum vied with each other in displaying the richest and brightest quantity of bloom,—the borders blazed with hyacinths and tulips,—and in a warm

corner where the sunshine stayed longest, thousands of crocuses blew asunder their transparent vestures and swayed to and fro among the green grass like fairy dancers tripping it in a carnival of colour. This golden opening of the year was, when fine weather came with it, the Vicar's happiest time—for his pretty wife sparkled into new animation with the brightness of Nature, and both she and little Laurence, inseparable companions, were always roaming about the grounds together, Azalea enjoying her small son's games at ball and humming-top with as much zest as though she were herself a child. Often and often when writing his sermon, Richard would lay down his pen and watch them from his window, and smile as the sound of their gay laughter reached him in the seclusion of his study,—and he would silently thank God for their beloved and beautiful lives. He had, of late, as has already been said, resigned himself to the general dullness of Shadbrook, and to the 'tone' adopted towards him by his parishioners, and if ever the lurking demons of ambition or discontent stirred within him, he made swift attack upon them and drove them back into their lair.

"I have nothing to wish for," he would say to himself, with emphasis—"Nothing to regret—nothing to desire. I am content. Indeed, I am more than content,—I am happy."

He impressed this fact often and often upon Sebastien Douay, who persisted in considering Shadbrook 'limited' as a life's outlook. But whenever he thus touched on the subject the little priest smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"If anything was to be done with the people, I would say with you that to be here is happiness,"—he declared—"But see you! All the Saints and angels and archangels could not move them to understand so much as one leetle bit of the cause and the need of religion. No! I will tell you one thing. And I say the same for myself as for you. If in the middle of Holy Mass there was news brought to my congregation that a pigsty was on fire, every one would run

out of the church. Yes! Think you then they can believe in God when they would leave His service for a burning pigsty? No! But see again! If they were all drinking beer at Minchin's expense and some one came to them with the same pigsty alarm they would not go! No! Not till they had finished the beer!"

"Well!" and Everton smiled rather sadly—"Would it not be the same everywhere else? In London, Paris or New York? Every man has his own special pigsty which he seeks to protect above all things. My dear friend, my unfortunate experience is, that most men will leave God for anything that immediately and materially concerns their present selves. Shadbrook is no worse than other places in this regard. Wherever I went I should find no better parishioners——"

"You would find many more agreeable to live with,"—returned Douay—"And you might be able to speak to people who at least would comprehend!"

Everton shook his head.

"Does any one comprehend?" he asked, wistfully—"Would you swear that any one *has* ever comprehended the Glory of the Unseen? That Glory which all our Churches feebly try to symbolise?—a Glory you and I *feel*, but cannot put into words?"

He spoke with emotion. Douay looked at him sympathetically.

"You should have been a monk, my excellent friend!" he said, with a genial smile—"You should have lived long ago, in the ages of faith, in one of the quiet grey monasteries where the beautiful sculptured cloisters permit the sunlight and moonlight to scatter through their arches bright glimpses of heaven—you should have had visions, and dreamed dreams like St. Anthony of Padua—and you would have embraced the Divine Infant and seen the Holy Grail! Yes—you should have been a monk—or another Galahad!"

A pale flush crept up to the Vicar's brows.

"No—I have nothing of a Galahad in me,"—he said—

"I am quite a commonplace man—just an ordinary country parson,—there are hundreds of us living our lives in little out-of-the-way moss-grown English villages, like tortoises in old gardens. We crawl along in accustomed grooves and sleep in the warm sun,—while out in the dusty high-roads of the world our Divine Master is being tried, condemned, and crucified in shame a second time! And we do nothing—nothing!"

His voice shook—his hand trembled; he was profoundly moved.

"My good Richard," said Douay, gently—"I believe you are truly a faithful lover of Our Lord! I believe you would sacrifice your very life for Him—even in these days!"

"Even in these days I would,"—Everton answered—"But I am not found worthy."

Many a time they reverted to this kind of intimate and serious conversation, and found in the exchange of each other's thoughts and ideals a singularly comforting sympathy. Everton soon learned that the good little priest's devotion to his Church was neither narrow nor bigoted, but broadly simple and loyally obedient. His views were, that as by far the greater majority of humankind are ignorant, materialistic, selfish and superstitious, it was well that there should be a Church, made mystic and powerful by the claims of ancient history and accumulated legend, that should hold that greater majority in its grip, and move them to salutary fear by its judgments.

"If all men were philosophers, astronomers and scientists," he said one day—"it would be a different matter. If every human being were so deeply cultured and thoughtful as to be able to follow and study the intricate workings of nature, and the magnificent order, physical, material and spiritual of the Universe, there would be no need for any church at all. God would be made manifest in His Creation,—Christ's mission would be fulfilled, and the 'Kingdom' for which we pray 'Come'—would have arrived. But no!—this will never be. And why? Because it is not intended to be.

The big mass of ignorance must always be there. Without it there would be no stimulus for wise men. And for this great mass, my Church with its pretty legends, and its worship of womanhood in the person of the Virgin Mary—and its admiration of ideal virtues as in the honour paid to Saints, is a picturesque means of raising the brutish mind to a leetle higher than the brute. That is all I say."

Everton did not contest these points with his friend, for he felt there was some sense in the arguments propounded. Lack of 'ideals'—lack of all devout feeling or enthusiasm for the service of Christ was plainly evinced among the rustic people whom it was his task to spiritually control,—and he had found that the conventional setting forth of the orthodox doctrines of Original Sin and the Divine Atonement was to them what they called 'muddlesome'—and if it brought them, out of habit, to church on Sundays, it certainly did not keep them away from the public-house on week-days. But he plodded on patiently in his round of duty,—resigned, yet hopeful that perhaps a time would come when the Power that had called him into being and placed him in his particular position, would show him what use his life could be in a world already too full of preachers and teachers whose efforts, for the most part, seem to be in vain.

In the middle of this particularly warm and dazzling month the little Laurence celebrated his fifth birthday. He was growing so fast, and at the same time mastering the baby imperfections of his speech so quickly that he was more like a boy of seven or eight than a child of five. He had begun to read, and could write in a very clear large round hand, and he showed an eager rapacity for books of all kinds—books with and without pictures—books full of long words which he could not spell, and books full of short words which he learned with marvellous ease and quickness. People said he was 'precocious,' because he was of a thoughtful and serious disposition, though he could be merry enough when he chose. But often when his father and mother were talking together, they would find him listening to them earnestly, with a line of close attention

furrowed on his brow, and his eyes full of a wistful wonder. He seemed to be always puzzling over things beyond his comprehension—as indeed he was. Once he asked, quite suddenly—

"Mummy, how did I comed here?"

She laughed.

"Darling, what do you mean?"

"I mean, how was I born'd?"

She lifted the fair enquiring face between her two hands and kissed it.

"An angel brought you to me straight from Heaven!" she said.

"Where's the angel now?" he pursued.

"Gone back to Heaven,"—she answered.

"Where's Heaven?"

She folded her arms closely round him.

"It's a beautiful world,"—she said—"Where God lives. We shall all go there some day."

"Will you go?"

"I hope so!"

"Soon?"

She was a little startled.

"Well—not *quite* soon—perhaps,"—she murmured—"I don't want to leave you and Dad——"

"Couldn't we go with you?"

She was silent. There was a coldness at her heart,—she was thinking how hard it was, how cruelly hard, that she—that her husband—and that her beautiful boy—should all have to die! Why live at all, why love at all—if only to end thus!

"Couldn't we?" persisted Laurence—"Let's all go to God, Mummy! He must be *such* a nice man!"

Poor Azalea felt very uncomfortable, and her cheeks reddened.

"Darling, He's not a man!" she said, nervously.

"Isn't He? What is He?"

"I—I can't explain—" stammered Azalea, desperately.

"Can't I love Him?"

"Yes,"—and she caught at this eagerly—"Yes, indeed, dear, —you can love Him—you *must* love Him!"

"Can I kiss Him?"

"I—I—don't know—oh, Laurence, you mustn't ask me so many questions!"

Laurence looked, as he felt, bewildered.

"Well, if God lives in a beautiful world where we're all going, and is nice and kind, I *shall* kiss Him!" he said, firmly, "Just as I kiss Dad. He would like me to."

Azalea here terminated the conversation abruptly. It was becoming too great a strain on her mind.

One afternoon, after many hours spent in superintending the planting and arranging of fresh beds of flowers with the gardener, an old man who took considerable delight in 'wasting his time with the missus' as he termed his labours under Azalea's direction, the pretty little woman ran into her husband's study like a vision from fairyland, clad in diaphanous white, a becoming big straw hat tied under her chin with a blue ribbon, and a picturesque brown rush basket swinging on her arm.

"I suppose you're too busy to come out primrosing with me?" she said.

He laid down his pen, rose from his desk, and surveyed her with admiring tenderness.

"How lovely you look!" he exclaimed—"What a pretty frock! And that hat! Why, Azalea, you are positively bewitching to-day!"

She laughed with pleasure.

"It's only cheap muslin,"—she said, with a condescending downward glance at the dainty frills and flounces of her dress, "But I had it made as though it were *quite* expensive—as though it had come from Paris! That's the *art* of it, Dick! —pure trickiness! And I trimmed the hat myself."

"And you're going primrosing?" he queried, fondly drawing her into his arms—"With Laurence?"

"No, Laurence has been playing about all day, and he's

just going to have his tea. I thought *you* might perhaps like to come out with me?"

"I'll come with pleasure if you wish it, darling,"—he answered—"But—if you didn't mind—I rather wanted to finish what I'm about——"

"Sunday's sermon?" she queried, with a playful arching of her brows.

He nodded, smiling.

"Sunday's sermon! I think I've got one or two good suggestions in it."

"Good suggestions! And do you think the Shadbrook people will care for them?"

"That's nothing to do with it," he answered—"I want to give comfort if I can."

She took a rosebud out of a bunch she wore pinned at her bosom and slipped it into his buttonhole.

"Do you know, Dick, I find more comfort in this beautiful warm weather, and in the garden and the woods than in all the sermons ever preached!" she said, laughingly—"Even *your* sermons included! Am I not wicked?"

He patted the small white hand that hovered round the rosebud in his coat.

"No, not wicked at all!" he declared—"If I were a fanciful instead of a dull, prosaic man, I should say that all the sunbeams and blossoms were God's own 'sermons' or hopeful messages to sweet women."

"That's pretty!" and she smiled—"But the loveliest blossoms soon wither—and so do the women! There's not much of a 'hopeful message' in that fact!"

"Well, it will be a long time before *you* wither!" he said, gaily, and he kissed the charming upturned face—"I never saw you looking better than you do to-day."

"I'm glad you think me so fascinating!" and she gave him a demure little smile and curtsey—"But you must please understand that I haven't dressed for *you*, sir! Father Douay,"—here she laughed—"I love to call him father!—is coming to dine with us."

"Oh, is that it? All the finery is for him! And the primroses too?"

"Not exactly for *him*—for the table,"—she answered—"I've made a pretty green silk centre, and I'm going to arrange primroses all round—heaps of primroses just fresh out of the woods. Don't you see?"

"I see!" and still smiling, he held her round the waist with one arm and looked at her long and earnestly—"You are very sweet, Azalea!" he said—"And I love you more and more every day!"

"Do you?" she murmured—"Sure?"

"Sure!" he answered—"I'm not jealous of Douay!"

"You've no cause to be!" and she laughed merrily. "He's only just a dear old thing!"

"Just a dear old thing, eh?" echoed Richard—"Well, that's expressive! And what am I?"

A sudden beautiful tenderness illumined her dark blue eyes.

"You are my husband,"—she said—"My husband, my darling and my best in the whole world! That's what *you* are, Dick!" And she stretched herself up on tiptoe to kiss him. "Oh dear! I often think when we're all in church praying to God to take us to heaven, how *very* disagreeable it would be to have to die and leave you and Laurence! What's the good of heaven to a wife who has left her husband on earth?"

"If she loved her husband very much, it might seem lonely——" he began to answer.

"It wouldn't *seem*—it would *be* lonely,"—she interrupted him, with a decisive shake of her fair head—"It would be simply horrible! For instance, suppose it were me, I should want you all the time, and if I had any eyes I should cry them out for you and Laurence—I know I should! Now really, Dick,"—and she looked very serious—"you surely don't think heaven could be a *true* heaven with no one in it that you *love*? Would *you* like a heaven without *me*?"

"I'd rather go to—the other place!" he answered,

promptly—"My dear child, don't bother your little head with these ideas! Go and gather your primroses and don't be long!"

"You won't come?"

He considered a minute, and glanced at his watch. It was half-past four.

"Which way are you going?"

"Into the hazel copse and the little wood beyond."

"Won't you be trespassing?" he asked, half laughingly—"Doesn't the little wood belong to Minchin?"

"Oh, that doesn't matter,"—she answered, lightly—"He can't stop the public right of way, and all the children pick primroses there."

"Well, perhaps I'll come and meet you on your way back," he said—"I shall have finished work in about an hour."

"All right! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye for the present!"

She turned to leave the room and he called her back again. "Azalea!"

"Yes, Dick!"

"Can you spare me another kiss?"

She laughed, and ran gaily into his arms.

"Sentimental Dick!" she said—"You are always like a lover! When will you be tired of me?"

"Never!" he answered—"Not even, 'when the sun grows cold, and the leaves of the Judgment-book unfold'!"

She shivered a little.

"Don't talk of the sun growing cold!" she said—"It seems so cruel on such a glorious day!"

He kissed her, and let her go. At the door she looked round and waved her hand.

"Good-bye!" said she.

"Good-bye, darling!"

He seated himself anew at his desk, and waited a minute or two, half expecting to see her pass the study window on her way through the garden. But she did not reappear. And he settled his mind steadily to write, evolving many more thoughts

as he worked than he found it expedient to set down for the benefit of the Shadbrook villagers, who cared little for anything a mere 'parson' might try to teach them, and understood less.

Azalea meanwhile went down through the garden and out into the village street, from thence making a short cut by the bridge over a stile and across a field into a little thicket, overgrown with shrubs and brambles and carpeted with last year's fallen leaves, through which the yellow tips of primrose-buds were faintly showing. But though she paused here for a moment looking around her, she did not linger, because this particular copse was too near the village, and she knew that the Shadbrook children had been there before her, plucking all the finest and fairest blossoms. She walked on quickly for about half a mile, and then began to climb a slight ascent at the summit of which were extensive patches of closely growing wood, spreading upward and away for a considerable distance, and here between the network of branches, through which the warm afternoon sunlight flickered in streaks of rosy fire, thousands of primroses were out in all their fresh beauty, like 'coins from the mintage of the Spring.' Throwing off her hat for greater ease, and also out of a pardonably vain idea that the sun might help to brighten the already bright tints of her hair, she began to pick the flowers leisurely, putting them together in dainty bunches and singing softly in her sweet small voice as she moved from one fragrant cluster to another, and unconsciously strolling higher and higher up through the woods, and further and further away from Shadbrook:

"Dere's a breakin' in de clouds an' de stars am showin',
Oh, meet me in de corn when de wind am blowin'!"

She hummed the old 'coon' song under her breath as she bent over the bright primroses, and then with a quantity of them in her hands, sat down among the dry brown leaves to pack them more closely in her basket, which was soon more than half full. A warm, soft breeze played among her uncovered fair locks like a caress from heaven,—the trill of an

unseen skylark shook the air with melody—and everywhere around her the birds were calling to one another in love-notes of fresh and penetrating sweetness. She made a perfect picture sitting under the delicately budding boughs, the sunlight glinting among the withered leaves that covered the earth, turning them to hues of copper and gold at her feet; and an artist would have been glad to have painted her as a study of sweet English womanhood, the sister and fitting companion of the sweet English spring.

She was a little tired, and a vague sense of sadness oppressed her. It was all very lovely, she thought, but very dull. If Richard could have come out with her she would have enjoyed it more.

"Poor old Dick!" she sighed—"It must be horrid to have to write clever sermons for people who don't and won't understand them! Oh dear! I wonder if we shall have to live in Shadbrook always! Fancy the long, long years going by, and doing nothing for us except wrinkling us with age and crippling us with rheumatism! Simply dreadful! Yes, you dear things!" and she apostrophised the primroses as she tied them up in bunches with some soft twine she had brought for the purpose—"You don't know how awful it is to live a terrible long time, trying to make yourself agreeable to people who shut their hearts against you! You just come out and bloom in the woods and look sweet, and fade away quickly, and there's an end. So nice for you! And everybody likes you—that's the best of it! Nobody hates you for being pretty—nobody is unkind to you,—and you have such a lot of companions that you can never be lonely. I'm lonely. Yes, I *am*!—even with Dick and Laurence. And when Laurence gets older and goes to school, and Dick gets more serious even than he is now, I shall be lonelier than ever. I want—oh!—I don't know what I want!"

She laughed and blinked away two tears that had risen in her pretty eyes. And her thoughts reverted to a recent rumour, whispered guardedly among the gossips of the village, which was to the effect that Jacynth Miller had left the

'variety' stage, and had made a 'grand marriage' with a millionaire.

"I wonder if it's true!" she mused—"And if it is, how strange and unjust it seems! Fortune seems to favour the bad and punish the good! I don't like to ask Dick if he has heard anything about it—he seems to hate the very mention of Jacynth Miller's name. She was certainly very beautiful."

Here she dreamily recalled the fact that the last time she had seen Jacynth, the girl had worn a bunch of primroses at her throat. The remembrance was not pleasant, and she looked down almost vexedly at the blossoms she had gathered.

"Ah well, she doesn't wear primroses now!" she said—"It's three years since she left Shadbrook, and I daresay she has plenty of jewels by this time. Bad folks get the best things! I'm sure I don't know why! And it *is* horrid to think that the worse the woman is, the luckier she seems!"

Her lips parted, and she began to sing an old Devonshire song of which her father used to be fond.

"There stood a gardener at the gate,
And in each hand a flower:
'O pretty maid, come in,' he said,
'And see my beauteous bower!
The lily it shall be thy smock,
The jonquil shoe thy feet,
Thy gown shall be the scented stock,
To make thee fair and sweet!'"

"Poor old Dad!" she murmured—"He used to love to hear me sing. I wish he had lived to see me married,—he would have adored Laurence——oh, how hard it is that people should have to die!" She shivered nervously, and without moving from her place began to pick all the primroses that were within reach immediately around her. "If Dick were to die—or my darling, beautiful baby Laurence—I know I should die too! I couldn't bear the world without them!"

She sang again very softly, while she tied more primroses together and added them to those already in her basket.

"'The gilly-flower shall deck thy head,
Thy way with herbs I'll strew,
Thy bodice shall be marigold,
Thy gloves the violet blue.'
'I will not have the gilly-flower,
Nor herbs my path to strew,
Nor bodice of the marigold,
Nor gloves of violet blue.'"

Checking her song she looked up at the sky and smiled at its cloudless radiance.

"What a perfect afternoon!" she exclaimed, with a little sigh of enjoyment—"I do hope Dick won't be long before he starts out to meet me. I think I'll wait here till he comes."

She went on gathering and tying up bunches of primroses, her happy face flushed with the warmth of the sun, and a smile of pleasure sparkling in her eyes. Behind her the woods still spread upwards, gently rising to a ridge of land plumed with slender pine-trees and other evergreens which formed a kind of cover for game. This was one of Mr. Minchin's 'preserves' and a board put up on a pole in a prominent position bore this legend inscribed upon it:—"Trespassers will be prosecuted and dogs destroyed." But Azalea was not upon the forbidden ground, though she was within a few yards of it,—therefore the man who suddenly appeared on the ridge, slouching along with a gun in his hand, would not have startled her from her peaceful attitude, even if she had heard or seen him coming, which she did not. He was walking unsteadily, with his head down, apparently picking his way among the 'snags' and stumps of trees as though he were afraid of falling, and he had got half-way across the ridge before he caught sight of her figure quietly seated among the primroses. Then, with a smothered exclamation he stopped short, and pushed his hat up from his

brows, showing a soiled, red, bloated face,—the face of Dan Kiernan. Too drunk to stand straight, he swayed to and fro, one hand clutching at the branch of a tree to steady himself, the other gripping his gun harder.

"By G—d!" he muttered, thickly—"It's that damned parson's wife!"

He laughed stupidly—staring fixedly at the little white figure below him. Just then a small sweet voice floated up to his ears, singing:

"'I will not have the scented stock,
Nor jonquils to my shoon,
But I will have the red, red rose,
That flow'reth sweet in June.'
'The red, red rose it hath a thorn
That pierceth to the bone.'
'I little heed thy idle rede,
I'll have the rose, or none.'"

With a mocking movement of his head Dan kept time to the floating echo of the tune.

"It's the dolly wife for sure!" he said to himself in a savage whisper—"I haven't seen her since—since——"

A dark flush rose to his brows, and he uttered a horrible oath.

"You lost me Jacynth, you little devil!" he said in a hoarse whisper—"*You!* You sneakin' simperin' baby-face! Oh, I don't forget ye! Not much! Nor likely to!"

Noiselessly letting go the branch he held, he crouched down like a wild beast among the brushwood and peered through the network of leaf and bramble, his eyes fastened greedily on the uncovered fair head that shone like a gleam of vivid gold among the paler tinted primroses.

"'The red, red rose it hath a thorn
That pierceth to the heart.'
'The red, red rose I still will have,
I shall not heed the smart.'"

Once more the clear little voice rang gently upward on the air, and a thrush swinging on a branch of hazel warbled a cheerful answering strain. Dropping on his knees, Kiernan stretched himself stealthily along the ground under cover of the brambles, still clenching his gun.

"Sing away, sing away!" he snarled, his coarse face growing darkly purple with suppressed fury—"But you're not going to get off your reckoning with me, my fine lady! A bit of a fright won't hurt ye—a bit of a fright——"

And he slowly raised his gun to his shoulder. A bough cracked near him and he paused irresolute.

"She bent her down unto the ground
To pluck the rose so red——"

The song trembled again towards him on a wave of the wind. He brought his gun to position,—then,—without considering his aim,—fired. A flash—a sharp report—one thin puff of pale-blue smoke—and the little white figure among the primroses sprang up erect with a shrill cry, reeled, fell forward and lay prone on its face, motionless. He burst into a loud laugh.

"Hallo!" he shouted—"Hallo, Missis Everton! Don't be scared! It's only Dan Kiernan shootin' rabbits!"

And bending aside the intervening boughs he watched the fallen heap of white among the orange-brown leaves, vaguely expecting it to rise and run away. But it remained still so long that he grew angry. Scrambling to his feet, he stumbled down through the woods and approached it—then stopped short, checked by a nervous horror. The innocent-eyed primroses, the tender points of young unfurling leaves, danced before his sight like dizzying flecks of green and yellow fire,—he saw the folds of a woman's white dress, and a thin dark stream of red blood oozing slowly through the whiteness, and he began to shake all over like a man in an ague fit. He tried to speak,—but his throat was dry; his lips refused to frame an utterance. There was a heavy silence everywhere—the report

of the gun had scattered all the woodland birds away. A flaring pomp of crimson flooded the west and burned among the dark tree-stems,—the sun was going down. He stood stricken as it were by some inward horrible amazement, striving to control the trembling of his limbs, the chattering of his teeth,—and not daring to move a step nearer to the little huddled form that lay before him in such ghastly mute helplessness. He could not touch it—and for some minutes he struggled with himself trying to think what he had done—what he had intended to do. Drink had so dominated and poisoned the cells of his brain that he was unable to grasp the full meaning of his own act,—he had no power to regret it, and scarcely any sense to understand it. The first thing that brought him to a kind of confused realisation of his position was the chiming of a bell in the near distance. It was the bell of Shadbrook Church, striking the hour. He counted six strokes. Moistening his parched lips with his tongue, he strove to recover his voice, and presently whispered hoarsely:

"Missis Everton!"

Silence! But it seemed to him that the oozing blood soaking its way through the white dress of the dead woman made a strange creeping sound. He listened with growing terror. Then there seemed to come upon him like a clang of iron hammers beating in his ears, the cry of 'Murder!' Brutal, barbarous murder! And he—was he the murderer? No!—no!—it was not so bad as all that,—he had frightened the stupid 'dolly wife,' and she had fainted. He was sure, quite sure he had not killed her! In a kind of futile frenzy he threw down his gun, and pressing both hands to his head tried to steady the whirl of the trees, the leaves, the masses of primroses that danced and twisted and writhed like mere blotches of colour, all concentrating in one glaring focus on that white central spot with the red blood crawling slowly through it, blurring it with a deep dark stain. Then, all at once, as though a curtain had been torn away from the eyes of his drugged inner consciousness, the awful truth flashed upon him, and with its crashing force came a mad access

of fear. He had murdered a woman—and the law would exact penalty for his crime! The law! What was the law? It meant hanging. Not always—no, not always! There were the halfpenny newspapers,—*they* would help him!—they would find some means to get him out of his trouble, as they would never help a just man!—they could, if they liked, work up a whole nation to beg that he might be pardoned for his dastard deed! When they knew all!—yes, when they knew how Jennie had died, and how Jacynth had left him, they would make of him a hero and a martyr! He had not read those papers for nothing! And an ugly smile darkened his face.

"'Twas the drink that drove me to it!" he said, suddenly and loudly, as though answering some invisible accuser—"Make what you like of it,—'twas the drink!"

A slowly moving current of air swayed softly through the trees, causing them to rustle gently,—a line of ethereal blue mist floated delicately upward from the moist ground, suspending itself like a fine web against the deepening rose tint of the western sky. He looked once more, furtively and shudderingly on the motionless form of his victim.

"'Twas the drink!" he repeated—"From beginning to end. D'ye hear? The drink! Naught else!"

The faint wind stirred a tress of golden hair on the little fallen head, and waved it gently to and fro. He sprang back, terrified. That hair seemed living,—was she—was she perhaps alive after all? She might be!—who could tell? It was incredible—unnatural—impossible that she should be dead! Dead, dead, dead! He muttered the word over and over again like an idiot child. Dead, dead! He had seen two or three dead people,—his father, who had been killed by the swing of a ponderous machine in an iron foundry,—his mother, who had died in her sleep,—and—Jennie. Poor Jennie! She had looked so old and waxen-yellow in her coffin! And Jennie's death had been brought about by that white thing there, lying face downward among the primroses. So that by a kind of monstrous special pleading he could contend

that justice itself had sped the bullet which had so surely hit its mark! His glance fell on the gun he had thrown down—and with his foot he pushed it nearer the prone body. He would leave it there;—it had his name upon it. He was not a coward—no!—he would not evade justice—he would be a Halfpenny Newspaper hero! But stay!—how came he to have a gun with him that day? With a painful effort he remembered,—it was through the kindness of Mr. Minchin. Through the kindness of Mr. Minchin! Mr. Minchin had paid him his week's wages and had said that if he liked to shoot over his, the great Minchin's, land for a rabbit or two, he was welcome. And he had had a drink—several drinks—and had come out looking for the innocent prey,—and then—then he had seen the 'dolly wife' in her white muslin frock, set down like a target in the midst of the green woods—yes—a target!—a mark for practice—and—and he had fired, simply for fun! Simply for fun! That was what he would say to the law—if—if the law had anything to say to *him*! And the drink was to blame,—the drink had made his hand shake—he had not meant to kill her——

Just then his ears caught a sound which filled him with delirious panic. It was a man's whistle. It pierced the sunset silence with flute-like clearness—and again and again rang through the quiet air. For a moment Kiernan was rooted to the spot where he stood, paralysed by sheer terror. Then, pulling his nerves together he turned and fled,—fled in furious haste, stumbling breathlessly and dizzily up the ascent leading to the ridge of land from whence he had descended,—heedless of how or where he went, but only blindly conscious that he must get away. Away out of the neighbourhood—miles and miles away! All the trees seemed to stand like a crowd of accusing witnesses in his path—he felt he could have twisted them up by the roots and cast them aside in his mad hurry,—their creaking boughs seemed to groan 'Murder!' as he passed, and he fought his way along in a feverish frenzy of fear, urging his trembling limbs

to running speed, now falling, now scrambling up and reeling on, till at last breaking desperately through a close thicket of brushwood, he reached the summit of the ridge and disappeared. As his dark figure vanished like a blot in space, a little brown bird flew across the purpling mist of the sundown, and perching on a branch of budding hawthorn, carolled sweetly above the small white figure that lay motionless among the last year's withered leaves and the primroses of the spring. And once more, clearer and nearer through the evening stillness, rang the cheerful whistle.

CHAPTER XIII

THE sun had sunk below the horizon when Everton, leaning his arms across his garden gate, looked down the darkening road outside with some anxiety. Not having been able to finish his writing as quickly as he had anticipated, he had sent Douay to meet Azalea on her way back from the woods, saying, playfully:

"She's very smart to-day in a new white frock which she declares she has put on to please *you*, not me!—so I'll be generous and give you all the advantage of it! You go and find her among the primroses and be her escort home."

Douay had accepted the errand with delighted alacrity, and had gone off at once,—but he had now been absent some time,—evening was beginning to close in, and there was no sign of his return. One or two early stars twinkled mildly in the warm sky, and the silence of a perfect peace deepened with the deepening shadows. The scent of budding leaves and sprouting herbs ascended sweetly from the dewy earth, and just where the Vicar stood, a bush of lilac thrust its flowering sprays against his shoulder, expressing in its delicate fragrance all the spirit of the spring. He could not see the village from his point of observation—and yet—as he waited, listening eagerly for the first approaching footfall, or the first sound of his wife's laughing voice as he had so often heard it ringing out merrily in conversation with Douay, he fancied he heard a strange smothered cry, as of several persons moved by one overwhelming sense of horror. A sudden foreboding thrill ran coldly through his heart; he unlatched the gate and took one or two

hesitating steps beyond it—then paused, listening again. Surely there was some unusual commotion in the village? His ears caught the echo of a confused noise like that of hurried feet running to and fro, mingling with an increasing murmur of men's and women's voices,—then he saw the gleam of lanterns flickering uncertainly along the road. An inexplicable dread gripped his nerves,—anon, shaking off the momentary misgiving, he walked on quickly for several paces, thereby stumbling almost before he realised it into the outstretched arms of Douay.

"Go back! Go back, Richard!"—and the little priest's face, convulsed and wet with tears, terrified him by its ghastly pallor—"My poor friend! Go back—back into the house!—do not ask me why—do not look at me——"

And his quivering voice broke into hard sobs of irrepressible anguish. Everton staggered and threw out his hands catching blindly at the empty air.

"God!" he muttered—"What is this? What has happened? Where is my wife?"

Seizing him by the arm Douay strove to drag him back to his own gateway.

"Come—come!" he entreated him—"Don't wait here—you must not, Everton! Come with me,—come, I beg—I pray of you! Your wife——"

"My wife!"—and Everton's struggling hands suddenly closed on Douay's shoulders like a vice—"Yes!—what of her? Tell me quick—quick! Where is she?"

"She is—coming!" and Douay made a strong effort to speak calmly—"They are bringing her—bringing her—home. Oh, my friend, try, try to be brave!—there may perhaps be hope! God is good—she may not be dead——"

"Dead!" Everton cried out the word in a loud wild voice, "Dead! Azalea! How should she be dead? What are you talking about? She is well—quite well! Have you not met her? Could you not find her?"

"Yes—yes—I found her!"—and Douay, battling with his own emotions, strove to support and guide the Vicar's swaying

figure towards his own home—"I found her ill—very ill! I ran to the nearest farm to fetch help—I did all I could—Richard, for God's sake do not look at me like that! I cannot bear it!"

His voice broke again, and Everton's brain swung round and round dizzily—strange black monster shapes seemed looming at him out of the evening shadows, beckoning him and drawing him with resistless force into some frightful chasm where there was no life, no world, but merely blank Nothingness. Some one—who was it?—told him Azalea was dead! He gave involuntary way to a fit of wild, half-groaning laughter, horrible to hear.

"My wife!" he cried—"Dead? No, no! Not if there is a God!"

More vague dark forms approached,—creatures of bulk and substance who seemed to gather in a little crowd around him;—some of them held him by the arms and spoke to him, but he could not understand what they said,—they all looked to him like devil figures in a delirious dream, and he fought with them reasonlessly and blindly, not knowing what he did, till overcome by a sudden sick faintness he reeled and nearly fell. Then he heard the subdued exclamations of men, and the sobs of women—he felt, rather than knew, that he was being half led, half carried into his own garden, and that he was too weak and helpless to resist. The blossoming sprays of the lilac at his gate brushed his face with a dewy freshness as he passed, and he closed his eyes heavily with a kind of dim hope that he might never open them again. At last, without any consciousness of how it happened, he found himself in his own study, lying back in his own chair with Dr. Brand bending over him and holding a glass of some odorous cordial to his lips. He pushed it away.

"I am not ill,"—he said, faintly—"Not ill at all—no! It was only a sudden giddiness—a foolish nervous fancy,—I thought——I thought——" he paused, and looking about him saw that Sebastien Douay was in the room, though his face was averted. "Yes—I thought I heard some one say that my wife

was dead. Of course it is not—it cannot be true! It would not be possible!"

He waited for a word of reply. Neither Brand nor Douay spoke. He raised himself in his chair and his eyes turned imploringly from one to the other. Then he began to tremble violently.

"I wish to understand," he murmured—"what all this trouble is? My wife went out into the woods to gather some primroses, and I said I would go and meet her. But I was late in finishing my work, and I sent my friend Mr. Douay, who is dining with us this evening, instead. Will she not come back with him? Shall I go and fetch her myself?"

Brand sat down beside him, laying one hand on his arm.

"Mr. Everton, you believe in God,"—he said—"And you are a naturally brave man. You want all your courage now. Shall I tell you the truth——?"

He checked himself as Everton suddenly sprang up with an excited gesture.

"Hush—hush!" he muttered—"What's that?"

And he listened intently to a dull noise outside the window; the noise of heavy tramping feet crunching the gravel on the garden path with a measured movement as though some burden were being slowly carried towards the house. Brand and Douay exchanged startled glances, and Douay went quickly to the study door, opening it very slightly.

"Keep the child away!"—he called, softly, to some one outside—"Don't let him come downstairs! He must not

"Must not see what?" Everton, pale to the lips, came swiftly behind him, thrusting him aside with a wild movement; "Let me go!"—this to Brand, who, himself quite shaken from his usual professional composure, still sought to hold him back—"I must find my wife!"

And he stepped out into the hall, seeing as in a misty blur of bewilderment the servants of the household huddled there together and sobbing unrestrainedly,—then with a cry which

no one who heard it ever forgot, he tottered blindly forward to meet a group of men, all Shadbrook villagers, who, bare-headed and moving softly, carried between them a stretcher, on which lay, completely covered over with a rough cloak, a small motionless figure. At sight of this the unhappy Vicar fell on his knees and covered his head with his hands.

"Oh, not Azalea!" he groaned—"Not Azalea! O God of mercy! Not Azalea!"

At a quick sign from Brand the men made a gentle effort to pass him and carry their light burden upstairs, but he struggled to his feet and stopped them. With staring eyes and labouring breath he approached that quiet recumbent form, and putting his hand out tremblingly turned back the cloak that hid it from his view. Oh, what a sweet, small white face! Was it Azalea? Could it be the laughing, radiant, winsome Azalea? With such gently closed eyelids and such a frozen piteous smile?

"Azalea!" His voice was a mere struggling whisper. "My wife!"

The men turned their heads away. They could not bear to look at him. Sebastien Douay drew near, but was unheeded.

"My wife!" The stifled exclamation was like a dying groan. He bent over the corpse, gazing, gazing as though his very soul were ebbing away in vision,—then, all at once his numbed senses started to life, and his heart began to beat fast and ever faster with a maddening rush of fear——what——what were those stains that dyed the whiteness of the breast and garments of the dead,—wet, crimson stains—horrible to see, horrible to touch——God, God, God!——The hammers clashing in his brain made louder, fiercer noise till it seemed that something worse than death was torturing every nerve in his body, and he almost shrieked out at last in vehement agony, scarcely knowing what he said—

"Tell me, tell me, tell me! For God's sake! What is it——what does it mean——this terrible thing——what is it——?"

He threw his arms about wildly, unconscious of his actions, and Brand, hurrying to his side, caught him and held him

fast. He heard some one say—"He must be told,"—and then he waited, like a criminal before a judge, his whole being strained to hear his sentence. Brand's voice, shaken by emotion, sounded like a booming tocsin in his ears, unnaturally loud, unnaturally deep.

"Your wife has been murdered!"

Murdered! He tried to understand. Murdered! He looked intently at the little fair, still face that smiled so strangely, not at him, but at something unknown and unseen. Murdered! An icy coldness congealed his blood, —he tried to speak and his lips moved stiffly as though gripped with an iron ring. He drew himself rigidly upright in the dreary calmness of utter despair.

"Murdered!" he echoed, feebly—"How——who would murder her?"

A murmur came from the men.

"Dan. Dan Kiernan. Kiernan, for sure!"

A wail of intolerable suffering broke from him.

"Kiernan!"

Dr. Brand, still supporting him, felt his figure sway and tremble as though it were struck by a lightning shock.

"It's best you should know everything at once, Mr. Everton,"—he said, very gently—"Your wife is dead! She has been shot through the heart. Mr. Douay found her lifeless body in the woods, and Kiernan's discharged gun was lying beside her. It's an awful tragedy! How the murder was committed we do not know. But—if it can be the least comfort to you—her death must have been instantaneous, and therefore painless. Come!—let me take you back to your room!"

But the stricken man stood like a figure of stone. Douay, with the tears running undisguisedly down his face, ventured to put a hand through his arm.

"My dear friend!" he murmured, pleadingly—"Come with me! Let us pray God to help us——"

Then Everton stirred. He turned his wild eyes round about him in vacant horror.

"God!" he cried—"Where is God? Does God live and look on *this*?"

He pointed, with both trembling hands outstretched, at his dead wife,—and just then one of the men who carried the stretcher, actuated by a kind intention, moved softly from his place to put aside poor Azalea's basket full of primroses which had been brought home with her body. But Everton caught sight of it. With sudden imperative force he snatched it from the man's hold, and stared at the freshly plucked blossoms, all prettily bunched together and full of fragrance,—*they* were living—they would live for days yet——but she——Azalea——she was dead! And yet——some one spoke of God! He smiled,—as men have been known to smile under the falling knife of the guillotine.

"Come, Douay!" he said, brokenly—"These are our primroses—to deck the table to-night! She wishes to make things bright for you——and for me!——she is always so bright herself——you know she is——always bright and merry!——come!——come!——"

His face changed and grew darkly convulsed—his voice died away in an inarticulate gasping sob,—and he fell prone on the ground, lost in the black oblivion of a merciful unconsciousness.

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They told little Laurence that his mother was ill, and that he must not go to her room. He was in his night-gown, waiting to see her as usual before getting into bed, when this unexpected news was brought to him. He listened with patient gravity, but in his own mind he did not believe the tale. He was puzzled and worried. He had been shut up in the nursery for some time and the door had been locked,—he had heard a strange commotion in the house and had longed to find out what it was,—heavy footsteps had tramped upstairs and tramped down again, and then there had followed a long silence. He was

instinctively sure that something mysterious and terrible had happened, and he wondered what it could be.

"Mummy went out at tea-time to pick primroses,"—he said—"Has she come back?"

Good Nurse Tomkins, who had stayed on and on with the Evertons solely for love of the child, put her arm tenderly round him.

"Yes, dear, I told you she has come back. But she is ill."

"Why are you crying?" he demanded.

"Am I crying?" Tomkins affected surprise. "I expect it's a cold I've got."

"How did Mummy get ill?" he went on—"She was quite well this afternoon."

"She—she was badly hurt in the woods,"—said Tomkins, hesitatingly——"And she is obliged to be very very quiet. She's not able to come and kiss you good-night,"—here there was such a long pause that Laurence was quite bewildered—"But you'll say your prayers now and go to bed like a good boy, won't you?"

The little fellow looked at her earnestly with wide-open loving eyes—the eyes of a child-angel rapt in heavenly meditation. Then he obediently knelt down, and folded his hands reverently, murmuring the "Our Father" with slow and careful tenderness. At its conclusion he paused—and heaving a small soft sigh, added:

"Pray God bless Dad and Mummy, and please, dear God, I am sorry Mummy is ill and I hope you will make her well directly unless you want her to be an angel. And if you want her to be an angel, please make me an angel too, and Dad and all of us, and teach us how to come to you in Heaven. Amen."

Nurse Tomkins choked back the rising sobs that threatened to break down her forced composure as she heard this quaint petition. Turning away she busied herself in tidying the room, while the boy clambered into bed and lay down, his golden curls spreading out in a kind of halo on the pillow. Then she came and tucked him up and kissed his forehead.

"Good-night, Master Laurence!"

He studied her face anxiously.

"I'm sure you're crying, Nursie,"—he said—"It's not a cold. Isn't Dad coming to see me?"

"Dad is with the doctor,"—she answered him, quickly,—"He can't come just now. Go to sleep, dearie!"

She left the room hastily, afraid to stay any longer lest her self-control should give way. Laurence listened to the soft echo of her departing footsteps, and lay very still in his bed, and very wide awake, thinking. There was something wrong in the house,—something dreadful—of that he felt quite sure. Never in all his little life of five years had he been told to go to sleep like this without good-night kisses from one or both of his parents. He could not understand it. His fancies began to drift dreamily backward over the long, sweet summer-like day that had now closed into night,—what pretty pink roses Mummy had planted just at the furthest end of the lawn where the sunlight could warm their opening buds and blossoms!—and there was going to be a new swing put up where the two big pine trees made an arch of shade over the greensward—and—Mummy could certainly toss a ball higher than he could—and she had promised him a wonderful Japanese kite that could fly ever so high even when there wasn't much wind—and Mummy had raced him round the field and pretended she couldn't possibly catch him, and when he had thought she was nowhere near she had suddenly run out from behind a tree, and had caught him and carried him riding astride across her shoulders all the way home! He laughed with delight at this recollection—Mummy was such a good playfellow! And now poor Mummy was ill—it would be very lonesome if she had to stay long in bed—perhaps she would be better to-morrow,—here his thoughts became drowsy and confused—his eyes closed, and though he opened them once or twice in a sudden startled expectancy, half hoping that his mother might, after all, come in to him, he was soon asleep.

Everton, meanwhile, lay unconscious for the greater part of

two hours. His swoon was deep and heavy, and at moments Brand feared that his life might ebb away. Sebastien Douay, patient and watchful as a faithful dog, remained beside him.

"I will wait," he said, "all night here. It may be that I shall be useful. I have already sent a message to my housekeeper,—she will not expect me home. I shall not leave my poor friend."

Strange men came and went from the Vicarage, stepping softly and speaking in whispers, — two inspectors, hastily summoned by telegram from the nearest police-station, were soon on the premises, questioning and examining every one who could tell them as much as was yet known of the crime, and with as brief delay as possible in an out-of-the-world place like Shadbrook, the scouts of the law were sent all over the country in the track of Dan Kiernan, the general impression being that he could not have got very far away, and that it would be a comparatively easy matter to run him to earth. At Mr. Minchin's residence the news had crashed down like a thunderbolt, though Mrs. Minchin's first exclamation was one of pleasure.

"Azalea Everton murdered? Really dead?" she exclaimed, with sparkling eyes—"What a blessing!"

Whereat her husband turned upon her in a towering rage.

"Fool of a woman that you are!" he shouted—"Is ruin a blessing? For that's what it means to me! Ruin!—ruin! If Everton's wife is killed, and Dan Kiernan—one of my brewery hands, remember!—has killed her, there'll be the devil to pay!"

By way of suitable response, Mrs. Minchin at once flew into one of her feline furies.

"There always is the devil to pay where *you* are!" she burst out, stridently—"I suppose you, in common with other male fools like yourself, have a sneaking admiration for baby-faced women——"

"I'd rather have a baby-face than a cat's face!" he retorted, "Or a cat's temper!"

These were the trifling sort of domestic endearments usually

indulged in by the Minchin wedded pair,—endearments which they fondly imagined were unknown to the outer world, but which their own servants took care to make the common talk of the neighbourhood.

The night moved on solemnly in a pomp of dark azure besprinkled with stars,—the outside world of nature expressed a majestic indifference to human sorrow, combined with an equally majestic peace. What matter if the hearts of men break under a strain of suffering too great for them to bear? The sun shines on in the same way—and there are always a host of clowns ready to laugh at every Agony in Gethsemane. One woman more or less foully done to death —is it so much to trouble about? Especially in these days, when each life-unit is so engrossed in whirling round and round in its own limited circle that it can see nothing outside of that —not even God!

And Azalea — the thoughtless, frivolous Azalea, whose brief existence had been innocently centred in herself, her husband and child—even she had been drawn out of the narrow ring of Circumstance into the vast possibilities of the Eternal,—while, so far as present time and place were concerned, she was asleep. She lay on her little bed, softly gowned in snowy linen and lace, her long bright golden hair unwound from its many twists and curls, and meekly parted on either side of her brow,—her small hands, waxen-white, crossed on her breast. She looked like the recumbent statue of a saint sculptured in alabaster. Death had given her features a sweet austerity which seemed to mutely express the knowledge of 'beautiful things made new, for the delight of the sky-children.' White flowers were set about the room, and a lamp was dimly burning—now and then the door noiselessly opened, and a servant looked in, to retire again quickly with a suppressed sob; and that awful hush which pervades a house when some one who has been the life and soul of it has passed away for ever, hung like an almost palpable cloud in the air. Everton, aroused at last from his long swoon, came back slowly into the dreadful consciousness of his grief, and with that consciousness

there arose in him a profound and terrible sense of despairing resignation—a sense that life being over, there was nothing to mourn for, or to regret. Everything was finished,—there was no earth, no heaven,—nothing but the dull acceptance of an inevitable and universal doom. In this fixed and frozen mood, he rose from the couch where he had been laid down in his room insensible, and in quiet, measured tones thanked Brand for all his attention.

"I am sorry," he said, gently—"to have given you so much trouble. I have kept you from your other patients—there is a good deal of illness about in the village just now—please do not wait with me any longer. I am much better——able to bear——"

His lip quivered—he looked away for a moment. Brand filled in the painful pause hurriedly.

"Yes, you are better, Mr. Everton,"—he said—"And you have a good reserve of strength—I can trust you! I will leave you if you wish it. Mr. Douay is here——"

Douay approached as his name was mentioned.

"Yes, I am here,"—he said—"And here I shall remain till to-morrow morning——" he checked himself abruptly as Everton laid a hand on his arm.

"Douay, I would rather be alone!"

"Richard, my friend, it cannot be—you are weak—you are not fit——"

"I am! I am fit,——I must be by myself——by myself to think!——to try and understand what has happened to me. For God's sake, let me have my way!"

Brand and Douay glanced anxiously at one another. Then Brand spoke:

"Very well, it shall be as you wish, Mr. Everton,"—he said, "But you will not turn Mr. Douay out at this time of night, will you? It's nearly eleven o'clock. Let him stay in the house at any rate."

"In the house?" Everton looked about him vaguely as though scarcely realising his surroundings—"Yes——oh yes——of course! My dear Douay, forgive me! You have been so patient—so kind—I forgot! And——and you went to meet

her——my poor little wife! Oh yes! you must stay here——but you will leave me for a while in this room quite alone, will you not? I shall be better so——"

They saw it was wisest to humour him.

"You shall do just as you like, Mr. Everton,"—said Brand, "Only promise me to try and master yourself! I am no preacher, and I cannot offer you the right sort of consolation—but your own trust in God will help you——"

Everton raised a trembling hand in protest.

"Spare me that!" he said—"I know what you would wish to say, and I thank you! But I am not strong enough to stand quite firmly under the blow——not yet! It is all for the best, no doubt!——all for the best that my beloved has been brutally murdered!——yes!" and he smiled, drearily—"All for the best! Yes——I will try to believe——"

His speech failed him, and his lips moved dumbly for a moment. Then he spoke out again.

"Has——has everything been arranged?"

Brand bent his head in assent.

"Where——where is she?" he asked, in a sighing whisper.

Brand replied in equally hushed accents.

"In her own room."

Another long and mournful pause. Then the Vicar held out his hand.

"Good-night!"

Tears rushed to Douay's eyes.

"Good-night, my dear friend!"

Brand could have cried too at the sight of the tall, slender, delicate-featured man before him who was stricken to the very soul by a grief so great that words were all powerless to express it. But he took refuge from his own emotions in practical utterance.

"I should tell you before I go, Mr. Everton," he said, quickly, "that the police are out all over the country after Kiernan. There's no trace of him as yet, but he will probably be found and arrested in the morning."

Everton listened, scarcely comprehending.

"And then?" he murmured.

"Then he will be handed over to the law for the punishment of his dastard crime!" exclaimed Douay, hotly.

The Vicar gave a slight gesture of utter weariness.

"What will that avail——to *me*?" he asked.

A silence followed. Everton looked at his two companions with strained tearless eyes.

"It is all no use,"—he said—"My wife is dead! Nothing can bring her back to me again. The vengeance of the law can only increase my suffering. Even as it is, the ways of the law will wring my heart till it is dry of life-blood! For I suppose there must be an inquest——?"

"Yes, there must be an inquest, certainly,"—answered Brand, with hesitation——"Surely you would wish it——"

"Wish it!" Everton wrung his hands in an energy of desperation—"I! *I* wish that strange men should desecrate by their looks the dead body of my wife! I tell you, Brand, the law, in seeking to avenge a wronged man, often wrongs him most in the manner of its avenging!" He gave another convulsive movement of his hands. "Leave me now,—he implored—"leave me, I beg of you both! It will be the truest kindness to me—it will indeed! I talk wildly, unreasonably, I know——I am not myself——I shall be calmer when I have had time to think!"

He sank into a chair wearily and closed his eyes. He heard whispered words exchanged between Brand and Douay,—he felt rather than knew that Douay had impulsively caught his hand and pressed it——then the study door opened and was softly shut again,—they had gone, and he was alone. Alone, ——and yet the first impression of his solitude was that Azalea had come in, and that she stood beside him. He could almost see the folds of her white gown,—the gleam of her gold hair. Only she did not move at all,—she was perfectly still, and though she smiled at him she was very pale. He stretched out his arms to the vacant air.

"My love, my wife! I dreamed that you were dead! But

you are not——you cannot be! You are here with me, are you not?—yes, always, always with me!"

And he fancied he heard the sweet familiar voice like a breath of music, answer him—

"Always!"

He started up amazed, looking eagerly round him. The candles were burning brightly—the room was empty, and gradually the awful weight of realised desolation fell back on his heart with doubly suffocating pressure.

"Dead!" he murmured——"Azalea! Not possible!"

His trembling hand here touched by chance a flower in his buttonhole—it was the rosebud his wife had pinned there when she had left him that afternoon a few hours ago. Only a few hours ago! His fingers closed upon it as a miser's fingers might close upon some priceless jewel,—his heart heaved—and his throat burned with choking agony,—but no tears relieved the tension of his brain. He would not unpin the rose, but he bent his head to its petals and kissed it in a frenzy of love and sorrow. The fragrant velvety softness of it was like Azalea's mouth when—when she was alive. When she was alive! And now—she was dead. Dead——and murdered by Dan Kiernan.

He tried to grapple with this hideous fact — *murdered by Dan Kiernan.* Yet he was so far from bringing its reality home to himself that his thoughts went groping miserably back over all the old trodden road of past incident,—trifle upon trifle recurred to him with minute distinctness,—and every small detail of everything that had happened, repeated itself in the nature of an accurate chronicle or summary of events since the ill-omened day three years ago when, moved by a spirit of Christian love and service, he had gone forth as a minister of the Gospel to rescue a defenceless woman from her husband's drunken fury. Then it all vanished in a blur,—and the one black horror remained with him—that Azalea was dead. That from henceforth he was without love in the world. And that she, in the full radiance of her beauty and happiness, had been brutally killed by the sodden ruffian who had been

the lover of Jacynth. Jacynth! That name, so full of poignant association with his misery, goaded him to a kind of madness,—he began to walk up and down the room, feebly at first, then with swifter and stronger steps, till all at once a thought struck him and he stopped abruptly with an upward glance of reproachful appeal.

"Where was God?"

He put the question sternly to the silence.

"Where was God?"

Where was 'Our Father,' the merciful Benefactor and Giver of Life and Love, when Kiernan's work was done? Where? Where was the Divine Force that should surely have interposed between the slayer and his victim? And with an overwhelming rush as of waves and winds hurtling down upon his sinking soul, the vast abyss of complete Unbelief yawned wide before him. He stood upon its brink and looked down. Blank Nothingness was there,—the nothing of life, the nothing of death, and most desolate of all, the Nothing of God! Of what use was all the praying and the preaching? Swift as a flash his mind flew back to the time when he had stood by young Hadley's deathbed, and had listened to the lad's wild ravings. He recalled the terrible words—"Don't pray! It's no use! With my last breath I want to make you remember that. *It's no use!*" And the frenzied cry—"Love, I say!—love!—it's what the Lord Christ never knew——it's what He missed——love for a woman!—and there He fails to be our brother in sorrow!" With what strange self-sufficiency he had heard these dying lamentations! Yes—self-sufficiency!—the placid self-sufficiency of a minister of the Gospel who was sure of his faith. Sure—quite sure of his faith! And now? The bulwarks were shaking—the fortress was giving way,—and why? Because death had battered down his own house door, and sorrow had pierced his own heart! Here he came to a pause in his meditations, shuddering inwardly as with icy cold.

"O we poor orphans of nothing,—alone on that lonely shore—
Born of the brainless Nature who knew not that which she bore!

Trusting no longer that earthly flower would be heavenly fruit ;
Come from the brute—poor souls—no souls—and to die with the brute!"

The passionate words of the greatest of modern English poets[1] clanged through his brain ;—they had been written in a grand scorn for the scorners, but were they true? And if true, why should life be lived at all, when there was nothing to live for? Self-slaughter might be called cowardly, but surely self-deception was its equal in cowardice?

A mellow measured sound here boomed upon his ears,—it was the church clock striking midnight. The house was very silent,—he supposed the servants had gone to bed. He had no idea that they were all sitting up together in the kitchen talking in frightened whispers over the day's ghastly tragedy—— listening for the slightest movement on his part, and ready to guard him from any reckless act of grief or desperation he might be moved to commit. He did not know that Douay was likewise on the alert, waiting watchfully in his bedroom with the door just slightly ajar, so that he could hear even the lightest footfall. Douay indeed was sorely troubled—he did not know what to do for the best. He murmured many Pater Nosters and Ave Marias mechanically out of old routine and habit, but felt that they were wholly inadequate to meet the occasion. His impressionable and kindly nature was easily moved to tears, and he wept freely over the fate of the winsome little woman for whom he had felt an almost paternal affection and friendship. How horrible it had been to see her lying dead among the primroses!—how horrible! He had gone to the woods, walking gaily along, light of heart and thinking no evil of any man, every now and then whistling by way of a call to her,—he had found her pretty hat with its blue ribbon lying among the last year's leaves, and he had picked it up and swung it on his arm. Then he had whistled again——and then——then——he had seen her lying face downward on the ground, with blood oozing through her

[1] Tennyson.

white garments!——and he had rushed to a farm close by crying wildly for help!——

"Ah mon Dieu!" he sighed now, as he went over the terrible experience again and again in his mind,—"What a cruelty! What a crime! Will all the saints and angels explain why such a thing should be? La pauvre petite! What had she done that she should meet with such an end? A pretty innocent little soul—as harmless as a bird or a butterfly! And Richard so loved her!—poor Richard! A possible great man! Will his life be quite broken now——or——"

A slight noise as of an opening door startled him. He listened, scarcely breathing—but for the moment there was no further sound.

"Of course the man, Kiernan, was drunk,"—he went on reflecting—"And so it is Mr. Minchin who is the real murderer! Have I not warned this brewer? I have—many times! I say to him 'Kiernan is dangerous——there will be mischief!' But he paid no heed—he is all grin and grab. He rules this foolish place where the gospel is not Christianity, but Drink. He is the little god of the dull brain and pot-belly! And hundreds of such little gods ride on the backs of the poor English people, keeping them in slavery worse than that of the dungeon and chain. And how strange are the Governments which punish crime, and yet do nothing to prevent it!"

The noise of the opening door downstairs was repeated, and this time it was followed by the movement of footsteps. Cautiously Douay peered out through the aperture of his own doorway and saw Everton coming slowly up the stairs. His face was deathly pale, and he was talking to himself as he came.

"I must go to my wife!"—he said, whisperingly; "I must look upon her once more as she lies asleep—and then—then I will sleep too——beside her!"

Douay anxiously watched him, himself unseen, as he went by with unfaltering tread straight to the room where Azalea's body lay,—the room that had mutually belonged to husband

and wife. He saw him open the door and hesitate—then enter and shut himself in.

A rush of tears to the little priest's eyes blurred everything from his view.

"Poor, poor fellow!" he said, softly;—"If he could only cry like a woman it would do him good! His brain is on fire with sorrow——or else it is frozen with despair;—perhaps the sight of her, so calm, so peaceful, so angelic, may touch the fount of healing! As for me——I will pray for him!——but, God forgive me if I say for once it seems but little use!"

And with that he smote his breast and muttered "Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!" many times for this rash utterance, which according to the teaching of his Church amounted to that 'sin against the Holy Ghost,' known as presumption of God's mercy, and kneeling down, he buried his head in his hands, and earnestly and unselfishly besought the loving pity of Heaven for his bereaved and suffering friend.

Meanwhile, little Laurence, sleeping as he was accustomed to do, all alone in his nursery, was disturbed and frightened by a strange dream. He thought he saw his mother standing near him,—there was a pale brightness all round her like summer moonlight, and she had a white dress on and a wreath of white shining flowers in her hair. She looked at him and said, very gently; "Father wants you, darling!" And he was so sleepy that he could not quite understand her,—so he rubbed his eyes with his two doubled-up little fists and for a moment only stared at her without speaking. Then she came closer to his bedside and bent over him, and kissed him; her kiss was so quick and light and warm that it was like a flame, and the touch of it woke him up. Yes, he was sure he was wide awake, and equally sure that his mother stood there smiling at him, though her face was very sad,—and she said, again—"Baby dear, father wants you!" And he was sorry he had not jumped up before in obedience to her call, but he answered now at once—"All right, Mummy! Are you better?" To this she did not reply, and when he looked at her again she was gone! He slipped hastily out of bed, and

stood shivering in his little nightgown, thinking and wondering what he ought to do. Nurse Tomkins slept in the next room, and there was an open door between—should he call her and tell her that his mother had come in to see him? No,—he decided it would be best to do exactly what Mummy had told him, and go to Dad first. So he opened the nursery door very softly and pattered out with his little bare feet on the staircase landing, which was almost dark, save for the glimmer of a gas burner turned low down. He paused, a trifle scared. His mother's bedroom was immediately opposite, and he was just making up his mind to go thither when some one came out of it——a strange, drooping figure of a man, with a wild, white haggard face and dishevelled hair,—a man piteous and terrible to look at, whose distraught eyes glared stonily in front of him as though fixed on some monstrous vision of hell. Was it——could it be his father? His little heart beat fast with fear,—he ran a step or two forward——

"Dad, Dad!" he cried;—"Mother says you want me!"

Everton reeled back from him, struck by sudden awe. 'Mother says'! 'Mother!' With hands uplifted as though to ward off a blow or a blessing, he stared vaguely at the little white thing shining out of the night's blackness,—the little white thing with its crown of golden curls that ran towards him trembling on its small bare feet——what——what was it? A child?——or an angel? Azalea was dead in the room behind there!—he had tried to rouse her with kisses and prayers,—he had knelt beside her, watching for some small sign of returning life that should respond to his entreating love——in vain! And now——had she sent a messenger from heaven to comfort him? Look at it! It seemed afraid of him! Its sweet small voice cried again plaintively——

"Dad, Dad! Mother says you want me!"

A nervous shuddering seized him,——there was a tightness in his throat and he felt as though he were choking. Involuntarily he stretched out his arms——then he gave a great agonised cry——

"Laurence, Laurence! I had forgotten you! God forgive me, I had forgotten! Her child—mine—life of our lives! Oh yes, I want you, my darling!—God knows I want you!——come——come——come to me!—I want you, my little, little child!"

Falling on his knees, he gathered up the frightened boy closely in his arms, and wild sobs broke from him, hard and passionate, while the tears, released at last from their burning prison, rained down on the soft golden head which he pressed against his breast with a force of which he was himself unconscious.

"I had forgotten you," he cried, again; "I was ready to curse God for His cruelty to me!——and I had forgotten you!"

CHAPTER XIV

DAN KIERNAN meantime had managed to get clear away. When he had fled from the scene of his crime, his first impulse was to make for a railway station and take train to the nearest seaport, from whence he hazily considered he might easily escape on board some trading vessel outward bound; his next idea was to tramp it along the high-road towards London and boldly risk the chances of arrest. In this latter course fortune favoured him, for he had not gone above a mile when he found a man in difficulties with the mechanism of a motor-car. It was not a finished upholstered vehicle,—it was merely the body of a 'racer,' and its driver had been testing its highest rate of speed, when some trifling thing had gone wrong, and he had cursed his unlucky stars for having brought him to a dead stoppage in the middle of a solitary road without a house anywhere near, when the help of an extra hand for a few moments would have set his apparatus going again in working order. Kiernan came up just in time to render the required assistance, and by way of gratitude for his services the man asked him if he would like a ride on the car, explaining that he meant to drive it at the rate of forty or fifty miles an hour 'steady,' except where there were likely to be police traps about.

"Where are ye goin' to?" Dan asked.

"London."

"Right y'are! That'll do for me!" and without further parley he took the offered seat beside the driver and was whirled away in a cloud of dust impregnated with the

stench of petrol. It was a little after seven when they started, and by quarter-past eight they had left the neighbourhood of the Cotswolds far behind them and were scudding through another county at a speed which set all laws for motorists at defiance. No one had seen Dan mount the car,—the road where he had picked up his unexpected friend in need, had been quite deserted at the time, and even in the ploughed fields on either side there was not so much as a stray labourer left working after sunset, so that no trace was left of him as to how or where he had gone.

He realised this with a sullen sense of satisfaction,—his brain was still heavy and confused with drink, though, like many sodden brutes of his type, he had the appearance of being sober. He sat and watched the hedgerows, the trees, the farms, the scattered villages all fly past him, as it were, in the maddest hurry,—the air lashed his face like a stinging wave of water,—the skies and the earth mingled gradually into one grey monotone of colour as the evening darkened slowly down. One curious cluster of unnaturally bright spots remained with him, however, and always danced in front of his eyes—a gleam of yellow, as of primroses in bloom,—a whiteness, as of a woman's garment,—and a dark red stain, as of blood. He was worried by these vivid flickerings of memory,—yet he knew quite well what they were. He knew he had killed Mrs. Everton,—the 'dolly wife' as he had called her,—and he was not sorry. He was vaguely frightened when he thought of it, but he was not sorry. There was no penitence or regret within him. In a dull sort of way he tried to argue with himself that it had to be. His clouded thoughts constantly reverted to Jacynth with a bitterness none the less intense because familiar and futile. The only girl he ever loved!—the only girl he ever loved! He repeated this over and over again till it set itself like a worded refrain to the rush of the car. She was a real beauty, she was! And he had been robbed of her! Never, never should he forget the night when he went home to his cottage meaning to be kind and gentle to worn and ailing Jennie, and she had begun to cry and speak of Jacynth, and to say how parson's

wife had told her a tale,—and he had sworn at her and rushed out of the house cursing her for a shrew and a burden on his life. Then he had gone to find Jacynth, and she had mocked him and said she was tired of him, and that she was going away from hateful Shadbrook, where there was nothing but tale-bearing and mischief-making all day and all night. And driven half mad between the two women, sweetheart and wife, he had gone and drunk himself blind and silly, and then—Jacynth had left the village without so much as a good-bye. And—Jennie had died—poor Jennie!—and all this peck of trouble had been brought about by the 'dolly wife'—the little baby-faced creature he had just left lying dead among the primroses. He had killed her,—and now he admitted to himself that he had meant to kill her. But it would be easy to swear that the gun went off by accident. Then there would be a verdict of manslaughter,—not murder—not murder. He would escape hanging somehow,—he was quite sure of that. The law was merciful nowadays! If the halfpenny newspapers were to be believed, law really existed more for the protection than the punishment of criminals. Some needy barrister would take up his case and make a reputation out of it! These and many other stupid and half-formed ideas and plans occupied his brain as he was borne swiftly along over miles and miles of open country,—there was no necessity to talk. His companion was not communicative, being absorbed in the business of driving the car, and when he spoke at all it was only to praise his machine's racing abilities. At about nine o'clock they entered a small town, where, in the centre of the principal street, the tempting signal lights of a showy public-house flared brilliantly through the darkness. Here Kiernan suggested a stoppage and a drink.

"I've gone far enough for to-night,"—he said—"And I'm much obliged t'ye for the finest ride I've ever had!" He laughed at this and repeated it. "The finest ride I've ever had! Come an' 'ave a glass afore we parts company!"

The driver shook his head.

"Thanks, I'd rather not!" he answered, very decidedly—

"I'm bound to get this car to London to-night, and I want all my nerve. The stuff they sell in these sort of places,"—and he indicated the public-house with a jerk of his finger—"is just rank poison. Besides I'm a temperance man."

"Temp'rance!" Kiernan gave a loud guffaw as the car stopped and he dismounted—"Or teetotal?"

"No, not teetotal,"—said the man, good-humouredly—"I've never taken the pledge. Just temperance."

"Oh!"—and Kiernan's heavy face darkened—"An' what's the good of temp'rance to ye? Eh? What's the good?"

The man smiled.

"Well, I get better wages, to begin with,"—he replied—"And I'm trusted by my firm. That's something."

"Oh ay! That's something," assented Dan, grudgingly—"But it isn't enjoyin' life. We can't only live once, an' I sez let's get all we can out of it afore we dies an' 'as done with it——" He broke off suddenly, with a scared look.

The man looked at him curiously—then nodded.

"Every one to his liking!" he said—"Some folks are happiest drunk, and others are more comfortable sober. Live and let live! Good-night!"

"Stop a bit!" and Kiernan stared confusedly about him—"We've come along so fast that I don't rightly know whereabouts I am. What part o' the country is this?"

"We're in Wiltshire just now," answered the car-driver—"And this is a nice little town enough to stay in. You'll find all you want in there,"—here he pointed again to the public-house—"Good beds and the usual tipple! Wish you a pleasant evening!"

And in another moment, with a droning whirr as of the wings of a monstrous dragon-fly, he was off and out of sight.

With his departure a sudden sense of overpowering loneliness fell on Kiernan. He stood transfixed, lacking all power and energy to move. He had not thought he should feel like this when left to himself. The night seemed to close round him like a black circle suggestive of dark prison walls,—there was no way out of it. A great dread was upon him, to

an extent he had never imagined possible. He began calculating how long it was likely to be before the police started on his track. He knew how slowly things were done in Shadbrook; he knew it would take a considerable time to get into touch with the proper authorities,—they would have to make out a warrant for his arrest, and the only magistrate whose residence was anywhere near the village was Squire Hazlitt, of Shadbrook Hall, and he was in London. They would have to go further afield for a legal signature, and all the journeying to and fro for the completion of the necessary formalities was so much loss to them and gain to him. He had heard the clock strike six just before he had left the primrose wood,—now it was past nine. Six to seven, seven to eight, eight to nine! Three whole hours since—since the murder! Much might be done in three hours, especially in these days of rapid telegraphic and telephonic communication,—too much for his complete safety.

Vague and innumerable terrors rose up in his mind;—he tried—he was always trying—to forget the small white fallen figure lying face downward among last autumn's brown leaves and the spring primroses. When they found her, what would be said? That Dan Kiernan had killed her, of course, because his discharged gun was lying beside her. Why had he been such a fool as to leave his gun there? Never mind! It would show them he was not afraid of being caught. He had plenty of pluck,—he would brave it out! Would they find her body soon, he wondered? Yes, surely!—she would be missed from home—her husband would probably go and look for her,—and at this thought he burst into a loud and involuntary fit of laughter. The noise of it, echoing through the quiet street in which he stood, frightened him. He began to tremble violently. Then he looked about him and saw the bright lights of the public-house, twinkling their devil's welcome to homeless wanderers. His fears suddenly subsided. Drink! That was the cure for all trouble! That would make a man forget that he had a murder on his soul! Drink! The burning poison that leaps at once to the brain, scorching every delicate cell and withering up every pulsation of thought,

memory or regret! Drink! He had his week's wages in his pocket—he would drink every penny of the money! He would drink to-night as he had never drunk before, even if he died for it! There were nearly two hours yet before the bar would close—he would not waste another moment of that precious portion of time! There was companionship in the warm and well-lit hostelry,—he could hear men's voices mingling with laughter and singing; once in there he would escape from the cold lonely silence of the night and the blackness of the sky which arched over him like a vast dome faintly bespangled with stars,—and he would cease to listen—as he was half unconsciously listening now—for the tramp of feet that should follow him up and march beside him to jail,—for the first word that should make him the prisoner of the law till his crime was either condoned or expiated. He pushed open the door of the public-house and entered,—it swung heavily to behind him.

For a long time the street outside remained quite empty and deserted. Towards eleven o'clock some of the customers at the bar came out, more or less the worse for their potations, and with hoarse good-nights, went their several ways steadily or staggeringly; a smart-looking young woman, wearing a white blouse, with her hair dressed to an exaggerated height above her forehead, opened one of the windows and looked out, leaning her bare arms across the sill and smiling impudently at the departing topers,—till all suddenly there came a loud clamour of men's tongues raised in angry altercation.

"Out you go!" shouted one rough voice—"No drunkards allowed on these 'ere premises!"

"If 'e won't go through the door, chuck 'im out o' winder!" cried another.

A furious scuffling and stamping ensued, accompanied by a volley of oaths and such coarse language as is unfortunately common to the British working-man when under the influence of anger or alcohol,—then the door of the public-house was violently thrown open and held back, while with unfriendly

force Dan Kiernan was dragged forward by several pairs of hands which literally flung him into the street, where he fell heavily full length, cutting his face and bruising his body severely. This done, the door was quickly banged to and barred,—the lights in the windows were all extinguished, and in a few seconds the erstwhile brilliantly illuminated house presented a closed dark exterior to the quiet night.

The wretched heap of man, hurled into the gutter by those who had made profit of his wretchedness, lay for some time inert,—then, after many futile attempts, he at last managed to rise, first into a sitting posture, and finally to his feet. Swaying unsteadily backwards and forwards, with the blood trickling from a gash on his forehead, no hat on, and his clothes torn and dishevelled, he was a shameful, pitiful object,—a creature far worse of aspect than any beast of the field,—a disgrace to the very name of humanity. Yet drugged and stupefied as he was, some feeble glimmering of reason flickered in his poisoned brain, for as soon as he found himself standing upright, he shook his clenched fist at the black frontage of the tavern from which he had been so summarily ejected.

"Curse ye!" he said, savagely—"Curse ye for a damned dirty cheat and liar! Takin' my money as long as there was any to get, an' kickin' me out when my pockets was cleared! Curse ye! May ye drown yerselves in yer own devil's brew and go to h—ll in it!"

Choking with rage, he shook his fist again threateningly and staggered away. Reeling down the street, with no idea where he was going, he came in contact with a lamp-post and nearly fell headlong, but righting himself by a miracle, suddenly caught sight of his own shadow flung on the opposite wall by the reflection of the gaslight above him. It was a hideously magnified and distorted shadow, and he charged at it furiously.

"Come on!" he shouted—"Follerin' me an' spyin' on me, are ye, ye great hulkin' fool! Wants a good all-round bruisin', does ye? All right!—'ere y'are an' welcome! I'll pound ye into a jelly for five shillin's! Come on!"

He ran forward and drove his fists hard into the wall,—the shock and pain of the impact forced him to realise the absurdity of his action, and he began to laugh boisterously. His laughter was so long and wild and loud, that it brought a woman to the door of a small house close by—a pale, weak, terrified-looking woman, who, with a morsel of lighted candle in her hand, peered out at him with scared colourless eyes.

"Is that you, Bill?" she asked.

Dan stared at her.

"No, 'tain't Bill—it's me!" he said, with a stupid leer—"Why are ye up so late, my darlin'! Wantin' Bill, eh? Who's 'e?"

The woman drew back, startled.

"Bill's my husband,"—she answered—"He's generally bad with the drink,—I thought 'twas him."

She retreated, and he shouted after her–

"'Ere, old girl! Stop a bit! Which is the road to London?"

She put out a thin hand and pointed down the street.

"That way—straight ahead, if you're trampin' it,"—she said.

And with that she shut and locked her door.

He waited a minute, trying to understand what he intended next to do with himself. Then he started off to walk, or rather to stumble along in the direction she had indicated. Nothing seemed 'straight ahead' to him,—it was all crooked—all up hill and down dale. Rough edges in the pavement rose up like waves of the sea, and sank again as his foot touched them. Circles of light swam before his eyes and broke up into saw-edged fragments of prismatic colour as he watched them,—the darkness of the night swirled round him like a giant wheel with such velocity that sometimes he stupidly threw out his hands to try and stop its incessant gyrations. The freshness of the air rather increased than relieved his sensations, and he sidled about and rolled forward on his way more like a shapeless block of driftwood in a swift stream than a human being capable of self-volition. Presently he found himself on an

open country road, with wide fields extending on either side. The town he had just left lay behind him, its few twinkling lights sparkling dimly like glow-worms on a smooth lawn. Some clumps of trees, with their lower branches lopped off in the hideous fashion ordained of county councils, waved their heads solemnly to and fro in a light rising wind like funereal plumes set on the hearse of a dead nature,—to his giddy and confused brain they looked like inexplicable tall objects with wildly trimmed hats on, bobbing and bowing at him in impudent mockery. He shook his fists at them and shouted idiotic nothings. He found enjoyment in shaking his fists,—the action amused and invigorated him. He felt that he was hitting some weak creature that had no power to hit him back again, and there was a pleasure in thus playing the bully-coward. He began to sing, or rather to howl scraps of comic music-hall ditties, and staggered from side to side of the solitary high-road, bellowing more discordantly than an angry swine. By-and-bye he took to dancing, and for a considerable time entertained himself by uncouth caperings which scattered the dust around him in clouds,—then, as if moved by an impetus not his own, he started running as though for a race. He went perhaps more than half a mile at this rate before he tripped over a large stone and fell flat on a stretch of grass by the roadside. The grass was wet and soft—its cool contact refreshed his heated body, and he raised himself into a comfortable sitting posture, clasping his knees with both arms. His head still buzzed and whirled,—but a few wandering thoughts commenced rising, like phosphorescent fires, out of his muddled swamp of brain,—thoughts that were not connected so much with the present, as with the past. He seemed to see himself as a young man, tall, fresh-coloured, with bright eyes, and a healthy vigorous frame,—a young man who had good work and could earn good wages, and who was thought well of by his employers. A picture of Jennie his wife, as he had known her first, presented itself all unexpectedly before him—Jennie, a little, shy, gentle girl with pretty brown hair and blue eyes, and a smile that went straight to a man's heart.

How loving she had been!—poor Jennie! He had married her and they had been happy,—happy save for the loss of their two children who had died in infancy. And she—she was dead too now, was Jennie,—he had seen her lying like a figure of old wax in her coffin. And now—why, now she was here—actually here, staring at him!—the figure of old wax with the black coffin-edge framing her in like the frame of a picture! He gave a horrified cry.

"Go away!" he yelled, in an access of delirious terror—"Go away! You're dead! Dead an' buried! What d'ye want with me?"

Then, as the dream-impression faded, he laughed foolishly and wondered why he had thought of Jennie at all, or of the days when he was young.

He got up and began to walk again,—he was steadier on his feet now, and he kept on a fairly straight line of movement. He realised that the stars were shining above him in the black-azure April sky, and after a little while he was able to distinguish his way along the road by their pale yet certain light. His steps grew firmer and more regular, and the swaying movement of his body gradually subsided. Some of the fumes of drink were clearing off, though he was none the less heavily drunk. His thinking powers, never very great, now sprang into unusual and abnormal activity, but instead of wandering like will-o'-the-wisps in and out the poison-clogged cells of his brain, they brought forward prominent and exaggerated shapes that seemed to detach themselves from his own personality and surround him like separate ghostly tormentors. Chief among them came the tall slender figure of 'Parson' Everton,—the man with the pale, resolute face and deep-set eyes—the man whose voice, with its mellow, steady tone, had in a certain sense moved him to shame when he heard it saying 'God forgive you!' He remembered that incident in its every detail. He, Dan Kiernan, had uttered vague threats against Mrs. Everton in her husband's presence, and that husband, hearing him, had replied simply in one phrase—'God forgive you!' And now? When 'Parson'

should see his 'dolly wife' dead, with the blood oozing and creeping through her white gown as he, her murderer, had seen it ooze and creep, would he still say 'God forgive you'? He wondered. A sudden shivering nausea seized him, and great drops of sweat broke out on his forehead. He stopped a moment and looked about him. Hush! What was that? A woman's cry? He listened, his whole body thrilling with inexplicable fear. A bird flew past him with a whirr of beating wings, repeating the cry—it was a small downy owl. His eyes followed the flight of the creature with an uneasy sense of superstitious dread. He listened again. There was not a sound anywhere except the low murmur of the wind. Long, wide, monotonous and solitary, the road stretched on and on before him,—there was no sign of a house or even a last year's haystack anywhere. It was one grey level line, extending into indefinite distance.

He trudged on again, but slowly and with ever-increasing weariness,—his limbs ached, and a throbbing pain began to beat in his head like a small sharp hammer hitting nails into every nerve. Yet so little would he admit to himself that drink was the cause of his physical suffering, that if he could have found another public-house open at that time of night, he would have sold the coat off his back for the worth of one or two more glasses of criminally adulterated whisky. His thoughts still jumped about restlessly like busy and officious demons, suggesting this, denying that, and calling to mind half-forgotten episodes of his youth, before he had, through the pernicious example of other fellow-workmen, fallen step by step into the degrading vice which now dominated him body and soul,—and burning waves of heated blood surged up to his face and temples like blown flame from a furnace as he tramped doggedly on, without any consciousness of his own intentions, and without any actual regret for the crime he had committed. Presently his swarming fancies took a new and violent turn, and he could have sworn he saw Jacynth Miller standing right in his path beckoning to him! As he went forward, she moved backward, with a tantalising, floating grace,

—and he madly stretched out his arms to catch and clasp the ever elusive phantom of a lost delight.

"Jacynth! Jacynth!" he cried, hoarsely,—and he hastened his steps—but the delicate shape still retreated, with a laughing light in the large, lovely eyes and a mocking smile on the red mouth. He ran and stumbled,—and ran and stumbled again.

"Jacynth! Jacynth!"

Then he stopped, breathless; the entrancing vision stopped also and held out slim, white appealing hands. Its draperies shimmered like moonlight and dew, and through them his burning eyes could discern the outline of fair nude limbs and snowy bosom over which the glorious waves of loosened hair fell in a glossy bronze-brown shower!

He uttered a savage cry, and made an equally savage rush at the exquisitely beautiful figure that seemed to invite and wait for his approach — he almost touched it as he thought, when lo!—it vanished into the dark air, and he fell prone in the dust, torn by such a sudden and wild delirium as caused him to roll there on the ground in a kind of convulsion in which he actually set his teeth in the flesh of his hands, instinctively seeking to counteract and relieve the terrible agony and tension of his body and brain. The paroxysm passed, leaving him as weak as a child and quite exhausted;—he huddled himself up on the spot where he had fallen, trembling and afraid to move. His eyes were hot and heavy,—each separate hair on his scalp pricked him as though it were burning iron,—he was utterly, forlornly ill and miserable,—and putting his hands before his face, the huge hulking brute gave way to maudlin tears.

"Jacynth, my gel, you're main 'ard on me!" he sobbed, abjectly—"Main 'ard y'are, an' I doan't care now what 'appens to me,—let 'em take me up an' put me to prison—it's all one to poor old Dan! Poor old Dan! He worn't 'arf a bad chap, 'e wornt,—'e was real mad with love for ye, Jacynth, an' ye knows it! Stark starin' mad! Poor Dan! 'E'd a' gone through all the bloomin' 'ell fire as ever parsons preached of to please ye, 'e would! That's true! That's God A'mighty

true! 'E'd a' stole anythin' an' killed anythin' just for a kiss from your little mouth of 'oney, ye knows 'e would! Ye could a' druv' 'im anywheres like a bull to market, ye knows ye could! Ah! an' I'd a' made short work o' Jennie too if ye'd said the word—but ye wouldn't a' married me if I 'ad! Ye wanted yer own way allus,—free as a bird! An' Dan let ye 'ave it—an' now ye runs away from 'im an' 'e doan't want nothin'—poor old Dan!—nothin' but a good sleep—a good sound sleep—an' 'e'll dream ye're in 'is arms, Jacynth!—goin' hush-a-bye!—dream ye're in 'is arms—comfortable an' lovin' —'e'll 'ave a good sound sleep——"

His broken and querulous accents trailed away into unintelligible murmurs—his limbs gradually relaxed, and presently rolling over on his back he lay helplessly half across the road in a lethargic slumber, his arms spread out on either side of him and his bloated face upturned to the quiet stars.

The night paced on for an hour or more in unbroken silence. Countless millions of mysterious unknown worlds swung in their golden and silver orbits above the wretched creature who, though endowed with powers of speech, thought and action, had found nothing better to do with those gifts than to wilfully degrade all three. The silent forces of the universe, patiently doing their work in obedience to Divine ordinance, had, so far as this one miserable unit of life was concerned, taught him no lesson. And there are swarms of such miserable units—horrible thousands of them, breeding other horrible thousands! We hear, and we read, of Law and Government,—and the hopes of the world spring up elated at the fair promises made of betterment,—hopes only doomed to be crushed again by the depressing discovery that the very dispensers of Law and Government are frequently more corrupt than those they would essay to govern, and are too often found among the vilest sinners against moral and physical uprightness. Between Dan Kiernan and the 'gentleman' member of Parliament who daily and nightly fuddles his brain with innumerable whisky-sodas, is there a difference? Not much, if any! The victims of the

filthy drinking-vice are on the same base level, whether they be of low-class or high quality. Both are grossly inferior to the beasts, and both are the shame and despair of nations.

Midnight had passed, and the road was still deserted save for that extended figure stretched flat upon it and breathing stertorously in a drunken sleep. The skies were perceptibly darker,—many of the stars were veiled in a gloom of drifting cloud and a few drops of rain fell slowly. The blackness of the atmosphere had grown deeper and denser,—the wind had dropped, and the stillness was more profound.

All at once from the far-off distance there crept the faint echo of a low burring noise, measured and monotonous like the whirr of a monster spinning-wheel. It clove the silence with a persistent hum, and went on steadily increasing in depth and volume of sound. Nearer and nearer it boomed and rumbled, till the reverberation was like the first muttered hint of an earthquake, —yet all up and down the road, looking backward or forward, there was nothing to be seen. Still closer and closer came the thrumming beat as of swiftly rolling wheels—with louder and louder resonance it swept through space like muffled thunder, —then—a sudden yellow flare lit up the scene, and two great lights, giant eyes of fire that sent long searching rays of blazing brilliancy through the darkness, gleamed into space and came flaming onward at full speed. Awake, Dan Kiernan! Awake, drunken criminal fool! If the gods of the past and future see any remaining worth in that besotted, drugged and miserable life of thine, let them intervene and save it now before it is too late! Awake, awake!

On, still on, and the great lights glowed more brightly and fiercely, showing plainly the vehicle their radiance helped to guide—a huge closed travelling motor-car of some seventy-five horse-power, which tore along the road like an express train. On—on—with a deadly smoothness and swiftness it rushed — till — just at that dark mass which blotted the grey level line of the highway like a neglected rubbish heap, there was a sudden sickening jolt. The car leaped forward and caught at something, dragging it along for

several paces,—something that gave a ghastly groan and then was silent. The chauffeur uttered a score of oaths in French as his machine swerved and oscillated dangerously—then by dexterous handling and with scarce a moment's pause, he righted it, and again started his dashing pace onward, when a woman's voice cried out—

"Stop! Stop!"

"Madame, I beg of you——"

"Stop, I say! I *will* be obeyed!"

With a discordant grinding noise the car came to a halt, its engines throbbing clamorously. An old man with pallid wrinkled features and a grey goatee beard, looked out of the window.

"What's the matter, Antoine?"

The chauffeur, thus appealed to, dismounted from his seat and came to the door of the car, touching his hat.

"But a little nothing, Monsieur! Some one or something in the road—a dog or a sheep. The car jumped over,—it is not possible that anything is hurt—we ought to go on at once and quickly, but Madame——"

Madame here settled matters by opening the door on the side opposite to that where the chauffeur stood, and stepping into the road. Madame was tall and slim, and rich sables clothed her from head to heel.

"You have run over something, you stupid Antoine!" she said, her eyes shining through the muffling web of the gauzy veil she wore—"I felt it rise up under me! What is it?"

The chauffeur shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands in deprecation.

"Madame, it is just behind. See!" And he pointed to a shapeless blur in the road some paces away from the back of the car—"Let me advise Madame that whatever it is, it is best to leave it!"

Madame gathered her sables round her and proceeded to walk towards the 'it' in question. The old man who was her companion in the car, stretched out his head and yelled at her—

"Come back! Where are you going?"

"To see what we have killed!" she replied, calmly—"There is blood on our wheels."

"Blood!" And his weak falsetto voice rose to a kind of shriek—"Antoine! Do you hear? Blood! She says there is blood on our wheels! Get it off at once!—I will not travel with it—no—no! It must be cleaned off—cleaned directly—I will not travel with it!"

He sank back in the car quite inarticulate with nervous excitement, and the chauffeur hastened to pacify him.

"Monsieur! Monsieur, let me pray you to be calm! I will bring the light immediately and see what is wrong—but Madame is alone—Madame may be frightened at the thing in the road,—will you go with her, or shall I?"

"I go with her? I?" And the wizened head peered out of the window again, its features livid with rage and fear—"Do you take me for a fool?" Here he called after the tall sable-coated woman's figure that went slowly moving by itself along the road—"Jacynth!"

She turned her head and paused.

"Jacynth! Come back!"

She moved quietly on again.

The chauffeur smiled covertly under the fringe of his dark moustache.

"Monsieur, it is better I should attend Madame! A dead animal is not a pretty sight for ladies."

"Go then!" exclaimed his master, snappishly—"Go and tell her to come back to me at once!"

The chauffeur thereupon took a small lighted hand-lamp from the front of the car where it hung, and in a second was by his lady's side.

"Madame!" he said, in a low tone—"Monsieur Nordstein is very angry that you go to look at this thing, whatever it is—pray return to him!"

She threw back her veil, and showed a pure oval face of dazzling beauty, illumined by large brilliant dark eyes,—the unforgettable face of Jacynth Miller—but an altogether lovelier

Jacynth—a Jacynth of culture, refinement and grace, with a manner expressive of all the ease and elegance of the great world.

"Monsieur Nordstein is angry!" she said, with a slight shrug of her shoulders—"What do I care for his anger?"

The chauffeur looked at her somewhat dubiously.

"You may not care, Madame—but there are penalties and punishments—and this thing we have run over——"

"*You*—not *we*!" interrupted Jacynth—"You! You are the driver of the car and you were going too fast. You must have killed something—here it is,"—and she suddenly halted—"See! It is not a dog or a sheep—it is a man!"

At her words and gesture he stepped forward, holding up his lantern—then bent over the shapeless bundle that lay in front of them, springing back from it again in shuddering disgust.

"Come away, Madame—come away!" he said—"It is terrible! It is some labourer—he is dead!—quite dead, and bleeding—bleeding horribly! How it has happened I know not,—I am sorry,—it was not my fault—he must have been drunk to lie there in the road—or perhaps he was dead before—but come, Madame—come!—come back to the car!—you must not look——"

She, however, advanced resolutely.

"I *will* look!" she said—"I have never seen a dead man."

She drew close to the body and stooped over it.

"Bring the lamp here!" she commanded.

The chauffeur, deadly pale and with chattering teeth, obeyed.

She gazed intently at what presented the appearance of a mere heap of dirty and blood-stained clothes, without a tremor or an exclamation of pity. Putting out a small foot, cased in a dainty shoe on which the silver embroidery sparkled like gems, she moved the corpse with it, turning the head over so that the face could be seen. Then and then only she recoiled a little. For she recognised it. It was Dan Kiernan's face—bruised, battered, gashed and bleeding,—Dan's and no other. Its eyes were wide open, and protruded hideously,—in the light flung upon them by the wavering lantern they glistened

and stared at her like living eyes—stared at her so straightly that she instinctively uttered a faint cry. Then, recovering herself at once, she gave them stare for stare—and smiled.

"It is Dan!" she murmured under her breath—"Dan Kiernan! Killed! Crushed under the wheels of my car!"

And with that she laughed—a silvery sweet laugh of triumph. The chauffeur started, thinking that the horror of the sight on which she was gazing had made her hysterical. But she was perfectly composed, and her attitude expressed the most absolute indifference.

"Yes—it is some tramping labourer,"—she said, aloud,—"No doubt he was lying drunk in the road. So it is not your fault, Antoine,—it is his own. Drink is the curse of all these kind of men! There's no house near here—and we are some distance from a town, so we must leave him where he is. Go back to the car and tell my husband I am coming. Stay! Let me have your lantern."

"But, Madame,"—objected Antoine—"You will be alone with this corpse—your dress——"

She smiled.

"My dress is all right. I'll take care it has no blood on it,"—she said—"And I'm not alone—the car is close by." Here she drew the lantern away from his reluctant hold—"I am coming immediately. I just want to look at this dead thing again."

Antoine lifted his hands and eyes in wonderment.

"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!" he inwardly ejaculated—"Quel cœur de femme!"

He hurried away to relate the nature of the accident to his master, who could be seen gesticulating impatiently from the car, and Jacynth Miller, now Jacynth Nordstein, wife of one of the sharpest Jew millionaires that ever played with the money markets of the world, stood like some wondrous figure of Fate, lamp in hand, looking down upon the mangled remains of her girlhood's lover with an expression that was neither sorrowful nor compassionate, but simply self-complacent.

"Dan!" she breathed softly—"Listen, Dan! It is I—Jacynth! It is Jacynth whose car drove over you just now! Aren't you glad? Isn't it a fine way out of Life for you?—a way you would have wished? You've been wretched without me—you know you have! Not a glimpse of me for three years!—enough to break your heart, Dan! And I—I've been afraid of you sometimes! I've thought you might turn up any day with some story of the past,—the past which I have half forgotten and want altogether to forget. And now there you are!—out of my way for ever! That's just my luck,—fortune always favours me! Out of my way for ever! I shall never have to trouble about you or think of you again! I wonder what you were doing here so far from Shadbrook? Tramping it? Perhaps to find me! Well! Your search is ended, Dan! You've found me!—for the last time! Good-night, Dan!—good-bye!"

She waved the lantern with quite a coquettish playfulness over the awful dead face upturned to her own,—and then, with a light step that betokened a light heart, turned her back upon the corpse and moved away. Returning to the car she found her husband half out of it, his foot on the step, and his keen small eyes glittering with excitement.

"Ah! At last!" he exclaimed—"I thought you were never coming! Antoine says it is a dead tramp you were looking at. What do you find in that to please you? And to keep me waiting?"

Swinging the lantern in one hand, she looked up at him, laughing. Her expression and attitude were perfectly lovely, and Israel Nordstein, whose passion for her beauty dominated him even more than his passion for money, altered his vexed frown to a wrinkled smile.

"Anything for a change, Isra!" she said—"To leave you for a moment makes you love me more for an hour!"

Her eyes flashed provocatively, and he quickly put out his arms and lifted her into the car beside him. His pallid face had reddened with pleasure.

"You wild girl!" he said, and kissed her;—"You pretty

tyrant! You know I could not love you more! Come close to me—sit so!—I like to feel you near! And now let us get on as fast as possible. You've had your way—now I must have mine. Antoine has seen to the wheels—they're all right; and I've told him to drive at top speed."

"I'm afraid our car killed the poor man!" she said, nestling against him with a little affected shudder and sigh—"He was past all help!"

"Well, he shouldn't have gone to bed on the high-road,"—her husband replied, cynically;—"He was probably drunk. They say God always protects drunkards—a curious taste on the part of the Almighty!—but this time He appears to have been away on other business." He laughed at what he considered a witticism, and just then the chauffeur came to the door.

"Shall we start again, Monsieur?"

Nordstein nodded good-humouredly.

"Start? Of course! We should never have stopped. But Madame must always be obeyed! On—on, my Antoine! Drive like the devil!"

And with devilish speed the car flew—straight ahead like a missile from a giant cannon, with a boom and a whirr and a grind—its fierce eyes of fire probing their way through the darkness—and presently silence fell upon the scene. Silence—solitude,—and a dead man,—over which the dull dawn broke in tears of drizzling rain.

CHAPTER XV

WITHIN twenty-four hours after poor pretty Azalea Everton had been laid on her bed, all clothed in white, and asleep for ever, Shadbrook the obscure became famous. Shadbrook, hidden away from the knowledge of the wider world in a remote part of the Cotswolds, suddenly leaped into unenviable notoriety. The shadow of a crime had fallen on the dull little village, causing it to blaze like an ugly red advertisement set against the quiet hill. The whole neighbourhood swarmed with reporters and photographers, and in every newspaper pictures of the scene of the murder, accompanied by sensational details of the supposed manner in which it had been committed, appealed to the morbid taste of the lower-class public. The unhappy Vicar was put to constant torture by intrusive press-men, who made their uninvited way into his garden and came up to his very house door, seeking to interview his servants, without any thought for his feelings or regard for his personal privacy. Shut in the quiet sanctuary of his study, with his little son for chief companion, he was bewildered and troubled beyond expression by the cruel and selfish attempts made by these hack journalists to trade on the terrible tragedy which had darkened his life. The very day following the crime, one of the halfpenny dailies, notoriously known for its vulgar commercial spirit and bad taste, published portraits of himself, his murdered wife and Dan Kiernan, all set in a group together, with a paragraph beside it headed 'Drink or Revenge?' The paper was sent to Everton through the post by some officious person who

evidently believed in the process of rubbing salt into raw wounds,—and when he saw it his soul sickened with a sense of utter and helpless despair.

"My God!" he murmured—"Is this what our country's once clean and honourable press is coming to!"

Then, when the news arrived—as it soon did—that the dead body of a man had been found on a lonely road leading out of Wiltshire towards London, and that it had been identified as the remains of Dan Kiernan, crushed and mangled in such a way as to leave no doubt that he had been run over by a motor-car, the excitement became intensified. Offers of reward were immediately published for the discovery of the destructive car concerned, whose owners had been so selfish as to run over a man, even though he were a drunken murderer, and leave him lying in the road,—for the police felt they had been defrauded of their intended capture, and the law sympathised with the police as having been equally cheated of fees in a criminal trial. But no one had seen any car dashing at break-neck speed through Wiltshire or any other shire,—no one appeared to have the slightest belief that any car could or would so dash through respectable English counties after midnight wholly unobserved,—whereby it will be seen and understood that Israel Nordstein knew how to use his money. Shadbrook was shaken to its phlegmatic core by hearing of Dan Kiernan's death coming so suddenly upon that of his victim. Up at Minchin's Brewery it was the one subject of talk among the men.

"That's a nice way to finish up!" said one of them—"Murderin' a poor lady in the arternoon, an' gettin' mangled to bits one's self the same night!"

His mates nodded a solemn affirmative.

"It was drink with Dan," —said another—"Always the drink. He'd a' bin all right from the beginnin' when he fust come to Shadbrook if 'e'd a' kep' sober. It was the drink as set 'im wild on that devil's wench, Jacynth Miller."

A young fellow, sitting cross-legged on one of Minchin's empty beer-casks, looked at them meaningly.

"It's the drink with most of us, boys,"—he said—"It makes fools and villains of us. Why don't we give it up?"

They stared at him sheepishly, and a slow smile went the round of their faces. He was a well-educated lad and had taken a certain 'lead' among them by having a few of them every evening at his own lodging, talking to them and entertaining them in such a manner as to successfully keep them away from the public-house.

"Why don't we give it up?" he repeated—"Above all, why don't we give Minchin a lesson?"

They exchanged dubious glances.

"There's a timber yard opening up some fifteen miles from here,"—went on the young man, doggedly—"I saw the boss yesterday. He wants men. They that can pack casks can pack timber, and the fellow that can drive a brewer's dray can drive a waggon-load of wood as easily. So I'm off. I'm going to give Minchin notice. I wish some of you would do the same!"

They listened in profound astonishment, offering no comment.

"Look here, boys,"—and the speaker grew flushed and eager—"I'm not a canting teetotaller—like Minchin. I'm not a religious humbug—like Minchin. I like to be on the square. This murder of the parson's poor wife at Shadbrook has made me sick of Minchin, his brewery, his beer and everything connected with him! He's as much to blame as Dan Kiernan—indeed I'm not sure he isn't the worst criminal of the two!"

"Steady lad, steady!" expostulated a big, burly drayman—"You're a-goin' it a bit too strong! It's a bad business—an awsome bad business—but you 'adn't ought to blame the wrong man."

"I blame the *right* man!" retorted the young fellow, hotly. "I tell you I've heard Kiernan threaten Mrs. Everton—ay, and Parson Everton too—over and over again, and Minchin has heard him, and laughed. The Roman Catholic priest here warned Minchin that Kiernan was always drunk and always dangerous—and Minchin laughed again. It's Minchin's stuff

that made Kiernan the brute he was. For it isn't sound beer —it's rank poison! Boys, you know it is!"

"There's a tidy lot o' chemicals in it, sartin sure!"—said one of his listeners—"An' there's very little o' malt an' 'ops. We 'ad an inspector or some such chap up 'erc four or five years ago what took samples to prove the purity o' Minchin's ale, an' I'm blest if there worn't a special lot brewed for 'im ready to sample! That's the way things is done—sharp an' on the sly—an' nobody ain't none the wiser!"

There was a silence. Then a man looked questioningly at the young fellow who had started the conversation.

"You're really goin' to try the timber yard, are ye?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, maybe some of us'll go with ye. We'll think about it."

They dispersed then, but at six o'clock that evening twenty-five brewery hands had given notice, and Mr. Minchin's astonishment was only equalled by his rage.

"What new game is this?" he demanded of his manager who brought him the unwelcome news;—"What the devil do these fellows mean by it?"

"I really couldn't say,"—the manager replied, uncomfortably, "I can only put it down to the general feeling of sympathy for the clergyman at Shadbrook. You see he's always been set against the drink—and now that his wife has been murdered by one of our hands—well!—I think it's quite likely to make the brewery unpopular."

Minchin stretched his wide mouth in an unpleasant grin.

"Nothing will make drink unpopular," he said—"You may bet your life on that!"

In this the manager did not presume to contradict him, and taking orders for a supply of fresh hands to replace those who had given notice—orders which, though he did not say so, he knew would be very difficult to fulfil—he withdrew.

At Shadbrook Vicarage itself the death of Dan Kiernan came as an unexpected relief. The Vicar had contemplated with indescribable horror the ordeal that would be inflicted

upon him if the murderer of his wife were brought to trial,—the vulgar publicity that would be thrown on his erstwhile sacred domestic life,—the examination of various witnesses who might be brought forward to relate the story of Jennie Kiernan's death and the innocent part Azalea had taken in that episode,—then would come the scandal concerning Jacynth Miller—and who knew—who could tell where Jacynth might be now, or what position she occupied? The chain of circumstance seemed interminable,—and yet from what a small link it had sprung!

Sunk in an apathy of misery, Everton was thankful at heart that this fresh agony was spared him—the agony of being perhaps compelled to testify to the truth of the manner in which Jacynth had brought disgrace into his parish, while he, like a blind fool believing only in good, had never been aware of it, and so through his stupidity had been the remote cause of the vengeance wreaked by the drunken Dan Kiernan on his innocent wife. How he blamed himself now!—how bitterly he blamed himself! He poured out all his soul to Sebastien Douay, who, listening to the full details of the story for the first time, was profoundly moved.

"You did it all for the best, my poor friend!" he said, sorrowfully—"You tried to save a drunkard from fatally injuring his wife,—and if, for this act of kindness you are so cruelly afflicted, then surely the good God is not merciful! And for the dear little angel who is gone, she did also for the best,—though it would have been better that she had never spoken to this Mrs. Kiernan——"

"I sent her,"—and Richard clasped and unclasped his hands in a nervous access of desperation—"I used to think—God forgive me!—that she did not show sufficient interest in the poor for a Vicar's wife—and I begged her to go and visit Jennie Kiernan while the woman was lying ill with the injuries her husband had inflicted upon her. And she went—reluctantly, poor darling!—but she obeyed me—so you see it was all my fault—all my foolish, blundering fault!"

Douay earnestly endeavoured to console him.

"There was no fault,"—he said—"And I see not why you should accuse yourself. It was one of those trifles from which sometimes springs a tragedy, and only God knows why! Richard,"—and he paused in a perplexed sadness, then resumed—"You will not see it yet,—and you will think me brutal perhaps for even suggesting it,—but there is some reason for all this trouble that has fallen upon you,—some Divine intention behind it——"

Everton sighed in utter weariness.

"Ah, spare me that!" he entreated—"It is cruel! I am borne down to the dust by a cross too heavy for me to bear——"

"But you will not be crushed under it,"—and Douay's eyes glowed with enthusiasm—"no, you will not be crushed! You are too strong. You will be like St. Christopher—you will carry the Christ of many sorrows through the stormy stream, and find yourself blessed by His love when the journey is at an end!"

The desolate man made no reply. He covered his eyes with his hand, and Douay saw the slow tears trickling through his fingers.

The chief comfort and help of all in the house during this time of sorrow was the child Laurence. He knew now that his mother was dead,—and he accepted the fact with a strange quietude, unbroken by tears. A look was on his face as of one who saw more than mortals could show him, and his nurse, puzzled by his tranquil demeanour, asked him once very gently whether he understood that his mother was gone away for ever. He smiled a little at this,—a wondering angel smile.

"No,"—he said—"I don't understand that at all. She is only just a little way off,—in Heaven. She will always come to me when I call her."

Nurse Tomkins stroked his bright hair.

"Are you sure, dear?" she asked, hesitatingly.

"Yes. Aren't you?"

She was at a loss how to reply. She had been a regular church-goer all her life, and she believed the New Testament or said she believed it,—how then was it that she had not the

same trusting faith as a little child? How is it, we may surely ask, that many professing Christians do not believe in what Christ teaches, and treat as crazed persons those who do? It is one thing to be a church-goer,—it is quite another to be a real Christian,—that is to say, a follower of and believer in the Divine Master to the very letter of all He taught and prophesied; for of such as this last there are too few to form even a small society.

"You see Heaven's quite close,"—proceeded Laurence, with grave earnestness—"And the angels don't have to travel ever so far as we do. They just wish to be with us, or we wish them to come, and they are here in a minute. I told Dad so. Dad cried, but I told him I had seen Mummy since she went away, and when I said just how she looked, he kissed me and believed me. And he doesn't cry so much now."

His nurse listened in silent awe. The little lad looked like a heavenly creature himself with his fair face and big loving eyes, and she was glad that he had not been allowed to enter the death-chamber where his mother lay in her coffin under a pall of pure white flowers.

"Let him remember her as she lived,"—Everton had said—"She was his companion and playmate, as well as his mother,—let him think of her as always bright and beautiful. It is better so."

And so it was. Laurence himself showed no desire or curiosity to penetrate into rooms where the doors were closed, nor did he appear to be in any way concerned with the dismal hush that prevailed in the house, the whispering voices, or the muffled footsteps. He was always with his father,—sometimes sitting quietly on his knee and nestling against him,—sometimes in a corner of the study window with a picture book,—but never showing any marked consciousness of the fact that his mother was no longer with him. His small personality and influence were so exquisite and remarkable that Richard almost felt himself guided and controlled by this little life for which he was responsible,—and in the child's presence his grief was calmed, his nerves soothed, and his whole fainting

spirit aroused and braced to a courage beyond his own imagined ability. For he saw that Laurence did not consider his mother as dead, but living,—living, and only a little way removed from him. And was not this the true spirit of the Christian creed? Had he, therefore, an ordained minister of the Gospel of Consolation, less faith than the instinctive confidence shown by his little son? Weary of himself and ashamed, he struggled and fought with his own bitter sorrow, which, like another Giant Despair, fell upon him full armed with cap of steel and breast-plate of fire,—and out of each fierce contest he came forth a stronger, wiser, and purer man.

Yet when, at the close of that fatal week, the day arrived for the final laying to rest of all that was mortal of his winsome wife in Shadbrook churchyard, his strength well nigh gave way again. The rector of a parish some thirty miles distant, a friend and old college chum of Everton's, came to perform the sad ceremony; and at first it was doubtful whether Everton himself would be able to bear the strain of attending the funeral in his desolate capacity of chief mourner. Ghastly pale and trembling, he sat in his darkened study till the last possible moment, listening to every sound,—to the measured tramp of the feet that ascended to the room where Azalea's body lay in its closed coffin, covered with wreaths and garlands of early spring blossoms, and then came softly treading down again under the weight of their precious burden,—it was terrible—terrible!—he said to himself over and over again;—the black paraphernalia of death ought not to be associated with so fair and bright a creature as Azalea,—Azalea, who had lain in his arms warm and sweet as a June rose, with her golden hair flowing about her,—Azalea, whose little feet had tripped through the house and garden so lightly that she seemed to float rather than walk on the ground;—how was it that she—she should now be covered in from the light and buried down in the cold moist earth? And he almost shrieked as the door of his room opened, and his old college friend entered, arrayed in white surplice and ready for the mournful rites he was called upon to perform.

"My dear Everton," he said, gently, "You look very ill. Do you think you can come with us?"

Everton rose totteringly.

"I must!" he answered—"I must go with her to the end!"

His friend looked at him with deep compassion. As Edward Darell, formerly one of the most brilliant of Cambridge young men, he had made Everton, who was about his own age, a kind of ideal,—for though Everton was not such a showy scholar, he was far more profound—and it smote him to the heart to see him so utterly broken down. After a minute he spoke again.

"It will be a great trial for you,"—he said—"There is an enormous crowd."

Everton heard, but scarcely comprehended.

"The Roman Catholic priest who is here," went on Darell, "tells me he fears it may be too much for your strength. He seems very intimate with you."

There was a tinge of reproach in his accents. Everton sighed heavily.

"Yes,"—he answered—"To a man left in a desert the first passer-by becomes an intimate."

Darell was silent for a few seconds. Then he went on.

"You know my opinion on matters of faith," he said, slowly, "I am a little afraid for you——"

Everton turned upon him a face so wan and wild that Darell recoiled.

"You do well to be afraid for me!" he said—"I am afraid for myself! Not afraid of changing my faith,—but afraid of losing faith altogether!" He paused—then added, more quietly, "Shall I come with you now?"

"If you feel able to do so,"—answered Darell—"Everything is ready."

In another moment Everton stood bareheaded in the open air, blindly conscious of a great crowd of people, men and women, youths and girls, the men all bareheaded like himself, and all swarming round one simple little white burden of

flowers which was the fragrant silent centre of the throng. The sunshine was warm and brilliant,—the scent of lilac swept towards him on every breath of air,—and all visible things of nature expressed the delicate beauty of the spring. Hazily he wondered why this mass of people had gathered round his house,—why such a murmur of sorrow and pity surged through them as he appeared,—and it was as a man walking in a dream that he yielded to some one's kindly guidance and found himself walking immediately behind that small white burden of flowers, carried by four bearers on a hand-bier so gently and slowly along. But he did not realise that a coffin lay underneath the flowers, or that his wife's body was in the coffin. Out in the sunlight and passing through his own garden Azalea seemed still living and quite near,—she was on the lawn—she was among the roses—he would see her directly—so his thoughts rambled on disconnectedly; he was just aware that the patron of his living, Squire Hazlitt, was present—that he spoke to him and pressed his hand, and that there were tears in the bluff gentleman's eyes,—then something leaped in his soul like a tongue of fire, and his eyes lightened with a passion sudden and terrible.

"For God's sake!" he said in a low tone to Dr. Brand, who happened to be near him—"Get that man out of my sight, or I cannot answer for myself!"

Brand looked where he was looking, and saw the fox-like face of the brewer, Minchin, gleaming like a pale ugly mask amid the surging blackness of the assembled people, and while he was yet considering how it would be possible to eject so unwelcome an intruder, the face suddenly disappeared. More than one person had heard the Vicar's agonised entreaty, and more than one person had understood it, and how it happened nobody quite knew, but certain it was that by dint of firm yet quiet pushing, Minchin found himself dislodged from his position and pressed over to the extreme edge of the crowd. There he waited in scornful impatience for a few minutes, trying to get another chance of admission to the churchyard,—but from the words and glances with which he was favoured

he saw, to his surprise and chagrin, that the people were in an ugly humour, and disposed to resent his presence at the funeral as superfluous. He, therefore, judged it wisest and safest to depart from the scene,—and as his thin angular figure detached itself and stood out clearly separate from the throng, a thousand angry eyes were turned upon him, and he heard something like a threatening hiss which boded no goodwill. He laughed to himself a trifle uncomfortably.

"One would think *I* had murdered the parson's wife!" he inwardly ejaculated—"Or that *I* was a drunkard! I've had nothing to do with it. Kiernan was in my employ certainly—but I'm not answerable for the conduct of my men."

So he argued—after the same specious manner in which most employers of labour argue, namely that they are 'not responsible' for either the degradation or the sufferings of those they employ. Which is one of those villainous perversions of the truth for which men are as deservedly punished in this world as in the world to come.

In deep silence the service for the dead began,—and Richard Everton, servant of Christ, stood rigid and tearless by the open grave which was soon to contain all that he had most cherished in the world. Not only sorrow but despair was in his soul, for he knew that his love for God was less than his love for her whom God had claimed. "He that taketh not his cross and followeth after Me is not worthy of Me." So said his Divine Master,—and in shame and bitterness he knew he was 'not worthy.' All he could think of was that Azalea—lovely, loving, sweet Azalea, had been done to death by a drunkard's malice! Done to death by a drunkard's malice! His lips inaudibly murmured the words;—his reason asked—Was it God's work? Or was it not rather the result of man's vice, which all the forces of nature and powers of heaven are ever seeking to punish and exterminate? Tranced in miserable thoughts he saw nothing and felt nothing,—intense mental agony had, like a frost, numbed every nerve. He was unconscious of the strong warm wave of sympathy that swept through the hearts of his parishioners as they saw him,

and moved them to a passion of love and respect such as they had never known for him before. They were a mere handful in the vast crowd that day—a crowd composed of people from all parts of the country as well as from London, Shadbrook having now become as notorious as it was once secluded. The villagers were overwhelmed by the numbers of tourists who arrived from every quarter, attracted by the horrid scent of murder like bloodhounds following up a trail. The natives of the place were few indeed compared to those hordes of sensation-seekers, and they felt bewildered and astray in the throng of strangers that occupied every inch of spare standing-room in their tiny parish churchyard. On the outskirts of the crowd several press reporters had gathered, one of them being supplied with an extra large camera. This individual, an ambitious youth who had grown more pimples than hairs on his chin, displayed a feverish anxiety to obtain a photograph of the unhappy Vicar of Shadbrook as he stood, a figure of utter wretchedness, by his wife's graveside. In his mind's eye this Fleet Street fledgling saw huge Americanised headings for his journal, such as—'Clergyman in Throes of Agony,'—or 'Moving Scene at Grave of Murdered Wife,'—and considerations of courtesy, feeling, pity and forbearance were less known to him than to the uncivilised savage. The journal for which he was employed was one of those modern vulgarities which have recently brought the country's press into contempt, its chief stock-in-trade being smudgy pictures of persons and events,—the persons being unrecognisable and most of the events fictional, the whole production being of such a character as to shame even the most barbarous conceptions of art. While he was making several unsuccessful attempts to set his camera in position, Squire Hazlitt perceived him, and, indignant at the open callousness of the man, signed to the sexton, Jacob Stowey, to go and remove him. Stowey understood the implied order, but he had already experienced something of the insufferable insolence and intrusiveness of these 'noospaper touts' as he called them, and he determined to get rid of this one by a method of his own, which he had thought

of once or twice, but had not as yet put into practice. Approaching the objectionable press man, he pulled his forelock.

"Want a good shot at the Vicar in 'is day o' dole an' desolation, sir?" he said, obsequiously—"I can find ye a better place for that there machine o' yours if ye like."

The press man was delighted.

"Thanks very much!" he answered—"I'll give you half-a-crown for your trouble."

Stowey kept a face of imperturbable gravity.

"Just follow me,"—he said—"An' ye'll be able to see Parson Everton's mis'able looks an' all the funeral business straight an' clear."

He led the way, and the confiding reporter followed him through a tangle of shrubbery and down a short avenue bordered by clipped firs. The extra-size-plate camera was heavy, and Stowey volunteered to carry it for him, an offer which was readily accepted. At a sharp bend in the path, which appeared to lead up against a dead wall, Stowey paused, and looked at his companion over his shoulder.

"See there?" he said, pointing sideways—"Top o' that bank? That's a fine open view!"

The press man hastily scrambled up to the spot indicated and pushed aside a few intervening boughs. There was nothing to be seen but a small turnip field and a glimpse of the back walls of Shadbrook Church. He turned round indignantly, just in time to hear a dull heavy splash, and to see Stowey standing without the camera, silently grinning.

"You fool!" he exclaimed—"What have you done with my camera?"

"Fool yourself!" retorted Stowey, calmly—"I ain't none quite so much as I looks! This 'ere's the old well, a bit stagnant an' smelly, an' yer camera's at the bottom of it. Arter funeral's over, I'll fetch it up for five pound!"

The press man swore till his oaths pattered on the air like rain.

"You brute, do you know what you have done!" he shouted,

"You've destroyed a thing worth twenty-five guineas! I'll summons you——"

"All right! Summons away!" said Stowey—"I ain't got twenty-five guineas in the world, nor the worth of it! Talk o' summonses!—if I was the law an' the commons I'd summons such as you for comin' and tryin' to take noospaper pictures of a poor man who's seein' 'is best o' life laid in the yerth, as if that was fit for makin' world's game of! Ay, ye can go to Squire if ye like! Squire's a magistrate, an' ye can 'ave it out with *'im*! But I've 'ad it out with *you* first! An' I'm glad of it!—dormed glad of it! You an' yer lot's a reg'lar noosance to decent livin' folk, an' I wish I could a' put yerself down the well along with yer machine! I'd a' done it cheerful an' willin'!"

But the irate reporter stayed to hear no more. He rushed away to relate to his professional comrades the injurious treatment he had sustained, and to 'work up' something in the papers that should bring his name into prominence as a victim of boorish interference while engaged in doing what he called his 'duty.'

Meantime, all the last rites for the murdered Azalea were reverently performed;—and only when the coffin was about to be lowered into the ground did the bereaved husband show signs of breaking down. Then, with hands wildly outstretched and oblivious of all the people crowding about him, he cried aloud—"My wife! My wife!" in tones of such poignant anguish that tears rushed to the eyes of the strongest men, and women broke out sobbing. Squire Hazlitt gently drew his arm within his own to hold and support him, for he felt the whole body of the man tremble as in a strong ague fit. Silently and with the tenderest care, as though a child were being put to rest, the little burden of white blossoms slipped down, down into soft mother earth, and with poetic fervour and earnestness the words were pronounced: "I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me: Write, From henceforth blessed are the dead which die in the Lord; Even so, saith the Spirit, for they rest from their

labours." Then, with curious cold suddenness Everton caught himself questioning the phrase—'die in the Lord.' Had Azalea,—thoughtless, light-hearted Azalea,—died 'in the Lord'? Had she ever really considered 'the Lord' at all, except as a necessary and conventional part of the day's instruction and business? And how could she have had time to 'die in the Lord,'—swiftly and brutally murdered as she had been by a drunkard! A sickening qualm of unrest and despair came over his soul; and when the funeral was over and the crowd slowly dispersed, he found himself wondering vaguely where he was, and why people came up to him, pressed his hand, and went away again, without venturing to say a word. It was all so silent—so mysterious,—so black and terrible—this 'dying in the Lord'!

Almost before he could realise it, he had been led away through the retreating throng back to his own home, and there he stood in his own drawing-room trying to understand that Squire Hazlitt was talking to him in a very earnest and friendly manner, but he could not grasp the purport of what he was saying. Some one offered him a glass of wine,—he pushed it away with a shudder. By degrees he became vaguely aware that not only Squire Hazlitt, but several other gentlemen of the neighbouring counties were present, and that they were all expressing their deep sympathy for him in his sorrow. Some of them were total strangers to him—others he knew very slightly,—but, owing to the extreme smallness and isolation of his parish, he had never been on visiting terms with any of them, therefore their kindness now seemed to him quite extraordinary. As the dark mist that clouded his mind slowly cleared, he saw Douay standing close beside him, with Dr. Brand and his college friend Darell,—and presently the sense of Squire Hazlitt's words began to rivet his attention. And as he listened and gradually comprehended, he was roused to sudden energy by the thrill of a great fear—fear that he was going to be taken away from Shadbrook. He who had sometimes rebelled at the

monotonous weariness of the little place,—he who had wondered whether he was doomed to pass all his life in Shadbrook, now trembled with terror at the bare idea of leaving it.

"Let me persuade you,"—he heard the Squire say—"to accept another living. I shall miss you from my own part of the country, of course,—but I'm sure it would be kinder to you to remove you from the scene of the awful tragedy that has befallen you. I have no other living vacant in my own gift, but I can help you to secure an excellent one where you will be among more congenial people and surroundings, and then—perhaps—in time,—the wound will heal——"

So far Everton listened, silently,—then he answered in low and trembling accents.

"It is a wound too deep for healing!"—he said—"And I cannot leave Shadbrook,—not now!"

"Why not?" persisted the Squire—"My dear Everton, think of it! You will be insufferably lonely here,—the whole character and type of the place is opposed to *your* character and type,—besides your capabilities fit you for a wider field of action——"

"A man makes his own field of action,"—answered Everton, gaining strength as the burden of his thoughts found relief in speech—"It is my own fault that I have not made mine yet—but I will,—and in Shadbrook! It is large and wide enough to contain a great sorrow—perhaps it will also hold a great love! My dear Mr. Hazlitt, you are goodness itself, and I thank you from my heart!—but, do not urge me to accept your offer! My work is cut out for me here."

The Squire looked distressed.

"The work is not important,"—he began,—"And much of it must be distasteful——"

"All the more reason why I should do it,"—said Everton—"Besides,"—and his eyes grew dark with repressed anguish—"you surely would not ask me to leave this house where *she* lived—or the churchyard where *she* rests?—and where I pray God I may be permitted to rest beside her!"

His voice quivered,—the Squire pressed his hand sympathetically.

"There, we will speak no more of it,"—he said—"But if at any time you should change your mind, remember I am ready always to do my best for you."

Everton thanked him mutely by a glance,—and by-and-bye he and the other funeral guests departed their several ways, and the shadows of evening closed darkly in upon the desolate Vicarage. Edward Darell, who had wished very much to stay the night with his old college friend and help to comfort him in his affliction, could not do so on account of duties elsewhere, but he went away with considerable reluctance.

"Do you remain with the Vicar to-night?" he asked Sebastien Douay on leaving.

"That will be as he pleases,"—answered Douay—"I am only one poor friend at his service,—he has another and a better one in his son."

Darell smiled gravely.

"Ah! Only a child of five," he said—"The poor little fellow cannot understand his father's grief."

"Perhaps not,"—said Douay—"But that is because he is more of a Christian than any of us."

Darell looked surprised.

"More of a Christian?"—he repeated, queryingly.

"Precisely! He really *believes*. We do not."

"We?" Darell echoed the word markedly.

Douay gave a slight expressive gesture of sadness.

"Enfin! Monsieur, if I question your faith, pardon me! I personally do not believe as the little child believes, and so I am not of the Kingdom of Heaven. But I will accept your assurance that you are as the little child, and, therefore, an exception to all Churchmen, both Catholique and Protestant alike!"

Darell reddened.

"I do not say that I am as a little child in simplicity and innocence,"—he answered—"But I do say that I believe!"

Douay raised his eyebrows plaintively.

"Do you? Do you believe the poor little murdered woman we have just laid in the earth is now still alive and happy? That she is an angel in that Somewhere, which with all our creeds, we can place Nowhere? If so, she must be a very solitary and sad angel, crying her pretty eyes out for husband and baby! For that is all she cared for in this world, and for the marvels of unknown worlds to come she had no inclination! That does not make the cruelty of her end less, but rather more."

Darell listened, a trifle perplexed. He did not know in what spirit to take this little professing priest of a rival Church, who, despite the restrictions of his order, appeared to be something of a secular philosopher as well. Moreover he was one of those clergymen whom acute sorrow has not closely and personally touched; and he moved austerely within the somewhat narrow circle of a college education in theology, bordered by an equally narrow boundary of conventional custom and prejudice. He considered Douay eccentric; and, unwilling to continue a conversation which might draw him beyond his usual 'form' or out of his depth, he ended it by murmuring a few more commonplace expressions of sympathy respecting Mrs. Everton's untimely end, and then took his leave. Douay watched him go out of the Vicarage gate with a rather pained smile.

"There is a man," he thought,—"one of thousands,—who would rather not ask himself the reasons for his faith and ministration,—who declines to be honest with himself, or try to see his own soul as God sees it. The position is good in one way, but bad in another. For it is selfish! It seeks to save personal trouble—but it is not faith. To have the courage to *know* and to *do*!—that is what God demands from the truly faithful,—that is what Everton has, when he is sufficiently strong to realise it. What a gain he would be to Rome!—but he will never belong to us—never! For he will obey no Superior save God!"

Entering the study where he had left Everton sitting solitary and silent in his arm-chair, he found him looking over the

various letters and cards of condolence which lay scattered in profusion on his writing-table.

"Is it needful to do that to-day, my friend?" he asked, gently—"Would it not be better to rest?"

Everton looked at him with eyes that expressed an unutterable despair.

"I shall never rest again!"—he said—"Not in the full sense that rest implies—until the end! I must occupy every moment now,—every moment, Douay!—or I shall go mad! The old days of leisurely study are over,—there is no more pleasure in peace! I must work, and I must fight—Oh my God, yes! I must fight hard——"

He broke off—and seemed to lose himself in a sudden mist of misery.

"Yes, you will fight against your sorrow,"—said Douay, soothingly—"That will be well for you, and brave——"

"Against my sorrow?" Everton's voice rang out with a sudden bitter clearness—"No! I shall not fight against *that*, for that may be my only safety! Douay, don't you understand? I must fight against a far worse enemy than sorrow—an enemy that is tearing my soul to shreds at this very moment—the monstrous mocking devil of Doubt!"

His face was white with strongly suppressed emotion; the trouble of his mind expressed itself in his very attitude, and Douay met his anguished, appealing gaze with a tender and compassionate serenity.

"In my Church," he said, softly, "there is no room for Doubt!"

"No room? No!—and why? Because you are slaves!—not to God, but to Man!" And the pent-up storm of thought suddenly let loose poured itself out in a torrent of unpremeditated speech—"And yet—one of the slaves as you are and as you are bound to be, doubt creeps in on *your* soul as on mine!—and sometimes—only sometimes—you wonder, as I do, whether the great Creator is the lover or the hater of all that He has made! Douay, forgive me!—be patient with me!—I must speak! You are happier than I in one respect

—you have never loved——you have never married. Your Church knows so well that the ties of human affection are so much stronger than all that religion can teach, that she wisely forbids them to her priests. She sets before you Woman as a snare of the devil, instead of being what she is at her best—man's only guardian angel! Douay, if you knew—if you knew——!"

He paced the room restlessly, and Douay, answering nothing, sat down by the writing-desk, leaning one elbow on it and covering his eyes with his hand.

"If you knew," went on Everton, passionately—"what my wife was to me! Oh, she was so full of sweet unwisdom!—so foolishly loving!—such a child in her fancies, and so pure in her soul! There was nothing heroic or strong about her—she was no guide, no adviser,—but she was all sweetness—just that!—all tenderness,—the very balm for my wounds of life! You do not know,—you cannot feel—how should you?—what it is to love! There was no gross passion in such love as ours; it was a love that God Himself might have spared had He been kind! But you do not understand! You have missed it all. It is what a dying lad said to me three years ago when I tried to comfort him with the hope of Heaven—'Love is what the Lord Christ never knew—it's what He missed—love for a woman—and there He fails to be our brother in sorrow.' That's true! The priests of your Church try to follow His example,—but He was divine—priests are but men—and men cannot live without love!"

With that he checked himself abruptly, and stood rapt in a sudden cloud of thought. Douay removed his hand from his eyes and looked at him.

"Well!" he said, in a voice that trembled a little—"You have not finished. Go on!"

With a quick start Everton came out of his momentary reverie. He met Douay's steady glance, and gave a wearied, half-apologetic gesture.

"You see my condition,"—he said, more calmly—"It is one of fear and, if I may put it so, of horrible amazement

that God whom we worship as 'Our Father' can, for no cause at all, so grievously afflict His miserable creation! For half our sins are the result of ignorance which is not our fault,—and the love we are instinctively moved to feel for one another is the best part of us. Only think of it! This very day last week Azalea was alive—here, in my arms,—now, her sweet body is lying stiff and cold and lonely down in the dark earth,—and how has this cruelty been wrought? Simply because Heaven and the fates have favoured a drunkard's vengeance! A drunkard!—his diseased brain and reckless hand pitted against the pure life of an innocent woman! Is it just? Is it sport for the Almighty? Tell me! Can it be called Divine sport?—or Divine malice?"

"Richard, Richard!" exclaimed Douay, in poignant accents of grief—"I cannot hear you say these wild things, my friend! No!—for you are not wicked,—you are not blasphemous,—you are an honest and courageous man! But your soul is hanging on the cross to-day—and with our Blessed Lord Himself you cry: 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me!' My friend, my dear, dear friend, be patient! Sorrow is as necessary to the spirit as pain is to the body. Without pain, we should not appreciate health —without sorrow we should not understand joy. Surely this is the obvious? Your great and terrible grief has been visited upon you for some necessary purpose—you do not see it?—no!—but do not question the ways of the Almighty, Richard! —do not question! Say 'Thy Will be done'—with a pure intention and wait!"

He was strongly moved, and his kind eyes were full of tears. But Richard stood looking at him, coldly impassive.

"You talk of sorrow and joy, pain and health,"—he said—"as if these things could any more affect me! Do you not realise that there may be a state of mind which no emotion can touch? That the soul of a man may be so numbed by speechless agony that even physical torture would scarcely draw from him a groan, and that in the dull monotony of

the daily round there is nothing he so entirely longs for as death to end all? Do you know these lines of a modern poet?

> 'The pulse of war and passion of wonder,
> The heavens that murmur, the sounds that shine,
> The stars that sing and the loves that thunder,
> The music burning at heart like wine,
> An armed archangel whose hands raise up
> All senses mixed in the spirit's cup,
> Till flesh and spirit are molten asunder—
> These things are over and no more mine!'"

His voice, full in tone at first, dropped to a tired whisper, and he stared with a melancholy, unseeing gaze out through the window across which the curtains were not yet drawn for the night. Two or three stars sparkled in the glimmer of sky behind the panes,—the reflection of the lamp in the room flung a ray of light across the grass. The shapes of the trees were blurred in shadows,—the whole view of the garden, so lovely by day, seemed 'without form and void.' A deep sigh broke from his lips.

"I am not fit to speak to you, Douay,"—he went on, after a heavy pause—"Nor am I sufficiently myself to listen to consolation. All I can think of is that the light of my life has gone out,—and that my darling lies there all alone,"—and he pointed to the outside darkness where the tower of Shadbrook Church showed just the faintest gleam of grey-whiteness through the black clumps of trees—"Alone, —without husband or child,—alone in the grave!"—he stopped a moment,—then continued, slowly—"by God's will! And I must be alone, too, to-night, to reason with my destiny—to see if I can understand it,—so I will ask you to leave me to myself. Do not look so anxious!—you need not be afraid that I will do any violence to my own wretched being. I am not a coward. If I were, I should not want to get face to face with God's intention towards me. You are the kindest of friends, Douay!—and I thank you from

my heart for all you have been, and are to me,—but go now!—go back to your own little peaceful sanctuary where there is 'no room for doubt'—and leave me and the devils that beset me to fight it out together!"

Something singularly compelling and powerful was in his expression as he said these words, and Douay was fully conscious of the magnetism of a soul and intellect stronger than his own.

"It shall be as you wish!" he answered, simply, almost humbly—"I will come again——"

"No—let me come to you first,"—said Everton—"Give me time. For I will not come till I have conquered, or am conquered!"

With very few more words they parted. Everton, left to his own company in the house,—a house now grown so quiet since the merry laughter and light step of its fair mistress had ceased to stir the soft echoes,—stood for a few minutes listening to the complete silence. Then going noiselessly upstairs, he entered the nursery. Little Laurence was there, fast asleep. His nurse had, at Squire Hazlitt's suggestion, taken him to Shadbrook Hall for the day while his mother's funeral was in progress, and he had been brought back after it was over, rather tired and perplexed. Curled up cosily in his little bed, with one chubby arm outside the coverlet, he looked the fairer and finer image of Azalea in her fairest and sweetest moods, and Everton bent over him with a tenderness more sad than fond.

"How much better for him to die now!" he thought—"With all his beliefs untouched—his dreams unspoilt—than to live on and lose everything, even to the loss of faith in God!"

Then,—half ashamed of the bitterness that was in him—he softly withdrew, and going down again to his study resumed the almost mechanical occupation in which Douay had interrupted him,—the sorting of the letters and cards of condolence which would all have to be acknowledged. In doing this he came upon several which had not yet been opened,—one

among these, with a gold crest emblazoned on the flap of the square-shaped envelope, had a faint, cloying perfume about it that affected him with a sense of nausea. He glanced at the handwriting, which was quite unfamiliar to him, and opened it. The sickly scent grew stronger as he drew out a small creamy sheet of notepaper, also crested in gold, but bearing no address. A couple of lines were written on it:—

'I am sorry for your sorrow.

JACYNTH.'

The letter dropped from his hand to the floor, and he sat inert, lost in sombre musing.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN anything tragic or unfortunate occurs in a family it is the usual custom to shut up the house and go away for a change of air and scene. That Richard Everton did not follow this conventional line of action was a surprise to all those excellent people who expected him to do as they themselves would have done under similar circumstances. It was extraordinary, they said,—quite extraordinary—that he did not at once take a trip abroad or something of that kind. For there is a curious idea deeply implanted in the minds of society-mongers that if your heart is broken or your life wrecked, you will be all right if you go to Paris or Vienna or even New York. Home, on which you may possibly have expended your tenderest care, as well as most of your cash, is supposed to exercise no binding or soothing influence upon you. You must immediately start forth like a wandering cat and howl your griefs to the moon on foreign pantiles rather than on your own. It was, therefore, incredible, said the Everybody that is Nobody, that the Vicar of Shadbrook should remain in his Vicarage all alone after the burial of his murdered wife, and show no intention of moving, not even for so much as a week-end. Perhaps the poor man was going mad? And the gossips shook their heads and pursed their lips gloomily when they heard that he kept himself for the most part shut up within the four walls of his study reading and writing, and seeing no visitors, his only companion being his little son. The duties of the parish were attended to meanwhile by a mild young curate, who being temporarily

'unattached,' had agreed (for a consideration, of course), to act under the Vicar's orders for a fortnight, at the expiration of which time it was understood that Everton would have rallied sufficiently from the paralysing blow that had fallen upon him to undertake his usual round of work. So for two Sundays the mild young curate took the services, and preached, or rather bleated, innocuous sermons of a nature not much above the comprehension of a child of four,—sermons that sent nearly all the congregation to sleep, and moved even the mentally quiescent Mrs. Moddley to remark that she 'never did 'ear such a dull bit o' Christianity in all her mortal days.'

And Everton, for the time indifferent to the opinions expressed either by his parishioners or by the outside world, stayed in the seclusion and silence of his home, made so desolate now by the loss of her who had been its embodied joy, and watched from his study window the gradual brightening of the springtime in his garden, often wondering vaguely how it was that trees could break into leaf, and roses lift their fair buds to the sun when Azalea was dead. Yet he knew very well that Nature has neither time nor space for regret. Her lesson is ever to re-create life out of seeming death,—a lesson which is the alphabet of the Higher immortality. Gradually, very gradually, he attained sufficient strength and self-poise to be able to study his own dual being;—the body, which clamoured and wept for its lost delight—the soul, which, stripped of all comfortable and merely conventional methods of religion, stood face to face with the vast problems of life and death—life and death as variously meted out to human beings by the Creator in so apparently indifferent a manner, that we are apt to call His will 'capricious,' when it is never anything else than the fulfilment of a law whose workings we are too ignorant to perceive or to define. And in solitary meditation he remembered, how when the trouble had first begun in the parish, and his wife had gone away for a time terrified by the mere hint of a threat from Dan Kiernan, he had in the loneliness then engendered by her absence, uttered a prayer

that was like a vow:—"Command me as Thou wilt! Send me Thy Holy Orders, and even if they lead me to my death, I, ordained to serve Thee, will obey!" Were those words spoken lightly? Was he ready to draw back now? Could he not tread on the waves of sorrow and go forth to meet his Master there? Or was he like Peter who, 'when he saw the wind boisterous he was afraid,'—and, therefore, out of fear, began to sink?

"O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?"

The gentle, reproachful words rang in his ears. 'O thou of little faith!' He thought of the modern world—a world of such 'little faith' as to be scarcely any faith at all—a world that has exchanged the Gospel of Christ for that of personal convenience,—and he realised as he had often done before, that Self was the god of each man's idolatry. Then was he too a Self-worshipper? Would he imprison earth and heaven within the narrow ring of his own particular misery? 'O thou of little faith!'

Alone he struggled with himself, beset by a thousand temptations. One of these was to resign the church altogether and give up his ministry. The reason that suggested itself for this was that he was now uncertain whether he would be able to preach with conviction. If he in his own heart felt that God was cruel, how could he emphasise to others the truth of the Divine Beneficence? A man could only speak from his own experience. And experience had given him a bitter lesson which seemed wantonly wicked and unnecessary. Unnecessary? Yes. Surely, quite unnecessary. And yet—there was a latent trouble lurking in his mind which he could not express, [redacted]ague longing to take up the cross that had been thrown so ruthlessly at his feet—a cross so heavy to bear that his whole spirit recoiled and rebelled at the lifting of it. And presently his thoughts, collecting round one centre, settled on that alone, and he asked himself straightly—"Do I believe, or do I not believe? Am I sure that I accept Christ as God-in-Man and that I faithfully seek not only to interpret, but to *live* His Gospel?"

From this point he plunged into an abyss of darkness and the shadow of death, — into a No-Man's-Land of wonder and fear. A long procession of the Churches as they are organised to-day passed before his mind's eye, — Churches for the most part built up on some sort of self-constituted dogma, in which the simple teaching of the loving Saviour is almost entirely excluded. He thought of various 'old' and 'new' theologies, which set aside the divinity of Christ as a fable, and assume to teach that the poor potentiality of erring and ignorant man is all-sufficient to make of himself a god,—and he questioned whether he, a slight reed set against the wind, could be of any service to combat the growing heresy of the world. Slowly the answer was given—little by little through the midnight gloom of uncertainty came flickering gleams of light,—his spirit struggled out of the blinding storm which had beaten him down and overwhelmed him, into a pale new dawn of hope and courage,—and one night he found himself on his knees, praying humbly and fervently for pardon as well as for guidance to that strong sweet Force of Divine Love than which there is nothing sweeter or stronger, and to which no human soul ever truly appealed in vain.

And when at last the Sunday came on which he had decided to resume duty, he was ready. Ready to face his congregation —ready, with strong heart, steady pulse and firm soul. The mist of tears and fire in his brain had cleared,—he was able to review every incident calmly,—to think of his dead wife as an ever-present, unseen, but actual companion—and to even spare a noble pity for the fate of the wretched Dan Kiernan whose end had been so swift and horrible, and whose mangled body had, after the brief inquest and usual verdict in such cases, been hastily buried by the parish within whose boundaries it had been found,—all these gruesome memories now settled as it were into a kind of dark horizon where the clouds hung black and heavy without the power to rise,—but in the foreground light had begun to shine.

On the last Saturday of his self-imposed solitude, Brand called in the evening to see how he was. Everton received

him kindly, and with a quiet pathos that rather shook the good doctor from his own composure.

"And so you are going to preach to-morrow?"—he said—"Are you sure you are equal to it?"

Everton looked at him steadily.

"I think so,"—he answered—"I hope so."

Brand took a turn or two up and down the room. The window was open, and the soft evening carolling of the birds echoed sweetly on the outside air.

"How's the boy?" he enquired.

"Laurence? Very well. He is a great help to me."

Brand looked at him curiously. It was odd to hear a baby of five described as 'a great help' to his father;—if he had said 'a great comfort' that would have been understood. But 'a great help'! However——

"I don't know whether the matter will interest you,"—he went on—"But Minchin's Brewery——"

Everton raised a hand appealingly.

"*Must* I hear this?"

"There's no 'must' in the case,"—answered Brand, with a smile—"But you may as well know that Minchin is in trouble. He can get no hands to work for him."

Everton was silent.

"He has sent all over the place," continued Brand—"And despite the number of unemployed both in the counties and London, it seems there are no men to be had for his particular job. In fact, the brewery is regularly boycotted. And some one has doubled the mischief by starting a report that it's haunted."

"Haunted!" Everton echoed the word—then gave vent to a long shuddering sigh—"It might well be so!"

"So it might,"—and Brand walked to the window and looked out on the garden, now glorious with a wealth of early summer blossoms—"Though I don't believe in ghosts myself. But a large majority of humankind are very superstitious, and a rumour of that sort is very successful in keeping people away from the supposed haunted spot. And a wandering phantom,

real or imaginary, of Dan Kiernan, such as they say has been seen, is apt to create an unpleasant impression." He paused,—then went on—"No single case of drunkenness in the village has occurred since—since——"

The Vicar interrupted him by a gesture.

"I understand!" he said—"For the time being there is a revulsion against the curse of our nation! But it is only for a time. No power on earth will stop the hideous debasement of the people by drink till the people themselves realise that the brewers and distillers are coining millions of money out of the degradation, ill-health and misery of millions of souls. Then, perhaps, when they see that they, the working-classes, who should be, and are at their best, the life and blood of the nation, are made to serve as the mere foolish tools of a trade, they will awake to their true position. They will refuse to be poisoned in order that the poisoners may become capitalists at their expense."

"I see you are as strong as ever on the subject,"—said Brand—"As indeed you ought to be—and even stronger. But you must remember it is not only among the working-classes that the vice prevails. Drink is as prevalent with the gentry as with commoners. And I'm not sure that *my* profession isn't as much to blame for the evil as any."

Everton looked at him enquiringly.

"I mean the medical profession,"—went on Brand, answering the look;—"Nowadays it is quite a habit among doctors to recommend whisky to their patients instead of wine or any other beverage. Yet any scientific physician who has studied the matter and has not been 'bought over' by the trade, knows that whisky is injurious to the human system. The old days when our forefathers took too much port, were better than the present time, when thousands of men and women alike are fuddled, if not actually drunk, soon after midday, through whisky-sipping. There was something distinctly respectable about the port-wine toper,—there's nothing in the least 'high-class' in the whisky sot." He paused,—then resumed—"You may, or may not, be surprised at a story I can tell you,—at any

rate it's true! A celebrated London physician whose name is, as they say, one to conjure with, gave an eloquent lecture at one of the big institutions on the pernicious moral and physical effects of alcohol, and illustrated his sound and sensible theories by diagrams shown with magic-lantern brilliancy. A month after he was approached by a wealthy whisky distiller who offered him two thousand pounds to write a book on the tonic and restorative powers of whisky. Need I explain that the learned medico put his conscience in his pocket, went back on his own arguments, took the two thousand pounds, wrote the required volume, and is now looked upon as a staunch supporter of the spirit trade? The same thing is done daily on a smaller scale with doctors of less distinction."

Everton gave a wearied gesture of sorrowful contempt.

"I am not surprised!"—he said—"Everything is done nowadays through influence, or money,—and even the honour of kings can be purchased for sufficient millions! The times we live in are corrupt,—our civilisation is an over-ripe fruit rotting to its fall. What is falsely called 'rationalism,' or an 'Age of Reason,' has always accompanied national decline. It occurred in Greece and in Rome—it is upon us now in England. It is a sure symptom that the days of noble ideals and enthusiasms are past, and that man's intellect has attained to such a fatal height of pure egoism that he will accept nothing greater, nothing higher than his own opinion. Never was there more urgent need of faith and prayer than now!"

Brand fixed a straight and penetrating glance upon him.

"You still believe in faith and prayer?" he said.

Everton met his eyes fully and calmly.

"With all my soul!"

The worthy 'Dr. Harry' gave a short sigh of relief.

"I am glad you have come out of the darkness,"—he said—"I thought—I feared——"

"That I might prove a coward!" and Everton's face grew warm with suppressed feeling—"To be candid with you, I feared the same! Such sorrow as mine pushes the brain to the verge of madness—and in mad moments all good things reel

away from one—even God! But no *sane* man doubts his Creator, and—as you say—I have come out of the darkness!"

A silence more eloquent than speech fell between them,—and when they spoke again it was on ordinary topics connected with the village and its inhabitants. But when Brand left the Vicar that night he knew there was no fear of his being unable to preach the next morning. The man was full of strength, dignity and resolve, and his broken heart and ruined happiness had made of him a force to be reckoned with.

Not only in Shadbrook itself, but through all the neighbouring parishes, the news soon flew that Everton was to preach that Sunday;—'only a fortnight after the burial of his poor little wife!' exclaimed the county gossips;—who would believe that a man, and a clergyman too, could be so callous! Actually to do his duty in that barefaced manner, so soon after the woman he 'professed' to love so much, had met with such a dreadful end! Ah, men, men! They had no feeling—really none! Here was a Christian minister who, instead of throwing up his work and going away to mourn decently amid the distractions of a foreign spa for six months, had actually stayed on in his own house, and was now going to take the services and preach as usual, just two weeks after the terrible tragedy which had devastated his home, almost as if nothing had happened! It was quite incredible!

And a crowd, such as had never been seen in the whole neighbourhood, swarmed up and tried to cram itself into the limited space of Shadbrook Church, packing the ancient little building to overflowing long before eleven, each person a-tiptoe with eagerness to catch the first glimpse of the Vicar when he made his reappearance. This general feeling of excitement was in a sense morbid, and of the same type as that which in the days of the Inquisition fired the minds of the torturers when they had a man on the rack,—but underlying all surface interest there was a deeper motive which was half unconscious,—the unspoken, almost unthought desire to know, to see, and to hear whether the victim of a loss so personal, so unmerited and so cruel, could

stand up in the pulpit, and with unshaken voice and steadfast eye proclaim his faith in the goodness and mercy of God. Even old 'Mortar' Pike, still alive, though now unable to walk, had himself wheeled in a chair as far as the church gates in order to take his feeble part in the unusual stir,—and when the bell slowly tolled the first chime of eleven o'clock, and the organist, 'all of a shake,' as he himself expressed it, began the opening bars of a simple voluntary, the silence of the closely-pressed congregation was so intense that the faintest rustle of the ivy that clung round the belfry tower outside could be heard distinctly within the building. Softly and tremblingly the organ music crept through the hushed air, like a whisper of the sea or the ripple of a stream,—and the people sat listening, waiting, and wondering in a tense condition of strained expectation. Then,—with one accord they rose as the Vicar entered; and all eyes were turned on the tall slim figure in its white surplice, and the pale, delicately-featured face, with its look of devout patience and unspeakable pathos, which expressed so much sorrow bravely borne,—and men and women alike shed tears at the first tones of the gentle deep voice as it uttered the familiar opening sentence:—"When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive." Then came a brief pause,—and the musical accents trembled ever so slightly on the next words chosen:—

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise!"

And when people sank on their knees to join in the general confession, sounds of suppressed sobbing mingled with the murmured prayer. Many wept heartily, and were not ashamed of the weakness,—for as Mrs. Moddley afterwards remarked to her neighbours:—"to see Parson Everton looking as pale as a ghost, and as patient as a saint carved out o' marble, was enough to break down the 'ardest feelins, which some folks feelins was 'arder than flints as the Lord very well know'd."

Conscious of the deep sympathy that flowed out to him from his congregation, and hearing every now and again the

stifled weeping of some of the women and children, Everton was at many a moment shaken from his enforced composure, but he carried the service bravely through, and only when he mounted the pulpit and looked down on the unusual crowd of faces below him,—many faces quite strange to him, among others quite familiar, all expressing an eager curiosity as well as pity—did he feel a sudden sick terror of himself—a dread lest his powers should fail him at the last moment. He saw the place where Azalea used to sit,—where her golden hair had caught the light from a side window and had gleamed like a web of the sunshine itself,—where her loving and lovely blue eyes had glanced up at him in shy reverence as he had given out the text of his sermon;—the bench was eloquently empty; and though the congregation was inconveniently crowded, no one had trespassed upon its vacancy. He leaned both hands heavily upon the velvet cushion in front of him and closed his eyes with an inward prayer for strength,—his heart beat thickly, and the blood surged noisily in his ears,—his throat and lips grew dry and burning, and he wondered whether he could so much as utter another word. Yet to all appearance he was perfectly self-possessed, and when at last he essayed to speak, his voice, to his own astonishment, rang out with a thrilling clearness as he gave his text from the eighth chapter of St. John:

"Because I tell you the truth you believe Me not."

With the very pronouncing of these words the flood-gates of long-pent-up thoughts were opened, and a tide of eloquence such as the parishioners of Shadbrook had never heard or dreamed of, came pouring from his lips,—such fiery eloquence as might have inspired an early apostle for whom neither thrones, principalities nor powers existed, but only the one Supreme God. He spoke of the pitiful egoism of modern thought,—of the apathy of the world to the gradual widening of the breach between itself and the Message Divine,—he drew a powerful and vivid picture of humanity left without the saving grace of the Christ Ideal;—and—pointing out the beautiful obedience to law displayed by the natural creation,

he entered into a passionate pleading for all things good and tender and true, between man and his brother man. Such sentences as might have graced the pages of Novalis came to him with an ease and spontaneity that would have distinguished the finest of born orators, and yet he was himself unconscious that he was saying anything out of the usual commonplace run of orthodoxy. He did not realise that the long, quiet six years of his married life had, because they were happy and full of personal satisfaction, been unproductive,—or that the very sense of the settled security he had felt in his home had effectually kept his thoughts chained up as in a prison-house; —nor would he have admitted, even if it had been suggested, that intellectual growth and advancement are seldom, if ever, associated with purely domestic comfort and tranquillity. Certainly the Spirit moved him as it had often moved him to write though never to speak,—and his listeners hung on his every word, intent, enrapt, amazed and fascinated,—hushed into a stillness so intense that not even the fold of a woman's garment stirred. Presently he came to a pause. With a straight unfaltering regard he looked down upon the upturned wondering faces, and his voice changed to a softer and sadder tone.

"And now,"—he said—"now, in conclusion, I venture to address you more personally than generally,—not as your Vicar only, but as your friend and neighbour, who is ordained to work with you, suffer with you, and if it so please God, to live and die with you. It is possible that, so far, my administration of this parish has been something of a failure, —I am quite sure I have made many mistakes,—and some of you I may have offended, while others I may not have understood; but before you go out of church this morning, I will ask you to believe that whatever I have done has been done out of honest love and care for you, and because I thought my duty lay in doing it. What I have left undone is through some fault in myself which is not intentional and which I shall strive to amend—for I want,"—he paused again—then went on, bravely—"I want you

to trust me! I want you to understand that there is no selfish, narrow, or puritanical motive in my heart when I try to keep down the besetting evil of this place—the accursed Drink. I have nothing to gain by it. On the contrary, I have much to lose. If I, from this pulpit, could tell you vice was virtue, and that men when they are drunk are more to be respected than men when they are sober, I should win far more commendation from what are called 'local authorities' than I do when I declare to you that the health of your bodies is ruined and the safety of your souls endangered by drink, and that nothing can alter the fact. It is not for me to speak concerning the dark cloud of horror that has swept over this peaceful-seeming little village within the last three weeks,—for I am he on whom the storm has broken, and I must bear it all alone. But one thing I very earnestly desire to say, and it is, that I fasten no blame on the memory of the evil-doer of the deed that has left me desolate,—for he never was and never could be considered as fully responsible for his actions. One might as well blame a wild beast for ravaging the forest to seek what it could devour. A man, drugged by poison, which the laws of the realm most wickedly allow to be sold to him as pure and wholesome liquor, cannot be held as personally guilty of any crime,—and therefore, I have only to say that even as God has punished the unhappy sinner, so may God forgive him! And so may God equally forgive all sinners who are led astray by sinners worse than themselves! For herein is our most terrible responsibility in this world,—it lies not so much in the wrong that we ourselves do, but the wrong we make others do. If I commit a sin I must learn the enormity of my own wickedness, and abide by my own punishment; but if I drag others into my sin, then my sinning is a hundredfold augmented, because I force or persuade others into a punishment which I alone should have received. I am not seeking to draw any personal inference from this, or to drive any point too closely home. What I wish you to feel and to know is, that I humbly and devoutly wish to be your friend in all things—in matters small as well as great,—that I desire to sink myself and the particular

misery of my own life entirely out of sight, and so comport myself among you that you may have no cause to reproach my ministry. I tell my men parishioners here plainly that, if, in spite of all they know, and all they must surely realise respecting the evils of drink, they still choose to help make large fortunes for those who brew and distil poison for their undoing, I shall not reprove or attempt to control them. I shall merely try to help them when they are in sickness and trouble. For this is a 'free' country,—and no amount of legislation will alter the mind of the free-willed man who chooses Drink as his career. I tell the women that if it is their pleasure to see their homes laid waste, and their young children brought up to believe that the chief object of existence is to drink away every penny that husbands and fathers earn, I shall remain passive, though sorrowful, and do no more than offer consolation when it is needed. In brief, I shall not 'interfere' with you,—save to rescue and comfort when I can. But I shall pray,"—

Here he waited a moment, gathering all his strength together for his concluding words—

"I shall pray God daily and nightly that He may see fit in His wonder-working wisdom to remove the temptations to sin that abound in this neighbourhood, and that He will give you—you yourselves,—the sound sense and perception to understand and to know the measure of the physical and moral disaster which the national scourge of Drink brings on you and on your children,—ay, even on those unborn!—and if I personally am afflicted,—if I personally am struck at and my life's joy swept away in one day through the working and result of this very curse among you, I claim from Almighty Justice no vengeance for my grief and desolation, except to see you, my little flock, saved!"

And in the passion of the moment he stretched out his hands with an eloquent gesture as though he would have gathered the whole congregation into some heavenly haven of shelter and peace.

"For you only I will ask—that God may give you to me!

That God may show me how to make you happy in your labours and your lives,—that He may help me to teach your children the sweet unspeakable content that is found in clean, simple and temperate ways,—and that the tears I have shed, and the despair I have known, may be acceptable to Him as a poor sacrifice of love on my part, so that if He sees it good and fitting, you may receive more comfort from me, left comfortless. For I am now detached from all desire in this world for myself;—I have finished with hope,—I have done with delight; what strength I have,—what brain I have, what heart I have—all are yours!—and my sole effort from henceforth must be and shall be, to help you, if I may, no matter how feebly and inadequately, a little further on the road towards Heaven! If you will not come with me, I cannot force you,—my only persuasion must be through 'the love of Christ which constraineth us.' Give me your prayers, my friends, that I may not fail! Give me your trust!"

He ceased. His hands were still extended above the people, while they, gazing up at him in mingled wonder and awe, saw his face so transfigured by the light of his soul's inspiration, that it seemed to have gained an almost supernatural beauty. Then,—as he,' with a gentle solemnity, pronounced the benediction, they sank low on their knees, and for several minutes remained absorbed in prayer, many of them weeping audibly.

When at last they rose to disperse, they did so in a strange, unusual silence,—men walked out with carefully hushed steps, and women moved softly, making no secret of their tears as they filed slowly past the freshly-laid turf that covered Azalea's small grave, where many wreaths and posies, newly gathered by the children of the village, lay in lovely profusion. Strangers paused in the churchyard, anxious to see the Vicar as he came out, but their curiosity was not gratified, as he had a private way of his own from the vestry to the Vicarage through the back of his garden, and of that he availed himself. Squire Hazlitt, who, in the usual 'Riviera

season' absence of his wife and family, had made a point of coming back from Paris to attend the first service taken by Everton since his terrible bereavement, stood in the church porch waiting for his carriage, and made no attempt to disguise the fact that he was blowing his nose and wiping his eyes vigorously,—for, as he afterwards expressed it, he had been quite 'bowled over' by the pathos and simplicity of the Vicar's appeal to his parishioners. To him, one of the wandering tourists, a young man of rather refined appearance, ventured to address the remark—

"You have a wonderful preacher in this out-of-the-way place, sir!"

The Squire looked at him chillingly, without reply.

"I beg your pardon!" and the young man coloured a little as he realised that this county magnate evidently considered he was taking a liberty in addressing him—"But—I am reporting this sermon for the press,—and I thought you might possibly be interested—you are Mr. Hazlitt?"

"I am."

"Then as the patron of the living, you must naturally feel proud of the present Vicar? Of course, what he has said to-day is bound to make him famous."

"Indeed!" And the Squire looked grimly dubious. "What use will that be to him?"

The journalist smiled deprecatingly.

"Surely fame is often useful? Especially to a preacher!"

"You may think so—I don't!" Here the Squire drove his walking-stick into the ground by way of pointing an emphasis to his words—"Fame isn't understood as fame in these days. If the world makes much of a man because he's clever, you journalists are the first to run him down and say he's 'advertising himself.' The managers of modern journalism always suspect some unworthy motive behind the work of every good intellect. They'd have called Christ Himself a 'self-advertiser,' if He had appeared in this century. Richard Everton was always a fine preacher, but it has taken no less than the murder of his wife for a discerning press to find it out!"

With that the old gentleman got into his carriage which had just come up, and drove away.

The journalist was a trifle taken aback. He looked round and saw that three or four men of the farmer type had been lingering near and had heard the conversation.

"Rather a plain-speaking old chap, your Squire!" he said, carelessly. One of the men gave a slow smile.

"We'se all plain-speakin' on the Cotswolds,"—he replied—"An' Squire ain't nowt ahint us. Be ye goin' to put parson's sermon i' the papers, mister?"

"I think so."

"Then the whole world'll see it, I s'pose?"

"Well!" and the young press man smiled condescendingly, "Perhaps not the whole world, but a very great portion of it. Our circulation is six times as large as that of any other daily paper."

At this all the men burst into a laugh.

"That's right! Keep up the advertisement! You earn your money while you may, mister! Go it strong!"

And with another guffaw of laughter they strolled off. For a moment disconcerted, the journalist looked puzzled and half angry,—then he laughed too.

"Evidently these chaps don't believe in advertised sales,"—he said—"I wonder if they at all represent the general feeling of the rustic population?"

He went on his way considering whether he should make an attempt to see the Vicar personally, and get from him a few notes of what he had said that morning, in order to compare them with his own shorthand memoranda,—but a certain latent sense of good feeling held him back from this intention, as well as the more practical idea, which was well-nigh a certainty, that if he did succeed in obtaining an interview, Everton would probably forbid any publication of his sermon at all. And this would completely frustrate his hopes, for he had been commissioned by his editor-in-chief to use extra special care in getting a good report, as Mrs. Nordstein, wife of one of the several Jew shareholders in his newspaper, had

expressed herself as curious to know what the Vicar of Shadbrook had to say to his parishioners after the terrible tragedy that had made havoc of his happiness, and it was understood that if he reported the proceedings faithfully, it would be to his advantage. Indeed, he was himself aware of that—for Mrs. Nordstein ruled the whole business of the office, socially and morally,—what she wished was done,—what she objected to was not done. The dream of the young journalist was to get an invitation to one of Mrs. Nordstein's 'At Homes,' where he might gaze critically and unreproved upon the charms of 'the most beautiful woman of her day,' as she was always carefully styled by the special newspaper on which he earned a precarious living. What interest she had in Shadbrook or its Vicar he could not imagine, nor did he trouble to enquire,—it was enough for him to know that if her expressed wishes were satisfactorily carried out, it was possible that he might stand in better favour with his editor.

The rest of that Sunday passed quietly away, unmarked save for one unusual incident, which was, that though both public-houses in Shadbrook were opened after church time they had no customers. The village appeared to have retired within itself and closed its doors against all intruders. The sunlight lay in broad warm patches over the hills and fields,—there was a joyous singing of birds everywhere, and no discordant sounds or sights marred the peaceful beauty of the day. There was an afternoon service at the church, but Everton entrusted this and the duties of the Sunday school to his temporary assistant, the mild young curate before mentioned, for he found himself more over-wrought than he had imagined would be possible after his effort of the morning. He was also a little troubled in his own mind, questioning whether after all he had done well in making a direct appeal to his congregation. It is dangerous to be too honest and straightforward in this world. If you go straight to a given point, you are sure to brush up against people making for the same place round sly corners, and if you chance to knock down these 'dodgers' they never forgive you. Yet in his

innermost conscience, Everton did not actually regret having spoken as his heart had dictated. It might be a mistake, or it might not, from a conventional point of view,—but then, what he sought most to fight against was this very 'conventionalism,' which takes all the warmth of humanity out of religion and makes it a mere dead formula. He had resolved to combat it in every possible way,—and he had made a beginning. Think as he would, argue with himself as he would, there was something within his soul that burned like a consuming fire—something that clamoured for utterance and that would be bound to utter itself before long, even if he died for it!

"I cannot,"—he half whispered to the silence—"I cannot look on at the growing apathy and atheism of the world and offer no protest! I must declare the message of Christ anew, even if the people of this generation have come to think it such an old, old message that they are tired of hearing it. For if I do not speak as I feel I am commanded to speak, I am but a trader in the Gospel, not a minister of its truth."

This expression 'trader in the Gospel' which had leaped involuntarily into his brain, gave him a moment's pause. Was it not all a question of 'trade'? The Pope and his myrmidons,—was not the keeping up of all the magnificent ritual of Rome more a matter of money than anything else? And the Church of England? Did not every ambitious clergyman hope for a 'rich' living?—for a 'comfortable' settlement in material rather than spiritual things? And were methods of work which involved personal considerations of convenience and well-being, the methods enjoined by Christ? On the contrary, they were directly opposed to His teaching.

"We are all on the wrong road," he thought, sorrowfully—"And the difficulty before us is to struggle back through the labyrinth we have ourselves made, to the right one. There must be bolder, more direct and fearless teaching; our human 'theologies' are misleading clouds which veil the face of Christ!"

Next day Sebastien Douay came to see him.

"I could not wait for you any longer,"—said the little priest,

pressing his hand warmly—"You told me you would come to me when you were conquered, or had conquered. Well!—the fight is over—you are the victor! I give you the laurel! But you have trampled *me* in the battle, my friend!—no matter!"

"Trampled *you*?" echoed Everton, amazed—"Why, what do you mean?"

"Do you not see? Where is my mission Catholique? Where do I make my converts? What converts are there to make? There are two or three—but there will be no more,—not if you go on preaching as you preached yesterday! You will draw all the people—all!" He laughed a little—then sighed. "Ah well! I will report progress to my superiors! I will tell them there is a real preacher here in the Cotswold district—a real one—not a sham! And so long as he speaks of Christ there will be no chance for St Peter!"

"But, my dear good friend," said Everton, touched and perplexed by his whimsically plaintive manner—"What difference can it make to you? I said nothing in my sermon yesterday that could appeal to any person outside Shadbrook."

"Outside Shadbrook there are several wider Shadbrooks!" and Douay gave an expressive gesture—"But it is possible you have not seen the morning's papers?"

"The morning's papers? No."

"Ah! That explains it! And whether you will care for it or not is a question, but your sermon is printed in them all,—and you are, for the time being, famous! Yes, my poor dear friend!—you are no longer the obscure scholar, peacefully preaching to a handful of villagers—your voice is ringing through the world!"

"But how?"—and the Vicar looked as he felt, pained and bewildered—"God knows I have had enough of journalism!—and yesterday I spoke to no one—I gave no report——"

"What you do not give the reporters take,"—said Douay—"and however it has happened, it is done! You are an acknowledged personage! And Shadbrook is proud! Shadbrook is reading all its halfpenny dailies this morning, and to see its Vicar named as a great and rising man, makes it feel

great and rising itself. But for me—alas! My poor little tin chapelle will be empty! *One* honest Christian minister is so rare that he is enough to command a large district! Two are not needed! You see now, my friend, where your great Church of England stands or falls? On its ordained ministers! If every preacher belonging to the country's national faith spoke to the people as you have spoken, from his heart,—or let us say, if every preacher *had* a heart to speak from, there would be no weakening, but rather strengthening,—and the Holy Father would lose all his English revenues! It is only the lukewarmness and laxity of your Church's *own* conduct that opens the door to Rome!"

CHAPTER XVII

AFTER his sudden, almost involuntary outpouring of unpremeditated eloquence, which, addressed only to the parishioners of Shadbrook, had reached so wide an audience that it had in very truth made him famous, Richard Everton found himself snatched up, as it were, by masterful hands invisible and plunged into a vortex of work. The days rushed by as they had never rushed before,—for domestic happiness accompanied by monotonous tranquillity, is apt to make time drag the pace with lame and leaden feet. Nothing is so slow as the complete equanimity of persons and surroundings,—it is the existence of the carefully cultured vegetable untroubled by so much as a slug. When life is hurled into battle, confronted by enemies, tossed and driven between the rival forces of heaven and hell, then only is it life indeed,—then only do the formerly lagging hours take to themselves light wings as on the heels of Mercury, and fly with a rushing speed and a flame of glorious vitality that knows no pause and no fatigue. Everton, living through the daily routine of a quiet country cleric, devoted to his wife and child, and seeing very little for himself beyond the enchanted circle of his own home made radiant by the pretty Azalea's gaiety and charm, had never thoroughly realised that his very happiness was narrowing his outlook and cramping his energies, though he was vaguely conscious that something was lacking to his full ability, but what it was he had never entirely determined. Now that the twin furies of Death and Despair had stormed his paradise, they had left its gates open,—and the world rushed in,—the

tired, doubting, suffering, angry world, full of its own sorrows, its own disappointments, its own ambitions,—a world that cried to him:—"You, O man, who continue to preach of faith and hope in the midst of desolation and anguish, give me some of the comfort you give to yourself! Lo, I, too, am drunken and despairing and murderous!—I, too, have loved and lost,—I, too, have laid my beloved ones in the worm-infested earth,—I, too, have blasphemed God and shrieked at Him: 'Where art Thou!' Tell me why I should not weep—why I should not rage and complain!—teach me, if you can, why I should be patient,—why I must endure unto the end that I may be saved! If you are not liar, humbug, pharisee, hypocrite, as so many of my teachers and preachers have been, and *are*, help me as you help yourself, for I need all the help that you can give!"

And he, the newly-aroused soul bent on the serving of Christ, heard and answered. There was no moment of time lost with him. Sunday after Sunday his little church was crowded, — Sunday after Sunday the 'fiery tongues' that descended at the first Pentecost, seemed alike to descend upon him, for he uttered such fearless, passionate, straight truths concerning the heresies and growing wickedness of the present so-called 'civilisation' which he prophesied was rapidly drawing to its climax and fall, and conveyed them to his hearers in words and sentences of such rich and powerful eloquence, that they clung to the memory and sank deep into the mind. All through that summer, hundreds had to be turned away from the church because there was not even standing room. Extra services were held, and once every fortnight Everton preached what he called a 'secular sermon' in the school-room, which proved to be such an attraction that people gathered from far and near to hear him, and would have gladly paid money for their seats if he would have accepted it, but he would not. And so, instead of gold and silver, they brought by way of tribute and thank-offering, the loveliest flowers to lay on his murdered wife's grave, which was now marked by a plain white marble cross, laid recumbent on the ground, though

raised just enough to allow the sun to reflect and shape its shadow on the grass. The memory of Azalea had become hallowed by the pity and remorse of the villagers, and they took a pride in making the place where her mortal remains were buried, look like a beautiful little fairy field of blossom. The Vicar noted their care and tenderness, but said nothing, not even in thanks. He felt it sorely that they had misunderstood the poor little woman when she was alive,—this strewing of roses and lilies on her grave was the expression of a regret that came too late.

Twelve months flew by with unprecedented rapidity so far as Everton himself was concerned, and the changes wrought in Shadbrook during that space of time were almost as amazing as the swiftly spreading fame of his preaching. For one thing, Minchin's Brewery had received its death-blow. By twos and threes the shareholders withdrew themselves and their cash from the concern,—labour could only be obtained intermittently, and never for long periods, as the rumour that the 'yard' was haunted had, like all such rumours, become so emphasised by constant repetition that it was now generally accepted as a fact. The horrible ghost of Dan Kiernan, mangled and bleeding, had been seen wandering among the piled-up beer-casks, and bending over the vats,—at least so the different 'hands,' casually employed from different neighbourhoods, were ready to say and to swear, both in and out of their 'cups.' And from the brewery the 'phantom' flavour seemed to have reached the beer,—for orders grew less and less, and even Mr. Topper of the 'Stag and Crow' public-house one day declared in a burst of confidence that 'Minchin's Fourpenny' wasn't what it used to be.

"The fact is, I can't sell it,"—he said—"And I've told Minchin so. Something's got to be done, or we'll have to shut up shop. Custom's falling off cruel!"

This was a fact. The Shadbrook working-men, farm-hands and agricultural labourers alike, had begun to fight shy of their 'publics.' Some of them kept up the habit of taking a daily glass at one or other of the convenient bars—but it was only a

glass and not, as formerly, several glasses. The offer of so much 'free beer' in the twenty-four hours tempted no one to work at the brewery,—and when the Vicar one day quietly announced the opening of a small gymnasium and billiard-room in the village, which, with the ready assistance of Squire Hazlitt, he had managed to make out of two dismantled but picturesque old cottages turned into one building, the young men gladly flocked there of an evening and gave themselves up to wholesome sports and exercises, and were well content with the excellent coffee and mild tobacco provided for their refreshment during the games. Here would come old 'Mortar' Pike in his wheeled chair, to witness the exhibition of such feats of strength as he had once been famous for, and in his feeble, wheezy voice he would comment upon and criticise the falling-off of ability and suppleness among the youth of the present day.

"Lord, Lord!" he would pipe, querulously—"To see me give a turn at wrestlin' would a' done yer 'art good!—there worn't no faddy nonsense about *me*—I worn't afeard o' my own fist, no, nor nobuddy else's fist naythe r! But you lads is all like cheepin' chickabiddies creepin' out of a shell!—you'll never make such men as used to be on the Cotswolds—no, nor you'll never see a man like me no more!—for the Lord 'll be pleased to keep me 'bove ground till I'm a 'underd—ay! and past, mebbe!—an' there ain't one among ye as'll get to *that* last mile-post—mark my wurrd!"

Then the lads of the village would laugh and humour him, and persuade him to tell them stories of the 'long, long ago,' which he was very willing to do, being childishly gratified to have such an audience ready to listen to him. And the evenings would sometimes finish up with part-singing, for many of the young fellows had good voices and a taste for music,—so that the time passed in so much pleasant sociability and entertainment that not one of the men who were thus harmlessly enjoying themselves thought of the public-house or manifested the least desire to go thither. Naturally these friendly gatherings of the able-bodied male population of Shadbrook for 'sports and exercises' were an opposing influence to the sale

of Minchin's liquors in the village, and in a way helped to give the toppling brewery an extra roll downhill. Nevertheless, though the business was daily and hourly becoming more insecure, Mr. and Mrs. Minchin presented an unmoved, not to say arrogant front to the world, almost as if every one did not know that their 'Company' paid no dividends. They had reduced their expenses considerably, had sold their horses, and went on foot instead of in carriages,—while their meanness to their domestics and tradespeople had from casual murmurings passed into a local proverb. 'Don't *Minchin* it' had become the ordinary phrase used on market-days between buyers and sellers, when the former were inclined to drive too close and hard a bargain, and 'as mean as Minchin' expressed the last possible qualification of stinginess, and bade fair to remain in the language as one of those proverbial 'colloquialisms' which occasionally crop up to perplex the antiquarian. The feud between themselves and the Vicar of Shadbrook was far more bitter now, than when poor, pretty little Azalea had been alive to infuriate the spiteful Mrs. Minchin by her bright charm of face and figure, and her superior taste in dress,—but they had to chew the unsavoury cud of envy and hatred in secret, inasmuch as from end to end of the whole neighbourhood Everton had secured the position of a ruling power. Every one came to seek his advice, or profit by his counsel,—and he who had imagined that with the death of the one woman he had loved his life would have been empty and desolate, with a desolation as horrible as that of a lonely hell, found it filled in full measure, overflowing and running over with so many new labours and interests that he had no time to think of himself or his sorrows at all.

And with these new labours and interests a strange new passion sprang up in his soul,—a love for Azalea dead, even deeper than that he had cherished for her when living. All the small weaknesses, frivolities and inconsistencies of her nature had dropped from his memory of her, and had left him to think of her as some grand sweet angel, ever near to him to guide and to console. So much indeed had he sanctified his earthly

love into a heavenly one that it was as if the man's inner self had become wedded to some spirit of unseen but eternal beauty. By day he worked in the quiet consciousness that she, his beloved, worked with him,—at night he felt her close presence about him like a warm enfolding radiance,—and this persistent clinging to something indefinitely pure and sweet and everlasting—something which he could not shape even in his imagination, but which, nevertheless, truly existed for him, made him almost as much of a poet and dreamer as he was a thinker and preacher. Azalea herself had never thought so far as to consider the possibility of keeping her husband s love after death, nor had she ever exacted from him any promises of lifelong fidelity, for among the lightly fluttering thoughts that had occasionally hovered through her little brain had been the uncomfortable one that 'men were deceivers ever.' Had she been told that this one man,—her own simple, 'prosy' undemonstrative 'Dick,' had such a deep store of romance in his nature as to be capable of sanctifying his life to her memory, she would never have believed it.

Nevertheless, so it truly was,—and as many a monk in olden days paid devotion to some one particular saint who was counted second to the Almighty in the records of his mind, so Richard Everton laid all his endeavours and undertakings on the shrine of his dead love,—the wife and mother who had been so cruelly snatched away from him in the very blossoming time of her womanhood. And so unwearying was he in well-doing and so swift was the growth of his influence, not only in his own parish, but throughout the whole neighbourhood and far beyond it, that the days scudded by like full-sailed ships before a fair wind, especially as he had undertaken the whole business of educating his little son Laurence, and fitting him for entry into Winchester school. The boy was remarkably apt and quick to learn ;—moreover he showed a keen delight in his studies, and was never so happy as when he was 'preparing' his lessons. Books were his passion,—and yet with all his love of reading and his fondness for asking questions of a nature somewhat puzzling to his elders, he was a thorough child, full of fun and fond of games.

Sometimes his father regretted that there were no children in the neighbourhood of his own class and age with whom he could associate, but Laurence himself did not seem to feel the lack of companions. He rather liked being alone,—he was perfectly healthy and happy, and had all sorts of ways of inventing amusements which suited his own particular taste and turn of mind. Sebastien Douay, always cheery, always kindly, despite the fact that his 'tin chapelle' now remained, as he had prophesied, deplorably empty, and that his 'mission Catholique' among the benighted folk of the district made no progress, did his genial best to become a child himself in order to entertain the little fellow;—he was always bringing him new toys, pictures, and wondrous modern 'scientific' games, all of which Laurence gratefully accepted, and considered, till he had found them out and knew their composition by heart, when he put them away with an ineffable air of quiet boredom. He was very fond of Douay, but apparently regarded him as a harmless little man who must be humoured rather than honoured.

"I wish," he said one day, very gravely,—"I wish you would talk to me about what you know and feel yourself, instead of trying to play with me."

Douay's round eyes opened surprisedly.

"Talk to you about what I know and feel myself?" he echoed.

"Yes,"—and Laurence smiled at him encouragingly—"Because you're a man, and you can tell me what it is like to be a man. From all I see, I should think it must be very troublesome. I would rather be a little boy."

"Ma foi!" sighed Douay, with a comical shrug of his shoulders—"So would I!"

At this Laurence laughed so heartily that Douay was delighted.

"Ah, that is what I like to hear!" he exclaimed—"You should laugh often like that, my child!—it is good for you!"

"It's not good for me to laugh when there's nothing to laugh at,"—said Laurence, with a quaint upward look at him—"I should be like the silly boy in the village who laughed him-

self into a fit the other day because a spider dropped on his head. But it would make any one laugh, you know, to think of *you* as a little boy!"

"Would it?" and 'Father' Douay rubbed his nose meditatively—"Laurence, mon petit, how old are you?"

"Six. Going on for seven,"—replied Laurence, promptly.

"You are sure you are not sixty, going on for seventy?" and Douay put on a catechising air—"You have made no mistake?"

Laurence gave him a look of quiet scorn.

"You think that's funny,"—he observed—"I wish you wouldn't be funny."

Douay collapsed after this, and later on asked Everton whether the boy ought not to go to a preparatory school?

"He's too young;—too little altogether,"—said Everton—"Besides, I can prepare him for Winchester myself."

Douay spread out his hands resignedly.

"You must do with your own child as you please, my friend! But take care! He will be either a misanthrope or a genius!"

Everton smiled.

"You think that possible? A genius?"

"Quite possible! But consider! What do the modern wise men say of genius? That it is insanity! Reflect upon that, good Richard! All the great thinkers, musicians, artists, poets and dreamers who have made the world rich in art and thought were, and are, madmen and madwomen—according to the latest science! Only the Pig-man is sane;—the Pig-man who grunts over his own trough of hog-wash! The God-man, ay, even our Blessed Lord Himself, is classed nowadays among the insane! Would you have your son a lunatic?"

Everton looked amused.

"You talk to entertain yourself, my dear Douay," he said, gently,—"as you often do. You know that the conflicting opinions of scientists on life and its wonders have no weight with me; nor do I care for modern criticism on any form of art. I would have my boy follow the bent of his own best

nature, and if he should prove, as you say, a 'genius,' I shall not complain. There are very few of the type!"

That afternoon he received a letter from a certain Bishop more noted for social amenities than religious discipline, inviting him to preach in one of the largest and most fashionable churches of the West End of London, on behalf of a great scheme of charity which was being organised by such among the 'Upper Ten' as were really sincerely disposed to do good, and including, of course, those who sought or needed a special advertisement through alms-giving. It was a 'noble cause,' wrote the Bishop,—and he was certain from what he had heard and read of Mr. Everton's preaching, that no one could be found to plead it with more eloquence. Would he come Sunday fortnight? He, the Bishop, would arrange that one at least of the numerous lesser scions of Royalty should be present to hear the sermon. Everton smiled at this with a faint contempt for the Bishop's touch of snobbishness,—and he thought over the proposal for some hours before answering it. Finally, however, he wrote accepting it. Deep in his innermost soul there lurked a strong desire to make a trial of his powers in London, and he could not bring himself to throw away the offered opportunity. Moreover, there happened to be a clerical friend of his own residing near Shadbrook who had often expressed a wish to preach in Shadbrook Church,—if he went to London this would give his friend the opportunity of taking the service during his absence.

Things arranged themselves in the usual open-door fashion which so often curiously attends a chain of circumstances that are destined to affect one's life providentially or adversely—and the intervening fortnight sped on so rapidly that almost before he knew how it had flown, he found himself one Saturday afternoon in the huge, sooty metropolis,—the city of cities which most resembles Babylon in its vast wealth, luxury and arrogance, and which is as surely doomed as was that ancient 'lady of the kingdoms' to sudden and complete destruction. From the smudgy windows of the reading-room of a quiet 'private' hotel not far from the British Museum, he surveyed

the dingy street,—the tall ugly houses, the dirty chimneys, and the tired-looking people that hurried past every now and again, all seemingly bent on some object which must be attained in desperate haste, or not at all,—their eyes strained in an onward groping gaze of utter fatigue and hopeless endurance—an expression which in this twentieth century appears to have become chronic with a large majority of persons, so that few countenances nowadays convey the idea of that calm and serene content which should naturally radiate from every human being who is rightly conscious of the high privilege and responsibility of life. Edward Darell, his old college chum, whom he had not seen since the day of his wife's funeral, happening by chance to be in town, had met him at the station on arrival, afterwards accompanying him to the hotel, and he was with him now, talking animatedly, but Everton, depressed by the gloom of London and the heaviness of the air, had allowed his thoughts to wander and scarcely heard what his friend was saying. His eyes were fixed on the dreary outlook—the wilderness of building which barred from view all but about a couple of yards' breadth of sky, and in the very midst of Darell's conversation he turned to him abruptly with the inconsequent remark—

"To think that this horrible London should be the summit of man's civilisation! The very apotheosis of sheer ugliness!"

Darell laughed.

"It's not so ugly as New York,"—he said—"You should go there and make comparisons! But I was not speaking to you of either London or its ugliness—I was saying how proud I am that you have at last shown what mettle is in you——"

Everton looked at him in gentle enquiry.

"At last?" he repeated.

Darell reddened a little, but he was not a man to shirk small difficulties, so he answered—

"Yes—at last! Don't mistake me, Everton. You were really too happy before,—too happy to help the world. Your great sorrow has made you a better servant of the Master."

"If you think so, I am glad,"—said Everton—"But I have

done very little. Indeed I am not able to do much. My work is entirely limited to Shadbrook."

"Ah no! You cannot say that now!" declared Darell, warmly—"Every sermon you preach is eagerly reported and copied in hundreds of journals,—and indeed this should be so. For you do not merely talk from the pulpit—you give love and help from it—what wonder then that you draw all who need love and help!—and how many thousands there are of these!"

Everton was silent.

"Do you know," went on Darell, more lightly—"I really feared you might perhaps go over to Rome? You were so very intimate with that little priest I saw down at your place——"

"I am intimate with him still,"—said Everton, quietly—"There is no man, not even yourself, whom I honour more than that same little priest! But because I honour a man I do not of necessity adopt his creed. My dear Darell, Rome would seem to be your bugbear,—and yet I understand that you include much of her ritual in your own parish services. Is that so?"

Darell moved a little uneasily. He looked round the reading-room to see if there were any listeners to the conversation—but there was only one man sunk deep in the recesses of an easy-chair opposite the fire with a newspaper over his face, apparently asleep.

"I do no more than hundreds of other clergy,"—he answered, hesitatingly—"Congregations will not attend a dull service nowadays."

"A 'dull' service!" echoed Everton—"What is there that can be 'dull' in the true heart-whole worship of God? Does it need any tawdry earth-trappings to symbolise the pure majesty of the Divine? Is it not rather an insult to Deity to make an over-elaboration of the simplicity of prayer, or of the direct uplifting of praise? Surely we should always remember the words of Our Lord when reproaching the Scribes and Pharisees—'All their works they do to be seen of men;

they *make broad* their phylacteries and *enlarge the borders of their garments.*' Is not this a warning—nay, a command against ornate ritual? The Roman creed is a form of Christianity grafted on Rome's former paganism; and the relics of its paganism constitute its chief mischief. The High Anglican Church of England does not copy Rome's Christianity, but only its paganism, in the way of elaborate ceremonial, incense-throwing and barbarically adorned vestments, and it is, therefore, an absurd incongruity in form, being neither one thing nor the other."

Darell looked, as he felt, a trifle uncomfortable.

"I do not agree with you,"—he said slowly—"But we need not argue the point here or now—your line of work is so different to mine——"

Everton gave him a keen glance.

"How is it different?" he asked—"You and I are both ministers of the same Church,—we both have the same high duty appointed to us—to lift the thoughts of the world beyond death to immortality!"

"Yes—and surely to do that successfully one must appeal to the senses,"—exclaimed Darell, warmly—"One must reach the soul through all that touches its inner consciousness of beauty, of picturesqueness, of solemnity——"

Everton raised his head with a slight, imperative gesture.

"Stop there, Darell! You will not persuade me that a poor biped perambulating up and down in gaudy vestments before an equally gaudy altar, like an actor on a stage, can convey any impression of 'solemnity' to the soul—or that any quantity of burning candles and smoking incense can bring to the mind thoughts of the Divine Creator of those myriad million lights of the universe which we call solar systems, and which shall never be extinguished till He, the Maker of them, wills it so. On the contrary, the more we intrude our earthly tawdriness, our barbaric love of glitter and display, and our absurd self-consciousness into the worship of God, the more we outrage the majesty of Him who simply commanded 'Let there be light—and there was light.' You 'feared' for me, you say, because,

having a Roman Catholic priest for a friend, you judged me weak enough to adopt a creed which even he, though trained to obedience, does not always find all-sufficient? But, my dear fellow, believe me I have greater fears for *you*, lest you may be neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic, nor pagan nor Christian, but something else that has no real foundation in the soul!"

Darell turned pale, and his eyes flashed defiantly.

"If you were not Richard Everton," he said—"I would not endure such words——"

Everton smiled kindly.

"But being what I am, you will put up with them, Darell!" he interposed—"And think them well over!"

Darell chafed visibly.

"The church where you are announced to preach to-morrow is very 'High';" he said—"So 'High' indeed that it might almost be Roman Catholic. But it is none the worse for that."

"And none the better!" replied Everton, with perfect good-nature—"But I have nothing to do with its ritualistic 'toilette'; I figure there merely as the preacher of an occasion—and my business will be simply to move hearts powerfully enough to cause a kind of reflex action whereby pockets may be moved also! Come, come, my dear Darell, don't let us 'gird,' as the Scotch say, at one another! The quarrels of the clergy are the ruin of the Church. Each man must do as he sees best in the carrying out of his ministry—but for me the Divine will always be the simple,—and the simple the Divine."

They dropped into conventionalities after this, and very soon Darell took his departure, leaving Everton in the shabby reading-room alone with the one man who still sat in the arm-chair by the fire with a newspaper over his face. As soon as Darell had gone, however, this personage stirred, and putting his newspaper down slowly, yawned, stretched out his arms, sighed comfortably, and finally pulled himself upright, thereby showing a very open, pleasant countenance, made somewhat fascinating by a pair of dark hazel eyes in which there sparkled a fund of dormant humour. He shot a friendly and inquisitive glance in Everton's direction,—then in a half-drawling accent

which was undoubtedly American, though so suave and musical as to have nothing of a 'twang' about it, he said—

"I guess, sir, you know what's the matter with the Church! It's been sick a long time, and there's such a mighty lot of doctors feeling its pulse and looking at its tongue that it's like to die before it gets a proper dose of medicine!"

Everton looked at him a moment before speaking.

"It is possible you may be right,"—he then answered,—"But I am, in a certain sense, an optimist—a disciple of the Obvious. That is to say, I believe in such old derided maxims as 'The darkest hour's before the dawn'—and 'It's a long lane that has no turning.' I think the time is very near for a grand renewal of religious life—a time when everything in the world,—its wealth, its commerce, its progress,—shall seem of less account than the worth of a nation's united prayer. For we are in the 'darkest hour,'—therefore the dawn is close at hand."

The stranger got out of his chair and stood up with his back to the fireplace, showing himself to be a man of good figure and stature, with an easy grace about his whole manner that expressed long familiarity with the freedom of an open-air life.

"Well," he said—"if that be so you may make up your mind that it will be a red dawn—the reddest dawn that ever broke over this world since France sent her royal rulers to the guillotine! France was then just one country with the dry rot in it,—but to-day we have several countries down with the same disease, and when they all start trying to get rid of the trouble there'll be ructions. I'm an American,—and of course over here there are a good many folks who judge everything from America as a fraud or a 'bit o' bunkum,' except a ten-million-dollar heiress. Yet, to speak quite honestly and meaning no offence, in comparing your nation with mine I don't know which is the more rotten of the two!"

"Severe!" commented Everton, with a smile—"And perhaps not altogether just."

The stranger smiled also, quite affably.

"Perhaps not! I'm willing to be corrected. But I'm compelled to form my judgment on the result of my experience. Now see! My name's Howard,—Clarence Howard—no relation to the Duke of Norfolk!"—here he laughed—"and I don't think any of my ancestors went over the ocean in the *Mayflower*. I've made my pile, as they say;—and as I don't need to work any more, I'm not working—at least not in the way that's usually meant by work. I don't marry, because I like my liberty better than I like women. I'm just a rover,—studying, thinking and learning. I've been all over the world pretty well. And I find the same thing everywhere—dry rot! And the crumbling process is going on as fast as if the whole fabric of law and morals were being eaten away by a swarm of white ants! And what is the reason of it? I know the reason; but when I say it out, I'm told I'm a 'religious humbug,' and that's the very last thing I am or desire to be."

Everton surveyed him with increasing interest.

"Whatever your theory, I shall hear it with attention,"—he said, "and I at least shall not call you a 'religious humbug.' I'm often called one myself,—but that is very much the way in which the clergy are regarded by the modern world. Perhaps, however, in a great measure this is the fault of the clergy themselves."

"Why, there you speak honestly,"—said Mr Howard—"And I like you for it! It *is* the fault of the clergy. And the reason of the universal 'dry rot' in our civilisation is that the world is losing its grip on God. It is slipping away from its faith in Divine Law and Order—and wherever and whenever that has happened, a downfall is imminent. I know you agree with me—because I know who you are. I heard the gentleman who has just left you, call you Richard Everton—and I consider I'm in luck's way to have come across you. I've read the reports of several of the sermons you have preached in your church at Shadbrook on the Cotswolds;—and as a matter of fact I'm going to hear you preach to-morrow. You've said some very brave, bold things, sir!—and I should like to shake hands with you!"

few years' time, when its plans are formulated, there will be fewer public-houses——"

"And fewer brewers and distillers?" interposed Howard, quickly;—"Will your Government make it illegal to concoct poison for the national consumption? Will it insist on the making of wholesome stuff, and inflict not only heavy money fines, but prison punishment, on the rascals who sell beer which is not beer, and spirit which is a deadly mixture of chemicals? And what of the grocers?"

"The grocers?"—echoed Everton—"You mean——"

"I mean that the grocers are every whit as much in the drink business as the publicans. It was W. E. Gladstone, I believe, and his Liberal party that gave wine and spirit licences to the grocers—licences which, if the growing mania for drink among women is to be checked, ought to be at once suppressed. Who shall count the number of women that order intoxicating liquors from the grocers and have the cost put down on the monthly account as so many pounds of tea or coffee, while perhaps the fathers of the families concerned, knowing their wives' habits, take every pains to prevent them getting at the vile stuff which maddens their brains and degrades their lives, and cannot understand how it is that, despite all effort, they still manage to procure it! Talk of 'blighted homes' and 'deserted hearths'! The grocers' licences have as much to do with the evil state of things as the publicans' licences,—and if ever the time comes to deal with the Drink question in honest earnest, — no two-mouthed tomfoolery, mind!—by which I mean no playing to the gallery with one mouth and whispering to the Trade with the other, —why the grocers' licences should be the first to be done away with altogether."

"I quite agree with you!"—said Everton—"In fact, I think it's likely more drink is sold to the people from the grocery stores than from the public-houses. It's curious we don't realise this more generally and forcibly."

"People are slow to realise any straight fact nowadays,"—rejoined Howard—"The modern brain is like a bad egg—

addled. Every one is more or less fevered with the mania of money-making,—and when the money is made they have neither the education nor the intelligence to spend it properly. But there!—no one can reform the bad or better the good. It's been tried over and over again—before Christ, and after Him—and it's no use. The wheel of civilisation revolves a certain number of times and then it stops! Then follows a great cleaning of the clock and a putting in of new works by the Almighty—and presently, after considerable trouble and delay, on it goes again! But the world has a bad half-hour while the renovating business is in progress!"

"Do you think civilisation has reached the high-water mark in your country?" asked Everton.

"No, sir, I do not. I consider my country and my countrymen in the adolescent or 'gawk' condition of dry rot—that is to say, the raw material is crumbling out of shape in order to re-form. America is like a half-grown boy who is all collar and tie, and is proud of his pants. His pockets are full of string and marbles, and he thinks them valuable property. He pulls them out every few minutes and looks at them with pride. He shows them to you, and chortles over them, saying: 'See what I've got!' He thinks you ought to put down everything of your own, and stand admiring his pocket-knife with eight blades. He considers you a fool if you don't attach any importance to his opinion. He's all Self-consciousness and Brag. But remember!—he's only a Boy! When he's a Man,"—here he paused, and his fine eyes sparkled with animation—"Yes!—when he's a Man, he's as likely as not to be the finest Creature in the world!"

"You really are of that opinion?"

"I really am. You see Americans are a mixed race—every kind of blood is mingled in their veins, bad and good, and it takes time for the good to work uppermost,—but it's bound to rise! Then we have plenty of 'grit' and 'dash';—and we're not afraid of ourselves or of anybody else. Of course we've set up our house in a hurry, and we've got a good deal of rubbish in it, because, being young, we wanted to furnish all

at once; and we bought too much and crammed too many things in—but we shall clear by degrees, sir!—we shall clear! We shall get over the String-and-Marble age,—and we shall find that dollars are not everything. And with maturity we shall develop idealism, nobility of character and exalted aims,—but you must give us a little more time to grow!"

He laughed pleasantly, and then fell to talking about London and its violently contrasting effects of vast wealth and abject poverty, and again the national curse of drink came uppermost for discussion.

"If you've nothing more pressing to do this evening, it might warm you up for to-morrow's sermon if you would take a stroll with me through some of the drink centres,"—he said, "I have made a study of them, and I know much of what goes on in them. I can show you places where women with babies in arms drink till the babies drop on the floor and lie there like little bundles of rags, quite disregarded. Some of the proprietors of these infernal dens advertise 'Storage for Perambulators,' as an encouragement to the mothers of infants to come in. Looking away back down the past years, it seems there *were* times when a drunken mother was so rarely seen that such an one was bound to be ashamed of herself as a disgraceful exception;—now there are thousands of drunken mothers. They do not mind spending whole mornings in the public-house. They neglect their duties just as much as the fashionable lady of to-day neglects hers. There is no strong wave of opinion that sweeps through the land to cleanse it of this great abomination. Now in the Southern States of America there is a great revulsion against the drink, because of the frequency of outrages on women by negroes. Drink has been proved to be generally at the bottom of these revolting crimes, and the citizens of Georgia have voted out the drink altogether. Don't forget that the Governor who signed that Bill signed away a large personal income of his own derived from the selling of liquor! I think his name will be found in the Book of Life somewhere!"

"No doubt of that!"—said Everton, his thoughts reverting

to Shadbrook, Minchin's Brewery, and Minchin himself—"I don't think I could name a single British brewer or spirit distiller who would do as much!"

Howard smiled.

"Well, that's your saying, not mine!—I wouldn't so insult the conscience of your nation,"—he said—"But I'm afraid the British Lion is getting a bit selfish—inclined to sleep in the sun and all that sort of thing, looking after his own comfort more than anything else,—however, I'm too fond of the grand old Growler to hope anything but good of him! It may be he'll wake up with an honest roar quite suddenly, and chase away all such vested interests in the national degradation as make intemperance necessary. I use the word 'necessary' advisedly—because to earn any sort of profitable dividends on the capital invested in the beer and spirit trades, national drunkenness would, roughly speaking, seem imperative. In the year 1904, your most flaccid statesman, Balfour, repudiated all public responsibility for the miseries of drink, and put the whole blame on the 'gross and criminal self-indulgence of the working-classes.' Well, all I can say about that, is that I hope the working-classes have got his insult pretty well fixed into their heads, and that it will keep them firm against voting for him or his party. It was, I suppose, convenient for him to forget that in order to keep up the profits of the trade interests he was defending, the 'gross criminal self-indulgence' he talked so big about was an absolute *sine qua non*. And he also forgot that the statesmen who abuse the working-classes go the quickest way to cutting their own throats, for they all depend on the working-class votes. And who persuades the working-classes to drink themselves blind and silly more than the selfish fellows who want to be returned to Parliament by hook or by crook, somehow or anyhow? A drunken man's vote counts as well as that of a sober one, and the more drunk the electors are, the more chance there is of their electing the scheming rogue who 'treats' them. When they get sober again they discover they've been 'had,' and that they've chosen a scheming rogue to represent them; but it's too

late then to remedy the mischief. 'Gross criminal self-indulgence' indeed! That's pretty tall talk! I should like to know if Mr. Balfour himself has never gone in for that kind of variety entertainment,—if not in one form, perhaps in another!"

"You must not presume to make such a suggestion,"—said Everton, smiling gravely—"There is no such thing as 'gross criminal self-indulgence' among the 'upper' classes. They stand aloft on the peaks of an inaccessible virtue. That is why they are able to cast aspersions on their 'lower' brothers and sisters with so much dignified acrimony!"

Howard studied his face with keen and searching intentness,—then smiled responsively.

"Exactly!" he said—"You understand the position. Shall we dine together?"

"With pleasure. At what hour?"

"At eight; but not here. Come to the Savoy Restaurant. It will interest you. It shows what human beings can do in the way of pampering their stomachs while they starve their brains. And it will be rather amusing there to-night, for Claude Ferrers is giving a dinner to his 'Aero-Club' friends,—'rank, beauty, fashion' and all the rest of it!"

"Who is Claude Ferrers?"

Howard laughed.

"Ah! Your Shadbrook must be hidden well out of the world if you have never heard of him! Claude Ferrers? Why, he is a famous aeronaut; a man who spends fabulous sums of money in the construction of balloons and aeroplanes and airships. He is the owner of a gorgeous steerable balloon in which all the pretty 'smart' women take trips with him for 'change of air.' Such a change has its risks, of course;—but then,—if none of them ever came back they would never be missed! He is an atheist, a degenerate, and—one of the most popular 'Souls' in decadent English society!"

"I would rather not know him,"—said Everton, quickly.

"Know him! My dear sir, you *won't* know him! You

can't know him! It's much more easy to know the King than Claude Ferrers. For the King *must* know people; but Ferrers won't know any one unless he chooses. But come and see him! Yes,—you ought! It will bring your blood to boiling-point for to-morrow! Just to have a look at the fat, smooth-faced sensualist and voluptuary whose reputation for shameless vice makes him the pride and joy of Upper-Ten Jezebels, will help you along like a gale of wind! And a light will be flung on your inner consciousness, which, if you are going to try and help the world out of the pit it is falling into,"—here he paused, and approaching Everton laid one hand with an impressive gesture on his arm—"I say *if* you are going to help the world—and I think you *are*!—that lurid light thrown across your white mind is absolutely necessary!"

Everton sighed,—then meeting the warm, persuasive glance of his new friend's kind eyes, smiled.

"As you like!"—he said—"You are so very earnest about it that I should feel myself a churl to refuse you. But I am not at all the sort of man for society scenes——"

"You are! You are just the sort of man for society scenes"—declared Howard;—"They exist for your comment and consideration. Society scenes made the fame of the Prophet Isaiah. Without society scenes he would not have been able to say: 'Their land is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures; their land is also full of horses, neither is there any end of their chariots.' And—'The shew of their countenance doth witness against them; and they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not. Woe unto their soul! for they have rewarded evil unto themselves!'"

He spoke the words slowly, with a wonderfully musical rhythm of utterance, and Everton heard him with surprise as well as admiration.

"I think you are a preacher yourself,"—he said.

"Say an actor, and you might be nearer the mark,"—replied Howard, laughing. "I was on the stage for a short time as

a youngster, but I got tired of the grease-paint and the foot-lights and took to a ranching life instead. However, my short probation with sock and buskin did me good;—I learned how to read properly;—an art in which few clergy excel,—and I imbibed Shakespeare as gratefully as a fish imbibes water. The Bible and Shakespeare are my two literary bulwarks."

"You could not have any stronger ones,"—said Everton—"All literature leans upon those twain,—the two least understood great works of the world!"

They drifted into generalities after this, and presently parted, to meet again two or three hours later at the entrance of the Savoy Restaurant. A number of brilliantly attired women were standing or sitting about in the hall or lounge of this famous London eating-house, talking to, or staring at each other during the '*mauvais quart d'heure*' before dinner;—most of them had their faces painted and their hair dyed, and one and all presented exactly the appearance of variety actresses waiting their 'turn.' Their dresses were much more worth observation than themselves, many of these being extravagant marvels of the costumier's art,—their own persons were merely the props on which the wonderful garments clung and trailed and sparkled and swept round in serpentine folds of bewilderingly varied hue and much perfumed rustling. Jewels, both real and sham, the sham, of course, predominating, sparkled lavishly on the brows, bosoms and arms of these fair feminine diners-out, thus giving their artificial attractions that last 'imperial' touch which made them look the very queens of comedy, and as Everton, walking with his American acquaintance, slowly descended the softly-carpeted steps leading from the lounge into the dining-room, many heads were turned after him, and many eyes silently questioned his identity. That he was not an habitué of restaurants was evident at a glance. The repose of his manner, the calm dignity of his movements, the gravely observant expression of his pale, intellectual face—all these denoted a personality far removed from that of the ordinary Savoy lounger and epicure. People looked at him, whispered and wondered.

He was quite unconscious that his appearance excited any comment. Howard caught one or two remarks that were half depreciatory, half flattering to his companion, and was faintly amused. Just as they were about to enter the dining-room, he touched Everton's arm.

"That's Claude Ferrers," he said.

Everton looked and saw a massively built man of between forty-five and fifty, with a fat, clean-shaven face and reddish hair which he wore parted in the middle and rather long over the ears. The eyes of this individual were remarkable,—they projected slightly in their sockets like balls of pale-blue glass with a light behind them, and challenged all other eyes with a curious kind of insistent self-defence. There was no real human expression in them,—only the peculiar glassy brilliancy and the fixed 'What do you know of me?' query. They turned on Everton as he passed by with a sudden opening stare; then the white puffy lids dropped over them languidly in lazy disdain. This was the look Ferrers gave to all strangers; a look which generally had the effect of making them either uncomfortable or indignant. Everton, however, was unaffected by it; one glance at the man sufficed to show him the type of creature he was,—one of those openly admitted decadents and libertines who, with the gracious permission and approval of the Pulpit and the Throne, are nowadays given free licence to contaminate the minds of the women of England, and so undermine the future honour of the nation itself. Their vices are well known, but are 'hushed up'; and the fact that many, if not most of them are 'well-connected,' moves even the Law to excuse them from appearing in their rightful place—the criminal dock.

Following Howard into the dining-room, Everton presently found himself seated at one of the smaller side-tables which commanded a good view of a certain portion of the room set apart for private dinner-parties. Here there was a blaze of light and colour, and a long table was set out for some sixteen persons, above which a large toy balloon, composed of red and white roses and lit from within by electricity, was so arranged as to

appear rising from the centre of the board, just held in place by cords of gold and silver attached to imitation 'sand-bags' of perfume. Tiny balloons of creamy satin, tied with gold thread, served as 'menus' and guest-cards, and were set at each person's right hand, and the effective colouring of the whole design was furthermore enhanced by long trails of red and white roses laid with a carelessly lavish grace down the centre of the whole length of the table. It was impossible to avoid looking at such an original and beautiful display of flowers, and Everton made a remark to Howard not only on the taste displayed in the decoration, but also on the pity and extravagance of it.

"I deplore the fate of those glorious roses," he said—"They are as living as we are, and no doubt when growing on the parent stem were sensible of the joys of life. It seems cruel to kill them for the pleasure of a night."

"It's the spirit of Heliogabalus over again," rejoined Howard;—"London and New York are merely repeating the orgies of Greece and Rome which took place just before their fall. Claude Ferrers is a modern Heliogabalus in his very modern way; he makes everything and everybody minister to himself and his personal comfort; and by dint of learning a few salacious witticisms out of Molière and Baudelaire, he almost persuades people to think him a wit and a poet. But he is the biggest Fraud nature and art ever perpetuated,—even his profound interest in science is only a 'pose,'—and he runs a balloon, instead of a motor-car or carriage, merely in order that the fool newspapers may notice his antics and print 'interviews' with him. See,—here he comes with his little flock of 'souls' which no creed can save!"

Everton turned his head to look;—then the blood rushed to his face in a burning tide and as quickly retreated, leaving him deathly pale. For he saw one whom he had hoped and prayed never to see again. A woman, clothed in clinging gossamer white, with a band of great rubies and diamonds set in the rich coils of her hair, and the same precious stones blazing on her uncovered arms and bosom, entered the room

on the arm of Claude Ferrers, moving so lightly that she seemed to float rather than walk,—a woman so perfectly lovely in face and form that even the most fastidious critic could not have found a flaw in her beauty,—a woman whom all eyes followed,—the men gloating upon her in mute admiration, the women watching her in speechless envy,—so that her appearance actually caused a sudden silence among the talkative Savoy diners, almost as though some heavenly angel should have swept white wings through the earthly crowd. She was smiling as she came, and listening with an air of graceful tolerance to the evidently eager and undisguised flatteries of her host of the evening,—when, just as she reached the portioned-off recess where the table for Ferrers and his party was prepared, some strange instinctive impulse moved her, and, raising her dark, brilliant eyes she met Everton's calm sad gaze fixed upon her. For one second she paused,—and in that second two spirits rose up in arms and challenged each other for good or for evil,—then, smiling still, she passed on, leading the way for the other guests, who all followed her into the private room, whereupon obsequious waiters dropped a heavy velvet curtain across the entrance and veiled the scene of festivity from view. With her disappearance the tension of Everton's nerves relaxed,—and he heaved a deep, unconscious sigh. Howard, noting his companion's pallor, had watched him rather curiously, but had refrained from speaking. Now, however, he said quietly:

"We're rather lucky to-night. We've seen the most beautiful woman in London."

Everton started as if from a dream.

"Have we? You mean the one that has just passed by?"

"Of course! There's no one else in the running! Why," and Howard laughed—"You looked at her so very earnestly that I thought it was a case of love at first sight!"

A faint cold shudder ran through Everton's veins.

"God forbid!" he murmured—then forcing himself to

speak in a lighter tone he said:—"I think I have seen her face before——"

"I daresay you have—she's been photographed in every possible position—with clothes,—and—without! She was a 'variety' girl—a very daring dancer;—and now she's Mrs. Nordstein, the wife of Israel Nordstein, the millionaire. Claude Ferrers calls her the 'Magic Crystal' on acccunt of her name."

"And that name is——?"

"A pretty and uncommon one,—Jacynth."

CHAPTER XVIII

'JACYNTH.' He heard it with a sense of relief. Of course he had known it all the time. The unforgettable face with its jewel eyes and rose-red mouth could only belong to one woman—and that woman she whom last he had seen in the village street of Shadbrook on the day young Hadley had died. The day, too, on which she herself had sworn that the next time he saw her she would be 'different.' He recalled the defiant ring of her voice when she had uttered the vow!—"I swear to you that next time you see me I'll be different. I will!" And when he had gently asked her if that was a promise, she had flung up her arms with a wild gesture and had affirmed it. "That's a promise! Do you hear it, Almighty God? It's a promise!" Almighty God had apparently listened to her adjuration, for she had kept her word.

Oh, she had kept her word with a vengeance! She was indeed 'different,'—very different, and yet the same,—always the same Jacynth. The rubies and diamonds flashing on her white breast enhanced her beauty no more than had the simple bunch of primroses she had once worn at the opening of her blue cotton bodice,—the same dazzling fairness of skin gave its glamour to both. And yet her loveliness made her all the more loathed in his thoughts. To him she was an embodied curse and cruelty,—a pestilential cloud that had broken in black thunder over his life and made wreckage of that as well as of every other life its blighting influence had darkened. He looked upon her as a murderess. For though she had dealt no blows, and had used neither poison nor

dagger, four deaths lay at her door. He counted them up inexorably in his mind,—young Hadley, Jennie Kiernan, his own wife Azalea, and, finally, Dan Kiernan—Dan, who had been her lover! Dan her lover! To think of it!—the huge, hulking, drunken sot had actually been the lover of that dainty lady of fashion who had just passed him by, robed in glistening white and wearing jewels worth a fortune! A bitter lump rose in his throat,—a swelling threat of tears commingled with fierce laughter,—and it was with the utmost difficulty that he restrained the hurrying tempest of his thoughts, and forced himself to listen to what his host was saying. Howard noticed his abstraction, but with kindly tact went on talking as though he had the most attentive of auditors.

"Balloon parties are the newest things in social functions," he said—"And Aero-Clubs are all the rage. The Scum-people—by which expression I mean the human stuff that rises to the top of Society soup and has to be skimmed off and thrown away—are tired of the earth and all that therein is. They have exhausted it by their own tedium. They want to see if the air is equally boresome. They have resolved to match their midget selves against the forces of the elements. It is a 'new sensation.' You will often notice (if you ever read society items) such sparkling statements as this for example: 'Lord and Lady High-Liver will entertain a balloon house-party at their country seat this autumn for their son the Honourable Fool Rising. Their guests include Count Mont-en-Haut of the Belgian Aero-Club, Count Vol-au-Vent of the French Aero-Club, Mr. Claude Ferrers and Captain Batswing of the War Office. Four balloons are to be in use for ascents every day.' Naturally such news is of the utmost moment to the world! Mrs. Nordstein is always included in these parties, not only because she is beautiful and a Court favourite, but because her husband is a millionaire and one of the largest shareholders in several of the halfpenny dailies, which eagerly chronicle such air-trips as being of rare importance to the working, thinking million who only give a dull curse or two of contempt for the whole farrago of nonsense. She is very

daring, too, and ventures on the highest balloon ascents with the nerve and sang-froid of Claude Ferrers himself. A French impressionist lately made a picture of her, in the car of a balloon, with very scanty raiment on, which he called, 'Beauty's voyage to the stars.' It was published in one of the papers that tickle the eyes of the groundlings with pictures of the semi-nude."

Everton's face grew cold and stern.

"So though she is married, she is still the variety mime!" he said.

"Of course! What do you expect? Her husband is proud of her 'variety' conduct. If she could not draw other men into his 'Company' nets, what use would she be to him? Marriage is not a sacrament nowadays—it is merely a form for the legalising of children in order that they may inherit what their fathers leave them. The fathers always have lots of other children who don't inherit,—the law takes no notice of *them*. 'Love' in the twentieth century is not the love depicted in the novels of Scott and Dickens. Great and noble as these two writers were and are in their ideals, we know, sadly enough, that the characters they depict are not true to life as life is presented to us here and now, for example,—in this Savoy Restaurant—in that private curtained-off dining-room—in the crowded streets outside, or in modern society anywhere. Novelists should write of what *is*, not of what they dream *should be*,—and you may bet what you like, sir, if they did, they would be unable to find much idyllic sentiment in modern matrimony!"

At these words a vision flitted before Richard's eyes of a sweet, childlike face framed in fair hair, that looked at him with the tenderest dark blue eyes,—of soft kissing lips, and a dear little voice that said: "You are my husband,—my husband, my darling and my best in the whole world!" Oh, Azalea! Oh, sweet life so cruelly done to death! Poor fond little woman! She had loved him! With all her pretty graceful follies, inconsistencies and caprices, she was pure as a drop of dew, and her memory came to him now with a fresh-

ness and fragrance as though a cluster of cool lilies should be suddenly laid in feverish hands.

"I think you generalise too much,"—he said, in a voice that trembled ever so slightly; "All marriages are not sordid. Love is still a vital force, if not with the rich, with the poor. I ought not perhaps to speak of myself in the matter, yet in simple justice to the loveliness of true womanhood, I know that whatever ability I have or whatever use I may be to my fellow-creatures is entirely owing to the great happiness of my married life, which helped and strengthened me. And, —though my wife is dead—her influence upon me remains present and actual; indeed I know it would not be possible for me to do anything without her."

He spoke with a grave simplicity that was infinitely pathetic, and his companion, looking at him, saw that he was most wonderfully and sacredly in earnest. The steadfast eyes reflected the poise of a soul fixed on one love and one purpose, and there was not a shadow of affectation in the feeling he expressed. A great and tender respect filled Howard's mind for the man's gentle yet powerful character; the temperament which was that of half-child, half-hero; and he answered quickly and with some compunction:—

"I understand—and I believe you! I will not even say that I consider you may be an exception to the rule of husbands. And—you must try to forgive my cynicism! I have travelled far and seen much,—and have grown somewhat disheartened as to the 'betterment' of humanity. I forgot"—and his face flushed with the warmth of a sincere emotion—"I forgot that to you of all men I should not have spoken of the modern degradation of the marriage tie."

Everton thanked him silently by an eloquent glance, and the conversation fell into a lighter vein. Howard was an entertaining and brilliant talker, and under the influence of the warmth and brightness of the Savoy dining-room, the crowds of gay people, and the sound of the exquisite music with which the diners were regaled, the trouble and storm which had stirred the waters of sorrowful remembrance in Everton's soul

at sight of Jacynth, gradually subsided and left him possessed of even more than his usual calm. Encouraged to do so, he told his new friend some of the difficulties of a country clergyman's life in England,—of the various oppositions to good with which such an one has to contend,—and above all of the potency of drink in a neighbourhood where the chief employer of labour is a brewer or distiller.

"You may fight for the cause of Christ," he said, "till every fibre of your spirit is strained to breaking—but the man who teaches Drink always overcomes the man who preaches God. It is horrible to have to say such a thing,—it is a disgrace to our holy religion,—yet so it is. No Church can really reform a drunkard,—he is the child of the devil and the devil keeps his own. We try, we clergy—with all our faults, and they are many,—we try our best—in vain! And the cause of our failure is not far to seek. It is really more physical than spiritual. The bodily craving of a man for strong drink is a disease, generated by what he has imbibed. The brewers put stuff into their beer to excite an unnatural thirst for more—the distillers do the same with the spirituous liquors—in fact, I look upon a drunkard as a poisoned man, needing the immediate assistance of the doctor. The clergy are not qualified to deal with purely medical matters."

They had by this time reached the dessert stage of their dinner, and Howard, helping himself to a rosy-vested pear, began to peel it slowly.

"Presuming you will pardon me for the remark, the clergy are at present not qualified to deal with any matters at all,"—he said—"Not in the way they are going on. They are in a great many cases corruptible, and open to the bribery of Rome. You tell me of country clergymen who find their lives difficult. Well! I can tell you of country clergymen who *make* their lives difficult, and the lives of other people unbearable! I know of one of these worthies who is always preaching about moral restraint between the sexes, and who is a great advocate of temperance as well, yet he is the most hypocritical and immoral of men. His 'natural' daughter, wearing the

clothes he has purchased for her, walks about his parish quite openly and unabashed,—goes into his house and garden when his wife is absent, and amuses herself in her own particular fashion. Every one in the place, down to the very schoolboys, knows who and what she is,—and he has brought himself into utter contempt—but,—his Bishop intends to promote him shortly! Have you ever considered the singular blindness of some Bishops? I have;—very often! Take another clerical example. I could give you the name and address of a clergyman so parsimonious, that he will not employ a sexton,—he rings his own church bell, digs the graves, and herds his cow in the graveyard! All the parishioners have ceased to attend his services, and they tramp to a church four miles distant rather than go near him. Does the Bishop know? Oh yes, the Bishop knows. But it is too much trouble for this particular Bishop to take any steps in the matter. One more case in point,—name and address likewise at your service,—that of the rector of a small country parish who for a certain social (and financial) consideration flatly disobeyed a fixed rule of the Church, for which, mark you! he received, not the reproach but the actual approval of his Bishop; yet this fraud of a 'Christian' is notoriously known in the town nearest to his village as an habitué of a low street where women sell themselves for a few shillings, and where two or three of them openly boast of their shameful intimacy with this 'dispenser of Gospel Truth.' Here again, the whole town knows, and the Bishop has been told—but the Bishop in this instance elects to be not only blind but deaf, for rumour asserts that this cheap adulterer, masquerading as a servant of Christ, is to be made a Canon. Well!—do you wonder that the Church is sinking into the quicksands of criminal apathy? When 'society' knows, as *you* will know shortly, that there is even one Bishop—only one!—*in propria persona*—who is guilty of such unnameable sins as should cause him to be publicly whipped out of his own Cathedral doors, and that notwithstanding this, he is allowed to remain on in his high office, can you be surprised that the laity are beginning to look upon

the ordained exponents of religion with suspicion, if not with absolute contempt?"

"But these cases are surely exceptional," — said Everton, in grave, pained accents—"There are black sheep in every calling——"

"True!—but I do not go about looking for black sheep,—my aim is to try and find the best of everything in human nature. These examples of the clergy have been thrust upon me—I have not sought for them. I have been, and am, deeply sorry to find them. But that they exist only proves the possible existence of many more like them. And most harmful and mischievous of all perhaps is that section which seeks to 'leave things alone,' and which entertains the slothful idea that bold, plain speaking in the cause of Christ is to be deprecated lest it make matters worse. These sort of men are well-intentioned, no doubt, but the front they present to the world suggests desire for personal ease rather than personal trouble."

At that moment peals of gay laughter echoed out from the curtained recess where the guests of Claude Ferrers were being entertained. Everton started, fancying he heard the rippling laugh of Jacynth ringing above the rest.

"Personal ease," went on Howard, stirring his coffee leisurely, and now and then lifting his keen dark eyes to study his companion's face — "and personal pleasure are the two chief objects of modern life. The luxury of our present surroundings bears witness to the fact. The people in there," and he indicated by a gesture the Ferrers party;—"care not a jot whether Christ ever lived or died. And such are the kind of folk you must be prepared to face if you preach in London. Some country clerics there are who refuse to admit that such folk exist. I know an excellent man down in Somerset, who is 'strictly orthodox' and rules his household, particularly his domestics, with a rod of iron. He assured me with much satisfaction that his parishioners knew nothing of the wave of atheism that was surging over Europe, and that he did not wish them to know. 'I do not allow it,'—he said.

He supervises the literature of his parish, and flatters himself that no man, woman or child ever reads anything he does not approve. Never was there a more pathetic case of blindness. His own servants take in all the sensational 'dailies' on the sly, and there is not a man in the neighbourhood who does not gloat every week over a certain 'Sunday Dreadful' which serves up all the worst police cases as a cook serves curry, well-seasoned and highly-flavoured. And he, the innocent good man, being convinced that his 'little flock' live in a state of primitive innocence, declines altogether to discuss with me any form of the heart-breaking distress from which half the world is suffering to-day,—the doubt of God which makes people 'afraid to think'—the misery and terror which hang suspended over the wretched human unit deprived of faith and hope, like the sword of an executioner, 'for,' says he, comfortably, 'it is better to ignore it.' Even so Louis the Sixteenth, though an honest and well-meaning monarch, ignored his people's discontent. 'Is it a riot?' he asked, when told the Bastille was being stormed by the mob of Paris. 'No, Sire,' he was answered—'It is a Revolution!' You can apply the same words to the Churches of to-day. It is not a riot; it is a revolution."

Fascinated by his even, quiet voice and the ease and eloquence with which he spoke, Everton listened with deep if sometimes grieved attention. A cultured American who can talk well, is better than a cultured Englishman who can do the same, for the American is less restrained by convention and prejudice. And though hating to be forced to admit it, he knew that Howard was not exaggerating the abuses prevalent in the Churches all over the world, but more particularly in the Church of England.

"I wish I could contradict you,"—he said, rather sadly—"But—to be honest—I cannot! The clergy are losing their hold on the million; the million are trying to find God for themselves—and I cannot blame them. The flocks are astray because of the sloth of their shepherds. I am afraid this is true. Yet I must say I have not met such flagrant examples of laxity

among the clergy as those you have spoken of—nor do I know of any Bishop who has so greatly transgressed——"

Howard interrupted him by a slight warning gesture.

"Hush!" he said—"All walls have ears, especially the walls of the Savoy; and the episcopal lord may be here to-night for all we know, though I should hardly think he would, after what is privately known of him, have the temerity to show himself in public. Anyway, he is far more likely to be at dinner than at prayers!"

Everton's honest blue eyes expressed a deep concern and bewilderment. He was about to speak when fresh peals of ringing laughter from the curtained recess made him wince and grow pale. Howard saw that he was troubled,—and concluding that the Savoy sights and sounds were beginning to chafe and irritate his mind, took pity on him.

"Would you rather go now?" he asked—"Or would you care for another glimpse of Mrs. Nordstein, made doubly radiant by the warm glow of champagne and 'crême de menthe' in her veins? People say she is at her loveliest after dinner—and that when most over-fed women look red-faced and greasy, she is pale as a pearl and cool as a water-melon. By the way, that's her husband, Israel Nordstein, just coming in."

Everton turned his head quickly and saw a thin, undersized old man with a pallid, wizened face and grey goatee beard, advancing slowly into the room, ushered along by a deferential French waiter all smiles, bows and gesticulations, who was evidently explaining that the Ferrers banquet was in a private room apart from the less exclusive crowd. Many people nudged one another and exchanged awestruck whispers as the notorious Jew millionaire passed by their various tables, nodding condescendingly to those he recognised, and looking about him quizzically with sharp ferret eyes that sparkled under his stiff bushy brows like bits of cold steel. At the table next to that where Everton and Howard sat, he stopped and laid a yellow, veiny hand on the shoulder of a man who was dining with a pert-looking young actress.

"Enjoying yourself?" he queried in a rasping voice, which struck against his false teeth like the grating of a saw;—"That's right! But don't let this delightful lady"—here he bowed to the actress in question with an unpleasantly derisive courtesy—"keep you late for your appointment with me to-morrow. Some one in the city told me you were going abroad, but I should not advise you to do that; no!—I should not advise it at this time of year!"

He stretched his thin lips in a wide grin, and his goatee beard wagged up and down with the inward movement of his silent mirth. The man he spoke to answered him in sharp haste and evident irritation.

"Oh, I'm not going. I've changed my mind."

"I thought so!" and Nordstein's smile was wider than before. "And let me assure you that you do well to change it!"

With that he went on to the corner where the French Ganymede stood attentively ready for him near the velvet curtain which hid the Aero-Club revels from outside observation. Raising the rich drapery with an impressive elegance, the waiter held it up as though it were an arch of triumph for the redoubtable man of millions to walk under,—then let it fall softly behind him like a conjurer who makes haste to conceal the stage whereon he works his black magic tricks and mysteries.

Richard Everton had watched the little scene with morbid intentness. He tried to realise that this old, shrunken, wicked-eyed Jew was the husband of Jacynth; the husband of a girl of twenty-one; for she was not eighteen when she had left Shadbrook four years ago,—and the more the fact forced itself upon him the stronger grew his sense of shame that such a thing should be. A feeling of revolt and resentment rose up in him;—his whole mental and moral being was jarred into sudden discord. The brilliant restaurant with its throng of chattering, laughing, feeding men and women, seemed to him nothing but a child's kaleidoscope with bits of coloured glass that changed into different patterns with each slight movement,

and he gave a quick involuntary sigh of utter weariness. He glanced expressively at his host.

"Shall we go?" said he.

"By all means!" answered Howard, promptly.

They left their table and walked slowly together through the crowded room. They were both tall, well-built men, of a finer and more intellectual type than common, and many people stared at them openly in the eminently rude British way which sometimes disfigures British manners. Everton thought he heard the words 'Another millionaire!' as Howard passed, by one set of persons who were dining together near the doorway, but glancing at his companion's unmoved face, he concluded his ears must have deceived him. At the summit of the wide staircase which they had to ascend from the dining-room into the lounge, a foppishly-dressed man stood looking down at them with a vacuous air as though he were peering into the bottom of a deep well. His face was of a sickly white hue, and a foolish smile played now and then on his loose mouth like a weak flicker from an expiring flame. He was considerably in the way of the coming and going people, and once or twice was swayed aside by their movement as though he were too helpless for personal resistance. Just as Everton and Howard passed him he suddenly lost his balance and toppled over, rolling from the top of the stairs to the bottom. Everton was about to hurry to his assistance when Howard pulled him back.

"Don't interfere,"—he said—"He's drunk. The waiters will see to him."

"Drunk!" echoed Everton, amazedly—"Here? Not possible!"

"Quite possible! You think not, because he's dressed like a gentleman and is in a restaurant which ostensibly caters for gentlefolk. But, my good sir, there's as much occasional drunkenness in high-flying places of this sort as there is in the lowest public-house slum. See!—they've picked up his lordship."

"His lordship?"

"Yes—he's a lord. Quite of the 'best quality'"—and

Howard laughed scornfully—"He went over to the States two or three years ago on the prowl after a pretty little Boston girl, an only child, whose father will leave her some millions. She had a romantic idea that it would be nice to marry into an old 'historic' English family and be called 'my lady.' But after seeing this chap drunk a few times she altered her mind."

"Fortunately for herself!" commented Everton.

"Quite so! Now his is a case of drink where Balfour's accusation of 'gross criminal self-indulgence' comes in pat. He is drunk, not through one sort of poison but through several sorts, mixed. He has probably taken at his one meal, sherry, hock, claret, champagne, port and liqueurs, finishing up with two or three whiskies. That is the frequent drink-routine of the habitual diner-out. Naturally complete intoxication sets in—I was going to say bestial intoxication, but that would be wronging the poor beasts who never get drunk. And this man is only one of many more of his class and kind. I could even name to you a royal prince who never goes to bed sober."

Everton gave a gesture of pained disgust.

"Spare me!" he said—"For if those who are set in high positions as 'leaders' of society sink so low, there is little hope for the masses who have no leader at all. And a preacher such as I am may as well give up his calling, for he can never be more than a voice in the wilderness."

"A voice in the wilderness was the herald of Christ,"—replied Howard—"We mustn't forget that! And the 'masses,'—the masses of Great Britain, are the finest masses of human material in existence! I would back them against the whole world;—yes, though I'm an American, I would! There's no soldier like the British soldier—no sailor like the British sailor—anywhere on God's earth! And,—if he were given the proper chance of training and experience there's nothing like the British working-man. He'll beat any foreigners at any piece of work if he can only be saved from the licensed curse of drink. Now shall we remain here a little?—or shall we go and see a few 'slum' sights?"

"Slum sights are fairly familiar to me,"—answered Everton; "I worked in the East End of London as an assistant curate before I was married, and saw enough there to break my heart if it had not been too full of faith and hope then to be easily broken——"

"Then?" queried Howard, with a keen glance at him; "And—now?"

"Well!—now it *is* broken!" he answered, quietly,—"But faith and hope still hold the broken pieces together."

Howard smiled—a very warm and kindly smile.

"Come along then,"—he said—"Come out of this luxurious feeding-place of the over-rich Dives-folk of the world, and let us go and look at Lazarus in rags, doing his best to fight starvation and misery. The struggle against poverty is always a more inspiring sight than is the passive acceptance of needless luxury. You don't want to see Claude Ferrers again or his 'Magic Crystal'?"

A slight shadow crossed Everton's face, but he smiled coldly.

"No. I have seen enough of them to-night."

They put on their coats and left the restaurant, and for the rest of the evening they strolled through some of the many purlieus of drink and poverty lying close about the Strand and Covent Garden.

"This place,"—said Howard, indicating a small, dingy street; "was the scene of a curious riot some time ago. Nearly every house in it is owned by Jews, and one of them, a baker, being overpressed with work against time, took on three Christian assistants to help him turn out his loaves. He was at once 'boycotted,' and gangs of Jews paraded in front of his shop, causing the greatest obstruction and annoyance, and threatening him with actual bodily violence because he had employed other than Jews. Think of that in 'free' England! I am no fanatical Anti-Semite,—but I should be intellectually blind if I did not see that Britain is being gradually overrun by Jews, in society, in politics and in commerce,—and that the marked encouragement of Jews by the Throne and the Press

is going in time to prove as serious a matter as the question of the negro population in America."

"I deprecate all quarrels between sects,"—said Everton, quickly—"Many Jews are kinder and more charitable than Christians."

"In certain well-defined and well-advertised cases, yes,"—agreed his companion. "But in the aggregate quantity, no. The grabbing Christian is bad enough, but the grabbing Jew is twenty times worse. Besides, it is not a question of sect—but of *race*. Racial differences are inextinguishable. The lion will *not* lie down with the lamb. Take Nordstein, for example. He has made his millions by the most unscrupulous and dishonourable methods, and yet there is no one who would dare to expose him. One of his numerous 'trades' is the Drama. He makes or mars it—as he pleases—and he is one of the many existing causes of its gradual decline."

"How do you make that out?" asked Everton, interested.

"In this way. He owns two or three theatres, in fashionable quarters. He lets these to certain men who yearn to air themselves as 'actor-managers,' on easy terms, with the private understanding that whenever he chooses to put a woman on the boards as 'leading lady,' the actor-managers must take her, willy-nilly, and 'boom' her for all they are worth. She may not have an ounce of talent,—that doesn't matter—'anything will go down with the public if it's only boomed enough,' thinks the Jew. But there he is often mistaken. The public are getting sick of having the discarded mistresses of wealthy Semites put forward for their delectation in 'leading' histrionic parts. They want trained, capable artistes,—not cast-off Delilahs. But it was in this way that Nordstein got his wife,—she was first his mistress."

They were walking through a by-street, badly lit and tortuous; and Everton's face was in shadow. He made no remark, and Howard went on:—

"She was a chorus girl in a musical comedy, and she had just one dance to herself in the piece, which she danced with unusual bravado. And her beauty attracted the ever-covetous

Israel, and he took her off the stage. No one ever expected him to marry her; but he did, much to the chagrin of several fortune-hunting young women. It was a great catch for her."

"A great catch!" repeated Everton, his voice thrilling with contempt—"That old, feeble, miserable-looking creature! And she a mere girl!"

Howard gave him a quick glance.

"The 'mere girl' doesn't exist any more,"—he said—"She wouldn't have a chance if she did. Women are taught the coldest world-wisdom in their schoolrooms nowadays,—and even the minx of fourteen is aware that a rich marriage is what she must aim at." Here he stopped in his walk. "Just look down this alley!"

A narrow court faced them from which all manner of sounds and smells came rushing forth like able-bodied roughs bent on choking and deafening them where they stood. Cries of children, shrieking laughter of women, shouts and oaths of men, were all mingled with the melancholy grinding of a wheezy hurdy-gurdy which was being played somewhere round a further corner, and from the murky end of the alley a bright flare of light quivered through the darkness, intimating that the Drink-fiend had legitimate abode there, and was holding his usual revels.

"I happened to go down this place once in daytime,"—said Howard—"on a visit of curiosity and inspection, accompanied by a police officer in plain clothes. I went into one of the wretched tenement houses, where there was a little child just dead. The scene was one of indescribable misery and squalor; and a poor tottering old crone, who evidently had some shreds of natural feeling left in her starved soul, was putting linen round the little corpse, and while I was there she laid a couple of pennies on the eyelids to keep them closed. As she did this, another woman of middle age suddenly started up from a corner where she had been crouching like an animal in a lair, and with a savage cry she snatched the coins away and rushed out with them to the public-house. And—*she*

was the dead child's mother! Will any of the modern 'poets,' as they wrongfully style themselves, write me that tragedy truly? No! They will not, because it is too vastly beyond them! The twentieth-century rhymers write of their own petty desires and disillusions, but they have little or no sympathy with the continuous heartache of the wider world."

They turned away and strolled in various other grimy and poverty-stricken quarters of the immediate neighbourhood, always meeting with fresh scenes of distress and hopeless abandonment to the curse of drink. In the midst of the foulest slums they saw the large and handsome gin-palaces, many with brilliant dancing-saloons attached, where such wild orgies are nightly carried on as shame the 'civilisation' of the age, and where money is lavishly laid out on specious attractions to allure the young and unwary into a vortex of destruction.

"To get the cash back that has been spent on these great buildings which exist for the distribution of poisoned beer and alcohol," said Howard—"hundreds, ay, thousands of men and women *must* drink till they die! Otherwise there would be no 'profits'; and the brewing and distilling companies would not be able to feed, like carrion crows, on the bodies slain!"

"And what do you think of small country places where the magistrates, as far as the granting of licences goes, are mere slavish tools in the hands of one brewer?" asked Everton—"I could name you a town where there are public-houses in every street, and each one of those public-houses is 'tied' to the same brewery. Every penny is made by the one 'Trust' concern,—a 'Trust' in the working-man's ruin! Should any publican seek to trade with a different company, the magistrates 'cannot see their way' to renew his licence. There is a Freemasons' Lodge in the town—but the chief business of its 'freemasonry' is to support the one rascally brewer on the gains made by the drunkenness of the people, and in allowing no outside competition."

Howard nodded comprehensively.

"You needn't tell me anything on that score,"—he said—"I know the devil's whole box of tricks! Country places are the happy hunting-ground of the pettiest tyrants; and mayors and corporations, made up as they mostly are of local tradesmen, think only of their own pockets and seldom try to serve the wider interests of the ratepayers. But what's to be done? All governing bodies become 'parochial' by degrees. Even the House of Commons itself grows less and less dignified as time goes on. It shows a tendency, on occasion, to sink to the vague vituperative condition common to old washerwomen at the tub's edge. And, by the way, what an amount of casual drinking goes on among the members of that honourable assembly! In the midst of the nation's business too! I remember being present once in the capacity of the intelligent stranger at an interesting debate one evening, and I certainly came away with the impression that whisky-soda was more anxiously sought after than the national welfare! After the debate, I stood in the lobby quarter of an hour, and during even that short space of time five men severally asked me to join them in swilling their favourite beverage. When you come to think of it, you know, it's not quite what one expects from the makers of laws for the future of Great Britain!"

At that moment they had come to the end of a long narrow street which led to the wider thoroughfares, and the thunder of London's restless motion and unceasing traffic sounded on their ears like the roar of an angry sea. A few yards more brought them into Leicester Square, where the flaring front of the Alhambra Music Hall made a garish fire against the overhead darkness of the night. By some instinctive mutual consent they both paused.

"It is not indeed what one expects,"—said Everton, slowly, answering his companion's last remark—"It is the last thing one should look for or ever see in the Government house of our great Empire. And,—if we look yonder——" here he pointed to the centre of the square, where an insignificant statue of Shakespeare challenges the contempt of every intelli-

gent foreigner for its inadequate conception of honour to the world's supremest Genius,—"there is the 'counterfeit presentment' of our country's Greatest Poet, who said of our country's curse: 'Oh, that a man should put a thief into his mouth to steal away his brains!'"

"Ah, that's all very well!" and Howard began to laugh—"But have you ever thought that your very Shakespeare himself, so far as associations with his memory in his own native place are concerned, is literally soaked in Beer? Soaked!—why, yes, I should think he's just pretty well drowned in it! His townsmen serve him up to you like a bit of toast in a gallon of ale!" Here he threw back his head and his laughter rang out heartily. "I don't speak without knowledge, for, of course, like all good Americans, I've been to Stratford-on-Avon. The first thing I heard there from a small boy who was 'touting' as a guide to the different places of interest, was that 'Shakespeare got *droonk* at Bidford.' When I had recovered from this dizzying shock, I was hit in the eye by the spectacle of a bizarre theatre on the banks of the classic Avon, as inartistic a pile of bricks as ever I beheld, and I was told it had been built by a brewer as a 'memorial' to Shakespeare. Then I grasped the architectural design, of course,—which is that of a glorified brewery, round vat and all complete. I likewise learned that the said brewer had edited a version of the Immortal Plays, with all the bits he considered 'naughty' cut out! But that's not all. A brewer 'manages' the so-called 'national' Trust of the Bard's own birthplace—never was there anything national' so purely petty and parochial!—and actually uses the design of the bust over the historic grave in the church as a 'trade mark' on the label of his beer-bottles! Poor 'Gentle Willy'! A beery fate pursues his noble ghost, and I have sometimes thought the inscription on his tombstone ought to read thus:—

> "'Good Frende, for Jesus' sake forbear
> To mix mine ashes up with Beer,—
> Blest be ye man who spares my fame,
> And curst be traders in my name!'"

He recited this with much tragic emphasis, and continued:—

"A positive fume of beer enshrouds every personal association with his memory—for a brewer is to put a window in the church where his remains are buried, immediately above the register of his birth and death,—and as if all this were not enough, a brewery stands on the site of his famous 'Globe' theatre in Southwark! The thing is almost more than ludicrous! It seems as if the Muses were mocking at England, and asking derisively: 'Which do you prefer? Your Greatest Man, or Beer? If you can't make up your heavy, boorish mind, — here! — take them both together!' We 'pushful' Americans, as we are sometimes called, often make errors of taste, owing to our nation's youth and inexperience, but if Shakespeare had been born in our country, we should have honoured his memory more sacredly in his own native place at least than to have turned him into a Beer-advertisement! We should have tried to separate the nation's greatest Poet from all connection with the nation's greatest shame—Drink. And what a statue is this in Leicester Square! Like a shop-walker meditating on an error in a bill!"

He gave a half-contemptuous, half-indignant gesture, and added:

"Let's come out of this! Shakespeare and the Alhambra do not 'couple' well!"

"Almost as badly as Shakespeare and Beer!" said Everton, with a smile.

"Almost! But not quite. For the idea of attaching the native and intimate associations of the world's highest brain to the world's lowest vice seems to me to be one that should not be tolerated patiently by any self-respecting nation. But you British are a queer people! Shakespeare's own criticism of you, through the mouth of his 'grave-digger' in *Hamlet*, when alluding to the soul-sick prince's having been sent into England because he was mad, fits you all up to the present day. 'A' shall recover his wits there, or if a' do not 'tis no great matter there—'twill not be seen in him there,—there the men are as mad as he!'"

"There's a good deal of truth in that,"—said Everton—"We

are really an erratic people. We have the reputation of being stolid and phlegmatic, full of sound reason and common sense,—whereas the real truth is that we are very impulsive, credulous, sentimental, and easily led away like children by the rumour of anything strange, monstrous, foolish and fantastical. The blind and stupid ease with which we swallow the lies of the modern press, prove this up to the hilt. We do not greatly appreciate our great men,—and by this I mean that we would not go out of our way to help them or make them happier while they are yet living among us. When they are dead we make just as much ado as may enable us to hold on to the tag-end of their spiritual royal robes ere they are swept away from us into the larger life,—but if they were to come back suddenly, materialised again into human form, and ask us for the loan of ten pounds, we would not give it to them! Think of Robert Burns! Think of the oceans of whisky that have been drunk to his memory since he died! And when he was alive he had to humbly ask his cousin James Burness for money! There is something horribly pathetic in the appeal: 'O James, did you know the pride of my heart you would feel doubly for me! Alas, I am not used to beg!' And I'm sure that if the unhappy, gifted fellow were to return among us to-morrow his experience would be the same,—and that not one of all his whisky-drinking admirers would find so much as five pounds ready to give him. Why, even a kind word might be grudged to him,—for when you come to think of it, how many lonely writers there must be who would be grateful for a kind word from their contemporaries, and they never get it unless they belong to a 'clique,' sworn to 'boom' each other."

"That's a fact,"—said Howard—"And in your literary sections over here you have a certain overpowering and offensive dilettantism which makes it a rule to sneer at everything which is 'popular.' And yet who in Heaven's name is more 'popular' than Shakespeare? Did he not 'play to the gallery'? Of course he did,—he depended on the gallery for support. He used old and 'popular' stories, favourites with the 'common' folk, as the groundwork of his plays, and upon them

strung his jewels of poesy for the benefit of the 'common' public. He never thought himself a genius, and never anticipated that the 'literary critic' would follow humbly in the wake of 'popular' applause, and crouch at his footstool for all time! Nowadays we talk of him as we do of all our dead martyrs in the service of art and literature, as a kind of demi-god whom it needs 'high culture' to appreciate,—but he himself never wrote specially for highly-cultured persons—only for the 'vulgar' British masses. Fortunately there was then no cheap press on which jejune youths were employed at five or ten shillings a column to sneer down their betters,—but nowadays the 'great' poet, so admitted by the literary cliques, is he who has buttered the fingers of a friend to 'boom' him; while the 'great' novelist on the same lines is the person who writes a sexual and sensual book unfit for decent-minded men and women to read, and is therefore the 'literary' star of the carnal-minded section of the 'Upper Ten.' By the way, who 'boomed' *you*?"

They were nearing their hotel by this time, and Everton stopped in sheer amaze.

"Boomed *me*!" he echoed—"Why, no one!"

Howard looked at him with a quizzical, half-laughing expression.

"Oh, come, come!" he said;—"That won't do! No clergyman can get his sermons reported in the extensive way yours have been, unless he's friends, — and particular friends too! —with the press."

The quick blood flushed to Everton's brows with a sense of something like indignation.

"I assure you," he declared warmly,—"I do not know a soul connected with any newspaper whatever!"

Howard gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"Well! Then all I can say is that some one is working you on without your knowledge. There's a hand behind the scenes somewhere. Everything you say is reported in several of the leading papers at more or less length—and do you suppose that could be done without money or private influence?"

This suggestion took Everton completely by surprise.

"Do you really think,"—he began——

"Do I really think you have a friend at court?" said Howard, good-humouredly—"Why of course I do! No one,—neither author, preacher nor hero, gets a whole column of 'boom' unless he pays for it, or is a friend of newspaper proprietors. Mute inglorious Miltons remain mute and inglorious except when they chance to please the 'vulgar' public. But you are not sufficiently known to this vulgar public yet, to create such a stir as has been *made* for you! I am sure you quite deserve it,—still there is evidently some one who knows your merits and has the power to bring them into recognition."

Everton was silent because he could find nothing to say. He was vaguely annoyed and bewildered. He had thought that such notices as he had received in the press had been solely because something he had said in his sermon had appealed to his hearers, and from them to the wider world. Now,—if such a thing were possible, or could be probable, that some unknown influence was at work to bring himself and his preaching into prominence, why then it was no more than a 'worked-up' fame,—a fictitious interest in him which would cease the moment the 'boom' dropped. All sorts of conflicting emotions stirred in him, and his face showed the troubled tenor of his thoughts. Howard glanced at him curiously once or twice,—then said, kindly:—

"Don't take me too seriously, Mr. Everton! I may be quite wrong. I only form my judgment on the facts of modern newspaper management as presented to me by experience. I came over here five or six years ago on business connected with the purchase of a certain influential journal,—I am fairly wealthy, and I was asked to help re-float the thing. Well!—I learned a good deal,—much that I was both ashamed and sorry to know. Anyhow, I decided not to put my money into the dirty work of a newspaper 'trust.' For I found that in these kind of commercial news-mongering concerns, no real justice for

the people is advocated, but only the interests of 'party' on the chance of personal emolument. Also, that no author, artist or actor is highly praised or recommended unless through some sort of 'pay' or private influence;—and I imagine the same rule must apply to preachers;—but, as I say, I may be entirely wrong——"

"I think—nay, I am sure you are!" said Everton, earnestly, "At any rate I hope you are. Such praise as has been bestowed on me by the press, would be not only valueless but actually offensive to my mind if I thought it was not genuine,—and as for 'pay' or 'influence,' neither I nor any of the friends I have could use either."

"Well, if there's anything at the bottom of it all you're sure to find it out,"—said Howard;—"I suppose your sermon of to-morrow will be reported?"

"As an assistance to the charity for which it pleads, I suppose it will,"—answered Everton;—"But for no other reason."

"What is your text?"

"A very familiar one,—'The poor ye have always with you;—but Me ye have not always.' I think my arguments deal chiefly with the latter half of the saying."

"'Me ye have not always!' Ah! One is almost tempted to alter the words to 'Me ye have not at all' nowadays,"—said Howard;—"But in what way do you propose to move a London congregation to such a conviction? Rustic folk are easily persuaded;—but the people,—especially the fashionable people,—of this giant metropolis are of more stubborn material."

"There I don't agree with you!"—and Everton laughed a little,—"Rustic folk are among the most obstinate of human beings. I think it would be easier to move the emotions of a London club lounger than those of a Cotswold farmer! But so far as my sermon may lead me to-morrow, I am not anxious to force any conviction on any one. I merely want to show, if I can, that the giving of alms without the 'Me', or the Spirit of Christ in the gift, is not

true generosity. The majority of people are proverbially ungrateful for every kind of assistance because it needs a great nature to acknowledge great benefits,—but what I would seek to teach is that if you give at all, have Christ with you in the giving, and then ingratitude cannot hurt you. For I am sure that the Christ-intention to do good is bound to work out to noble issues. It is the 'Me you have not always' that makes the difference between mere alms-giving without heart, and real charity."

They had by this time reached their hotel, and entering it they said good-night to each other. As Everton held out his hand, Howard detained it a moment in an extra-cordial pressure.

"You must forgive me," he said, "for having bored you with my talk!—but I've wanted some one to 'pour out' to for ever so long! Most Americans talk too much, and I'm not exempt from my countrymen's little failing. I think you English talk too little;—but that's a matter of opinion. Anyhow, what I want to say just now is that I've taken a great liking to you, and that if I can be of any service to you at any time I hope you'll command me. You may have some scheme for the betterment of your parish,—some plan for improving the general condition of poor humanity," and he laughed;—"and if you have, do me the favour of letting me help you. I have plenty of money I don't want for myself—that would be a tempting bait to most clergymen!—but it won't be to you;—you're too straight. You'll just tell me when you need something done and you'll find me on the square!"

Everton was surprised and touched.

"It's very good of you,"—he began,—but Howard interrupted him.

"No, it isn't!" he declared, with a whimsical sparkle in his eyes;—"It isn't 'good' of me—it is simply agreeable to me. A mere form of selfish indulgence, I assure you! Good-night!"

He went then to his room,—and Everton soon followed his example. Alone, with the roar of London still making muffled

thunder on his ears though the hour was so late, he stood looking through the dingy panes of his window at two or three faintly twinkling stars that could just be seen between the dividing lines of a stack of tall chimneys opposite, and he thought of his own quiet Vicarage with its old-world garden,—of the little church with its square ivied tower, and the grassy flower-strewn plot where his murdered wife Azalea lay, mingling her delicate dust with the creative elements of Mother Earth, who so quickly changes what we call death into other forms of life;—and it seemed to him as if a kind of epoch had rolled away since he had left Shadbrook that morning. Was it possible that he had only been one day in London?—nay, barely more than half of one day? Why, it was an age!—an age since the garden-gate of his country home had swung behind him, shutting away the lovely quiet of fair lawns and full-foliaged trees,—so much had happened since then,—he had seen so much,—heard so much,—and suffered so much! Suffered? Ay, with a poignancy incredible, though the agony was nothing more than the compression of a few facts into a few sentences uttered casually by a stranger. Why should he wince at it? What did it all amount to? Only this;—that all the pain and doubt and despair of good that had gripped his soul as it were in the clutches of devils when his wife had been brought home to him slain by Dan Kiernan, had returned in full force upon him now with the knowledge that Jacynth was alive and prospering. Somehow he had sub-consciously imagined her going from bad to worse,—becoming perhaps a frequenter of such gin-palaces as he had seen that night, and inhabiting a room in one of those wretched slums. He had never thought to see her as a wealthy woman, with jewels flashing on her breast, and the world of fashion gaping greedily upon her beauty. It was not fair, he told himself angrily, that she should be thus full of pride and vitality, while the innocent Azalea lay dead,—murdered, as surely through her as by Dan Kiernan. And he thought of a phrase in the book of a modern author,—a phrase which,

when he had first read it, had shocked and grieved him; 'the dreadful mind of God.' He had considered such an expression blasphemous—and yet—was it not true? 'The dreadful mind of God!' Surely it was a dreadful mind, if it could so give pre-eminence to evil, and doom innocence to destruction! The vision of Jacynth as she had entered the Savoy dining-room that night, radiant, self-possessed, smiling, supreme in her beauty and egotism, flashed before him as though it were a mirage-picture, sketched in summer lightning. She had recognised him,—of that he felt sure. She had recognised him as quickly and positively as he had recognised *her*. Her dark luminous eyes had challenged his scrutiny,—had dumbly but insistently commanded his silence as to her past. Even now, in the solitude that environed him, he could see those eyes,—could feel their haunting, passionate dominance. The idea that they mysteriously followed him and looked at him steadfastly like stars shining out of the misty air, stung him with an angry sense of helplessness;—and full of strange wrath and pain, with a spirit rising up in indignant protest at what seemed to be the unequitableness of Divine equity, he suddenly threw himself upon his knees and prayed with all his heart and soul that he might never meet her again! Never, never! For so it would be best!

CHAPTER XIX

A CHURCH, crowded with ultra-fashionable people, is, to the minds of a few thinkers, always a curious anomaly. It is called the 'House of God,' and in certain forms of faith there are priests who affirm that God Himself, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, is personally present in the compressed form of a consecrated wafer. If this fantastic and superstitious theory finds actual acceptance with sane persons, is it not rather wonderful that in this 'Presence' of God, men and women are so indifferent, irreverent and callous as they, for the most part, show themselves to be during any and every sort of Divine worship? For even where no eccentric inventions of the priesthood are in vogue,—where the ritual is simply one of prayer and praise to that Almighty Power whose eternal force projects the life-currents through interminable oceans of space wherein great planetary systems, like golden argosies, sail on their glorious voyages to pre-determined ports of wider splendour, is it not amazing, even appalling, that a crowd of human units, whose lives hang on the finest hairs of circumstance, should gather together in a building for the ostensible purpose of acknowledging their 'manifold sins and wickedness,' in the presence,—mark you!—in the 'Presence' of this Supreme Omnipotence, and should show themselves less conscious of Divine nearness than they do of their neighbours' looks and clothing? Are they humble? Repentant? Modest in bearing? Not they! Nothing perhaps in all our various mockeries of true religion can equal the ridiculous arrogance, the pitiable conceit of Church congregations in fashionable

quarters of London, where the women rustle up to their seats arrayed in all the newest modes, casting glances of envy or scorn at one another,—where the men, not troubling to kneel lest their trousers should grow 'baggy,' say what they dare to call a prayer in the crowns of their hats to the God they thus impudently deride;—and where the pretentious show of mere mannerism is trebly enhanced when the church is one of those known as 'high,'—and ornate ceremonial assists the general aspect of the over-dressed, self-conscious throng. For then the priests, as well as people, attitudinise and make dumb mimicry of the awful things of life and death,—then they, too, play like children with the danger-signals of the universe and invite disaster on the soul,—then they, too, make show of dress and ornament, and mince and simper before the altar like tawdry puppets on a stage playing for money and applause, forgetful that while Truth may be called the very blood and being of God, Falsehood, as opposed to the spirit of Eternal Law, contains within itself the destruction of every fabric, religious or social, that it attempts to build on its own quicksands of sham.

It was in one of these highest of 'High Anglican' churches that Everton found himself called upon to preach on the Sunday morning following his arrival in London, and all through the service, which was little less than Roman Catholic in its character, he was full of a silent, deeply-repressed but all the more poignant regret, shame and sorrow. It was not that he was in any way fanatically prejudiced against the Roman Catholic faith:—on the contrary, should it have chanced that he had been born and brought up in that faith, his very temperament would probably have made him one of its most devoted adherents. He would have obeyed the laws of his Church to the letter, and would never have known what it was to enjoy 'the glorious liberty of the free.' But, being what he was, he could not understand how thinking, reasonable men, having once cast off the yoke of mere heathen superstition, and having begun to learn some of the magnificent scientific Facts of the Divine Cosmos, could wil-

fully return again to the slavery of the dark ages with their pagan rites and ceremonials, all of which show as barbaric tawdriness when compared with the pure and quiet spirit of simple piety.

"If this were a Roman Catholic Church," he thought,—"I should feel nothing but compassionate respect for all who were engaged in performing their devotions according to the measure of their intellectual capabilities; but when I know it is the 'Church of England' professing to teach the 'reformed' faith which our forefathers died to hand down to us, together with the watchword 'The Open Bible,'—I cannot but wonder what my fellow-clergy are about that they so deliberately falsify their mission! And the Bishops and the Archbishops! Why do they remain inert? To whom are they truckling? To Rome? To 'principalities and powers'? To themselves and their own love of authority? One thing is certain,—they are not obeying Christ;—and with disobedience must come downfall!"

And he was so full of perplexity and pain that when the time came for him to preach he ascended the pulpit like a man in a dream, looking down on the sea of faces and upturned eyes as part of the shifting and uncertain glamour of a vision briefly presented and soon to vanish in nothingness. He was unconscious of the ripple of interest that ran through the crowded congregation as he appeared,—he could not hear the many whispers cautiously exchanged between various persons such as:—"That's the man whose wife was murdered." "Oh *really*!" "I suppose she had a lover?" "Oh dear *no*! She was killed by a drunken labourer,—you see, he's a temperance preacher." "You don't say so! There must have been some reason for the murder?" "No—just the drink,—a sort of revenge on a temperance man." "Hope he isn't going to preach temperance to-day?" "No—that isn't his subject—hush-sh-sh!"

And every one settled down into decorous silence as Everton's mellow voice rang out over their heads with a clear penetrative tone so unlike the affected drawl of most preachers, that of itself alone it roused and arrested immediate attention. Un-

like most preachers, too, was Everton himself, with his pale fine face, earnest eyes and rapt expression;—and before he had spoken for five minutes the whole worldly, egotistical crowd was moved, if not to actual interest, to extreme curiosity. He was 'something new,'—something of which they had latterly lost the knowledge,—something real in eloquence, grace and inspiration. And they listened; amazed, if not impressed. Here was a country parson,—a stranger to London congregations, whose life, so it was said, had been clouded by a terrible tragedy,—who was Vicar of a very small parish in an obscure corner of the Cotswolds, and who, till the murder of his wife by an irresponsible drunkard, had been absolutely unknown,—here was this very man preaching to a large section of wealthy and exclusive London society with an ease, an elegance, a beauty of phrasing and a boldness of purpose such as had not been heard for many a long day in that church or any other. It was understood that 'Royalty' in the shape of a German Princess of that or this other 'Hofsburger' was present, and the glances of such toadies and time-servers as bow to the very smell of royal boots, were, for a while, furtively turned on a stout, unprepossessing lady who occupied a seat immediately opposite the pulpit;—but presently, as the stout lady remained royally rigid, her aspect became tiresome, and people left off watching the quivering of the short feather in her bonnet which they had at first contemplated reverently as though it were a plume in an angel's wing, and concentrated their entire attention upon the sermon. And gradually they became aware that they were listening to a flow of unusually brilliant and persuasive oratory,—by degrees their vague brains grasped the astonishing fact that a parson preaching in aid of a charity and openly appealing for funds, may, if so gifted and inclined, present his subject in various points of view like the facets of a diamond,—may plead his cause with the picturesqueness of a poet and the subtle power of a philosopher, and may win his way by sheer strength and beauty of rhetoric where doctrinal persuasion would be of no avail. And as Everton

spoke on and on, the hush in the church grew more strained and intense,—till the smallest interruption, even of the proverbial 'church cough,' would have been resented as an almost unpardonable offence by all present. So exceptional a preacher had not been expected to appeal to the congregation on behalf of a benevolent scheme which, on the whole, had been rather difficult to organise, owing to the prevalent custom among 'society' folk of giving their names by way of assistance and nothing else; and the most callous and indifferent persons who heard Richard Everton's sermon that morning were faintly stirred to reluctant admiration for the strength, sincerity and simplicity of his utterance. With the tenderest pathos he spoke of the miseries of the poor, and with equally tender compassion he compared these with the sufferings of the rich,—the 'sorrowful successful' as he called them,—they who had all this world's goods at their disposal, and cared for nothing save change and a 'new sensation.'

"To make others happy," he said, in one passage,—"is the only 'new sensation' that never tires. It matters nothing at all if these others prove ungrateful for the benefits you bestow upon them. You gain far more than they do, by your simple act of giving. You expand your soul; it grows nearer to the stature of the Divine. The grudging man, the mean man, dwarfs his spiritual height—cramps his spiritual powers—withers his spiritual fibres,—and becomes the merest pigmy, when he might reach heroic form and heroic attributes. Nothing that is given in a noble cause is ever lost—it comes back again to the giver with an additional thousand blessings. You who carefully count your pounds and pence,—you who invest every shilling in something that you imagine may bring you high interest, and as often as not lose all your stakes, have you so little faith in the God you profess to worship as to think He will not richly satisfy you for what you give in His Name? I say that the richest man among you to-day is likely to be poor if he refuses to help his less fortunate fellow-creatures; while the poorest who gives what he can with a loving heart in the gift, is more certain of prosperity, swift and continuous,

than any present millionaire who denies assistance to those who are in genuine need. I am not pleading for indiscriminate charity. There is nothing I deprecate so much or consider so harmful to the true interests of benevolence as the giving of money to the unworthy,—to the practised begging-letter writer, for example, or to the degraded disciple of the Drink mania, who feigns misery in order to obtain the wherewithal to spend on the poison that transforms him into a thing that is neither man nor beast,—but I say that wherever a real means arises of doing good to our fellow-travellers who are journeying in the same road as ourselves, through life to the larger life beyond, we should never lose the opportunity thus offered to us. Sometimes a kind word is more than gold; sometimes a gentle look is worth more than millions to the lonely-hearted man or woman; and of these lonely-hearted there are many among the world's richest inhabitants. In whatever way we are called upon or expected to help and console, let us not grudge our sympathy,—our quick aid,—our utmost love! Captious critics may say I express myself in mere platitudes; that we have all heard over and over again to the point of positive tedium that it is good to 'give to the poor and lend to the Lord.' 'We know all that!' they exclaim: 'Give us something new!' Yes!—you may know all that,—but like the dates and figures of history you learned in childhood, you need to be reminded of a duty which is so obvious that by this very cause alone it falls into neglect. And there is nothing so 'new' in this age, as the doing of a kindness for kindness' sake! Without a selfish motive, without egotism, without brag, without any of the smug self-importance and assertiveness which so frequently disfigure the donors of large sums to charities; nothing of all this,—but just kindness for kindness' sake! love for love's sake!" He paused here, smitten by a sudden personal emotion. "For, after all,"—he continued, slowly; "love is the greatest of all the attributes of God. If we can love our neighbours as ourselves, we have reached a high form of faith,—I repeat 'if' we can! If we can forgive our enemies while they are slaying us with their scorns and slanders, we

have gone yet a step higher,—and if we can do good to those that despitefully use us, we have touched the hem of the garment of Christ Himself, who when He was being nailed to the Cross said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!'"

His voice sank,—and once more he paused. There was a moment's deep silence, and the German 'royalty' who was seated opposite the pulpit made a rustling movement of her gown, indicative of her readiness to depart. The flicker of a smile crossed Everton's face—he heard and saw the lady's restless stir, but paid no heed. It was not his intention to spoil his sermon for the convenience of any 'Highness' whatsoever. He had no sympathy with that section of the time-serving clergy who hastily gabble through a prepared sermon for the delectation of exalted personages who decline to listen to any exposition of the Word of God longer than ten minutes. And so, gathering up by degrees all the threads of his discourse, he wove them gradually and without haste into a powerful summary and conclusion, full of ardour and feeling, delivered with such moving earnestness that a kind of lightning thrill ran through the eagerly listening congregation. They were indeed sufficiently warmed by enthusiasm as to have given way to outbursts of applause had the place been any other than a church,—and when the sermon at last came to an end, they were ready to generously and gladly assist the cause for which it had been preached. A collection was made immediately Everton had descended from the pulpit, and over two hundred pounds in loose money was taken in about five minutes, added to a bank note for one hundred pounds which had been dropped in the plate like a crumpled bit of paper by Everton's American acquaintance, Clarence Howard. While the people were filing out of church to the solemn and thunderous strains of a Wagnerian organ voluntary, Everton had to wait a few minutes in the vestry for the Vicar of the parish, whom he had promised to accompany to luncheon with the particular Bishop whose invitation and persuasion had brought him to London. He

was a trifle weary; he had done his best, and yet there was a sense of fatigue and depression upon him; a kind of unsatisfied query lurking at the bottom of his soul, which said,—"What is the use of it all? What is the use of charity to the poor? The utmost that can be done is but a drop of relief in the ocean of human misery;—an ocean so vast and wide and deep that sometimes it seems threatening to swamp the world!"

The door of the vestry opened softly, and a verger looked in.

"Beg pardon, sir! A lady wishes to speak to you."

And before he could draw a breath or utter a word, he was face to face with,—Jacynth.

"How do you do, Mr. Everton?" she said.

He was silent. She smiled as his eyes fastened upon her gravely and coldly. She knew how beautiful she looked in her gown of dark clinging velvet with old lace at her throat and wrists, and a plumed hat such as Gainsborough's ladies might have worn, coquettishly poised on the waving masses of her rich brown hair.

"I saw you last night at the Savoy," she went on, in soft slow accents which had the ring of an almost ultra-refinement, "It was quite a surprise, though of course I knew you were in London because I heard you were to preach here to-day. We are all so interested in the charitable scheme which you have pleaded for so splendidly, and see!—this is to add to the collection on behalf of my husband and myself." And she laid a cheque for five hundred pounds on the little table that stood between them. "It is to be included in the general collection, please!—and our names are not to be mentioned. I brought it round to the vestry myself in order to explain this to you personally,—and also because,—because I wanted to speak to you again. You remember me, don't you?"

"Yes," he answered, quietly—"I remember you perfectly—Jacynth!"

As he uttered her name she gave him a quick glance of

something like amusement. "If you were quite candid with yourself," she thought, in her overweening vanity, "you would say you remember me because you can never forget!" But his features were perfectly impassive; she could read upon them no expression of either pleasure or pain.

"So much has happened since we last met,"—she went on, lowering her brilliant eyes and heaving a slight sigh;—"But I often think of poor little Shadbrook——"

A sudden flash of scorn on his face checked her in the middle of her sentence.

"I should imagine," he said,—"that it would be difficult for you *not* to think of poor little Shadbrook!"

She looked up at him with a musing, almost childlike expression of surprise. Then she laughed a little.

"You are not a bit changed, Mr. Everton! You are just the same well-meaning parson trying to make bad folks good! I wonder you don't get tired of it, for it's no use, you know! But you are famous now, and that makes *such* a difference! Even if people won't be reformed the preacher who tries to reform them always gets the advantage of being talked about." She smiled;—the radiant smile of sweetest self-content. "Come and see me to-morrow, will you?"

"Thank-you," he replied, stiffly, "I am returning to Shadbrook to-morrow."

"Ah, but you will not return if I ask you to remain in town just one more day!" she said, with a sudden pretty earnestness—"Please do me this favour! I want to have a long talk with you,—I have so much to tell you! Don't refuse me!"

She laid her delicately gloved hand on his arm. He shuddered instinctively, trying hard to control the rising wave of bitter wrath that surged through him at the sight of her. Only last night he had prayed God that he might never meet her again. And this was how God had answered his prayer! Then, were prayers futile? Or was there in very truth a malicious devil who took delight in intercepting them and bringing them to naught? He longed to tell this woman what

he thought of her,—what evil she had worked on harmless lives,—and yet,—there she stood, foul to the soul's core with vulgarest vice, and lovely as a spring morning!—smiling at him too with the simplest and most wistful air of perfect innocence! He lifted her hand from his arm and put it gently aside.

"If you wish it, I will come," he said—"What hour shall I find you disengaged?"

She took out a golden card-case on which an elaborate monogram 'J.N.' sparkled in diamonds, and on one of her visiting cards wrote with a tiny pencil—'5.'

"There!" she said—"You must consider yourself quite a privileged person, for as a rule I never see any callers on Mondays. We'll have a good long 'talk-out'!—I want to tell you *everything!*"

Almost he smiled. There was something vaguely humorous about her splendid effrontery;—the effrontery of the position to which she had been raised by the wealth and the whim of a rascal Jew. So contemptible an uplifting!—and yet in the world's eyes quite sufficient for the subjugation of that Clown with Cap and Bells which is nowadays called 'Society.' Sufficient too, for her, originally a mere village wanton, to assure him that he, her former Vicar, 'was quite a privileged person' in that he might be permitted to see her on a day not usually granted to visitors! And through the recesses of his memory rang the echo of a dying man's frenzied scream—'Jacynth! Jacynth! Hold her! See where she goes! Will no one stop her? Running, running, running,—look!—running straight into Hell! Jacynth! All the devils at her!—tearing her lovely body,—her lovely body that God made! God! There's no God! There never was! It's all a lie!"

At that moment the vestry door opened again, and the Vicar for whom he had been waiting, entered.

"I'm sorry to have left you alone so long, Mr. Everton,"—he began, formally; then with a sudden change of tone he exclaimed—"Mrs. Nordstein! This is indeed an unexpected pleasure!"

She held out her hand to him with a graceful air of condescension.

"I hope you don't mind my coming into the vestry?" she said, and a dazzling smile lit up her lovely face as brilliantly as though the sunshine had illumined it—"I felt that I really must congratulate you on having secured Mr. Everton's services for our good cause. He has given us much to think about, has he not? I have brought an offering from my husband and myself—Mr. Everton will explain——"

She broke off, looking from one to the other in prettily feigned embarrassment, while Everton handed the cheque she had given him to his colleague.

"Mrs. Nordstein wishes this to be included in the general collection," he said, coldly—"The donors' names are not to be publicly mentioned."

The Vicar glanced hastily at the sum for which the cheque was inscribed. Then his little eyes twinkled with excitement, and his face, which was full and rubicund, grew rounder and redder.

"My dear Mrs. Nordstein!" he murmured, in almost reverential accents,—"This is really too much! You are too generous! Five Hundred Pounds! Why, this brings our collection up to eight hundred pounds this morning! Mr. Everton, are you not delighted with such an excellent result of your good efforts? It is positively unprecedented!"

Everton was looking fixedly at Jacynth, and wondering as he looked, whether any memory of the past, or any prick of conscience troubled her? Apparently not.

"I am sure," he said, stiffly, "that Mr. and Mrs. Nordstein would have helped your cause in any case."

"Ah, do not be too sure about that!"—and Jacynth laughed softly,—"We have so many appeals that we are obliged to harden our hearts against them all sometimes. But such a grand sermon as you have preached this morning would move the coldest spirit! Thank you so much for it! Good-bye!"

She extended her hand. He was obliged to take it for civility's sake,—but he dropped it again quickly. She under-

stood the repulsion expressed in his movement, and an amused smile lifted the corners of her lovely mouth. Turning from him, she held out the same hand to the Vicar, whose name was Carey, and whose congregations, owing to their 'High' ritualistic practices, were known among the irreverent as 'Mother Carey's chickens.' He grasped it impressively and bent over it.

"May I?" he said, and kissed the well-fitting back of her glove. Her smile deepened.

"You remind me of Cardinal Lyall!"—she said—"He is a perfect courtier,—like yourself!"

"Ah, the Cardinal is privileged! He sees you oftener than I do!" answered the Reverend Carey, with a fatuously tender air of reproach.

"You mean that he calls on me oftener!" she corrected him, laughingly—"But he is not always admitted! Now if *you* will let me know next time you are coming to see me, I promise to be at home! Good-bye!"

With a flashing backward glance of her dark eyes at Everton, she moved out of the vestry, and Mr. Carey ambled hastily after her.

"Allow me to see you to your car!" he said, eagerly, and, like a portly servitor attendant on a queen he followed in the wake of her trailing velvets and perfumed lace, and disappeared.

Everton left alone again for a few moments, was thankful for the brief respite from the strain he had been putting on his nerves. He was astonished and dismayed at the force of the storm that raged within his own soul. He felt as a man deeply and cruelly wronged may feel in the presence of his bitterest foe. Over and over again he asked himself how it was possible that Jacynth,—Jacynth Miller,—Dan Kiernan's light-o'-love, and the toy of other men besides Dan Kiernan, should actually have taken a position in London society!—a position too in which she could seemingly afford to dictate her 'days for visitors,' as though she were some great celebrity or mover of world's business, to whom time was more precious than money! He could have laughed at the incongruity of the

thing, if his thoughts were not so bitter. Jacynth!—she, whom he had hoped to call 'the best girl in the village'—Jacynth,—who had been a frequenter of the Shadbrook public-houses,—Jacynth whose old 'auntie' still lived on in her tumble-down cottage, drinking and swearing her days away,—Jacynth, the same, the very Jacynth, without heart, without conscience, without pity! Her half-amused, half-tolerant condescension of manner towards him had stung him to the quick! But,—he would see her to-morrow. And to-morrow he would tell her the truth of herself!—the cruelty, the shame, the grief she had brought into other lives than her own,—for though he had prayed God to spare him from any contact with her, God had not consented to his prayer. Therefore, let the worst happen! The worst? What was his idea of the worst? There was no 'worst' for Jacynth. Divine Order or Divine Chaos had arranged that all should go well with her who served God not at all,—while the same Divine Order or Chaos had equally decreed that all should go ill with him who was God's minister. Then, if it was to be so, God's will be done! Here his troubled meditations were interrupted by the return of the Reverend 'Mother Carey.'

"Come along now, Mr. Everton," he said,—"I'm sorry we have been delayed a little,—but we shall not be late for the Bishop's luncheon. It's only ten minutes from here, and my brougham is waiting. This way!"

They passed out of the vestry and through a side passage of the church into the street, and entering the carriage which, as stated, was in readiness, were rapidly driven away.

"You know Mrs. Nordstein, I suppose?" said Carey, then.

"I have met her," Everton replied, evasively.

"Charming woman!—perfectly charming!—and generous to a fault! A less simple nature than hers would be spoilt,—ah dear me, yes!—quite spoilt by the constant adulation she receives in society;—but she is so young, and so unsophisticated!—so beautifully unconscious of her beauty!"

Everton smiled coldly.

"You are no doubt a good judge of her character,"—he said.

Mr. Carey beamed all over with self-gratulation.

"I think so! I think I may say I know her fairly well,"—he answered, placidly "She is always ready to help our church, though she is not a regular member of our congregation. She has numerous friends among the clergy, and is very catholic in her tastes. You heard her mention Cardinal Lyall?"

Everton bent his head in assent.

"He is, as of course you know, a leading light of the Roman Church in England, and she assists his charities quite as much as she does ours. Her husband is a Jew;—an enormously wealthy man!—enormously wealthy!" and the reverend gentleman almost smacked his lips as he said the words—"But he leaves her at perfect liberty to follow her own religion, and to help its good works in any way she pleases——"

"Her own religion? What is that?" asked Everton.

"My dear sir!" And Mr. Carey opened his round eyes in mild wonder—"Was she not in my church this morning?"

"That does not make the matter clear to me,"—and Everton looked at him, fully and squarely—"Because I do not know what form of faith your church stands for."

'Mother Carey' stared hard.

"Why, you have just preached there," he began.

"As I should have preached anywhere in the cause of charity," answered Everton, quietly—"But I do not consider that I have preached in a church which represents the national faith of England. To tell you the truth I am rather puzzled to know what to call it. My density, no doubt! I should have been glad, however, had I known it was quite 'Roman' rather than partially so. I should have preached with quite as much heart,—perhaps even with more feeling in a place that showed itself honestly consistent with its own professed doctrines."

Carey reddened.

"You speak rather plainly, Mr. Everton,"—he said—"And

were I inclined to be touchy, which I am not, I might say offensively."

Everton gave a slight deprecatory gesture.

"You would be right, I am sure!"—he said—"It is my habit to deal bluntly and unsparingly with what I consider a false position, and that I often give offence is my fault as well as my misfortune. But I can make no apology. Our Church is in a very serious state—and I cannot tolerate what I view as 'stagey' trifling with the noble and simple truths of Christ. Christ Himself is being arraigned before the world's tribunal for the second time in these degenerate days, and I cannot stand idly looking on without protest. 'High' ritual is theatrical,—theatrical things are sham things,—and God knows we have enough shams in this life without making a sham of the Life Beyond!"

"I fail to understand you!"—and the Reverend Mr. Carey drew himself up rigidly—"But—if you please, we will not argue! There are at the present day several points of difference among the clergy which it is better we should not discuss. You have done us great service in preaching for our cause this morning, and for the rest,"—here he smiled, unctuously—"let us agree to disagree! Here we are!"

The carriage stopped at that moment. They alighted and entered the house where they were expected by the Bishop, who, as one of the chief patrons of the benevolent scheme in which society had interested itself, was responsible for having invited Everton to preach in aid of the cause that morning. This distinguished ecclesiastic was a portly pleasant-looking man, with a kindly, somewhat effusive manner, and humorous twinkling eyes which often belied the utterance of his rather primly set mouth, over which they appeared to keep mischievous watch for a chance of contradiction. He was a great favourite with women, because he always managed to impress them with the idea that he was particularly and paternally interested in each individual member of the sex taken severally and apart. Considered as a whole, however, his opinion of them was widely different to that which he simulated, and

perhaps if they had known of the not always choice witticisms which he was wont to indulge in at their expense when well out of their vicinity, they might not have subscribed to give him the luxurious motor-car, of which he had lately become possessor, as the result of their admiring homage. Nevertheless he was quite an agreeable personage, though he was prouder of his own legs than of anything else in his diocese. Let it be said that this vanity was excusable, for the legs were undoubtedly exceptional in their elegant shapeliness. Wherever they moved they commanded attention. Standing upright, or gracefully crossed when the body they so nobly supported was in a sitting attitude,—slightly bent in a posture of attention, or moving forward with an all-conquering stateliness, the legs were the dignity of the Bishop. They advanced now to meet Everton with a bland geniality, and the hand that was proffered at the same moment was quite a poor and secondary affair compared with them.

"Delighted," — said the Bishop, in rich, warm tones, "delighted to have the pleasure of personally congratulating you on the splendid work you have been doing lately in the cause of temperance, Mr. Everton! Yes! And most grateful to you for coming up to town to help us with our little scheme of charitable work. Mr. Carey tells me the collection to-day amounts to eight hundred pounds! Eight hundred pounds! Astonishing! I know of no preacher in London who could have drawn so much out of the pockets of a congregation in one morning! Let me introduce you to the Archdeacon!"

Everton here acknowledged the presence of a handsome man of middle age, about as portly as the Bishop, but rather more symmetrical in height and build, though owning less shapely legs than those of his ecclesiastical superior. He was an impressive individual, with an elocutionary voice and an elocutionary manner, and was highly popular with that particular section of church-going society who like their religious doctrines served up to them like dessert, on painted plates with satin doyleys, and finger-bowls full of rose-water. He greeted Everton with a grave cordiality that became his height

and general appearance, and as he was the only additional guest whom the Bishop had invited, luncheon was no longer delayed. Seated at table, the four gentlemen in Holy Orders began to exchange ideas on the topics of the day, and though at first Richard took a ready and eloquent part in the conversation, he soon found himself out of the running and quite behind his companions in what is called the social point of view. Growing more and more silent, he presently sat quietly listening to the flow of talk between the Bishop, the Archdeacon and the Reverend 'Mother Carey' in more or less pained bewilderment. Money was unquestionably their favourite subject,—the wealth of this, that, or t'other personage being discussed, declared, or denied,—and various ideas for 'drawing' congregations were mentioned as being of vital importance.

"But we must not go quite so far,"—said the Archdeacon, in his deep, vibrant tones—"not quite so far as our excellent friends in America! Over there the services are extremely 'up-to-date.' One minister in New York has, so I hear, illuminated the outside of his church with arc-lights like a music-hall. He has provided an orchestra instead of an organ and illustrates his sermon with magic-lantern slides. Pretty young women in white gowns show the congregation to their seats, and every worshipper is provided with a picture post-card! Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!" The Archdeacon's low laugh had something mellow and juicy about it. "That is a curious, and no doubt effective, form of service! But I hardly think it would succeed here. A post-card parson! Ha-ha! He is a great enthusiast, and calls the primitive Church methods 'the age of the tallow candle.' He says that we in England still pursue the tallow-candle policy, but that *he* intends to use electric light. Ha-ha-*ha*!"

The Bishop and Mr. Carey joined gently in the soft 'Ha-ha!' and helped themselves and the Archdeacon to more wine. Everton was very still; his face was pale, and the light in his eyes was cold as the flash of steel.

"After all,"—said Carey—"he's not so far wrong. It's

absolutely necessary nowadays to attract the people by something new, and, if possible, 'sensational.' They are tired of plain Gospel preaching. I have often thought of asking Mrs. Nordstein to recite in my church. Some devotional piece, of course—'Rock of Ages' or 'Abide with me.' She would 'draw' immensely!"

Everton looked up. There was an expression on his fine features that, like a word of command, invoked silence. He waited a moment,—then—addressing himself to the Bishop, said:

"My lord, will you not speak?"

The Bishop gave him a placidly surprised smile.

"Will I not speak?" he echoed—"Is there anything for me to say?"

"I should have thought so!" replied Everton, steadily, though his voice had a strong ring of passion in it—"I should have thought it impossible for you to tolerate patiently the proposal made by a minister of Christ to turn the services of the Church into a 'variety' entertainment!"

The Bishop flushed red with a violent shock of annoyance.

"But you must not take it quite in that way,"—he hastily began.

"How am I to take it then?"—and Everton, thoroughly roused, flashed a challenging glance at Carey, who merely smiled and shrugged his shoulders with an air of patient tolerance, while the Archdeacon turned his well-trained eyes from one to another as in mild deprecation of any dispute—"A church is a building consecrated to Divine worship. Men are educated and ordained to carry out certain forms of this Divine worship with all possible humility, simplicity and reverence. Yet I gather that Mr. Carey would not consider it beyond his ordainment if he could engage the services of a notorious society woman to play the actress within the so-called 'House of God,' in order to draw a large audience, God Himself not being considered sufficiently attractive! My lord, if the Christian religion is no longer an honest faith with us, let the Christian churches all be pulled down rather than

have their ancient and sacred associations desecrated,—but, if we solemnly and truly believe in God and the Incarnate Divinity of Christ, let us beware how we blaspheme!"

The Bishop looked confused. He was distinctly uncomfortable,—anxious as he always was to conciliate all parties and harmonise conflicting opinions, he found Everton's plain speaking very awkward and difficult to answer.

"Surely,"—said the Archdeacon, coming to the rescue with a bland and pacifying air—"you would not, Mr. Everton, consider the recitation of a hymn in church by a good and beautiful woman, blasphemous?"

"I was about to make the same protest," murmured Carey, sipping his wine;—"Mr. Everton has, if he will pardon me for saying so, become rather suddenly heated in the matter. A great singer does not commit blasphemy because he or she sings an anthem in the church,—nor can I imagine the recitation of a beautiful poem by a sweet and generous lady a more blasphemous performance than the singing of an anthem. It does not do to be too narrow-minded in these days. And I think I may venture to remark that the word 'notorious' does not apply to Mrs. Nordstein. She is certainly renowned for her beauty—but her social reputation stands very high—in fact she is a woman of the finest principle and most unblemished character——"

"Unblemished, — positively unblemished!" agreed the Archdeacon, murmuringly—"It is true that she was for a very short time on the stage as quite a young girl,—but that was the merest episode of accident, and scarcely counts in her life at all."

Over Everton's face there swept a shadow of stern pain.

"It matters little what she is,"—he said, coldly;—"I judge no one in this case as either virtuous or vicious. What I say is this—that if any attempt is made to sink the church to the level of the theatre, it will end by making religion a farce. If people cannot be drawn away for one day in the week from all worldly concerns,—from all spectacular shows, costume, theatrical mannerisms, noise, bluster and brag, to consider

in prayerful quietness the majesty of that Omnipotence on whom our little lives depend for every breath,—then we clergy are not doing our duty. We may not and dare not blame the people, for it is evident that we alone are in fault. We have lost our hold on them. And I am quite sure that if there is any one of us here present or elsewhere, who feels that he cannot draw his congregation together in the name and for the love of Christ, without any external or fictitious aid, his plain duty is to resign the Church altogether and seek some other means of making his life useful to the world."

The Archdeacon smiled blandly.

"You are mediæval, my dear Mr. Everton!" he said, in soothing accents—"Really quite mediæval! It is very refreshing to meet with any one like you in these days. You are a great gain to the Church! But you must not expect to find many imitators. St. Francis preached to the little birds. Perhaps you will be another St. Francis. But modern society, alas!—is not composed of little birds!"

The Bishop laughed genially.

"Live, and let live!" he said,—"I believe in allowing each man in Holy Orders to formulate his own ideas on the faith to suit the tone and temper of his congregation. Provided the laity are drawn to God,"—here he pursed his lips and looked solemn;—"no objection should be raised to the means whereby this desirable end is effected. We should not deny even to Mrs. Nordstein,"—here he smiled again,—"the power to save a soul! We cannot lay down any fixed law."

"Not even the law of Christ?" demanded Everton—"It seems to me our sole business is to lay down *that* law, and insist upon it, if we mean to keep our faith firm as a bulwark of our national life."

"The Higher Criticism," began the Archdeacon, oratorically, "the Higher Criticism——"

"Is rank blasphemy!" said Everton, his rich voice ringing out like a clarion. "You call 'higher criticism' the opinion of

a set of pigmy scholars, whose knowledge, such as it is, may be proved mere ignorance within the next hundred years of scientific discovery! Assertion and contradiction are the forward and backward swing of time's pendulum,—what the wisest man declares is true to-day may be false to-morrow;—but the life and death of Christ,—the Perfect Example of Perfect Love, is the same yesterday, to-day and for ever! And by Him and His command alone we must take our stand, otherwise our calling and election to the ministry is a lie and an affront to Heaven!"

There was a moment's dead silence. The Bishop grew red and pale by turns. Everton's plain statement of plain fact was to him visibly unexpected and unpleasant. The Reverend Mr. Carey looked to him for an answer,—the Archdeacon turned a deferential ear towards him. He hummed and hawed; it was gradually borne in upon him that he ought to say something. He took a hasty gulp of wine, and his contradictory eyes looked down at his mouth in watchful expectancy.

"You have very strong opinions, Mr. Everton," he said, at last—"And, if you will excuse my frankness, I venture to consider them rather *too* strong! Were I the Bishop of your diocese I am afraid—I am really afraid I should have to take you to task! You tread on very delicate and dangerous ground when you assume—mind, I only say 'assume' to know exactly the meaning of Our Lord's commands,—for He gave as much consideration to the Magdalen as he did to His own mother,—nay perhaps, even more!—and He consorted 'with publicans and sinners.' Provided we serve God, it matters little *how* we serve Him. To one person a showy ceremonial may help to salvation;—to another, a simple service may suffice; to one a Roman Catholic ritual may appeal,—to another a Methodist meeting,—but provided we have all one great intention——"

"Which is to suit our own convenience," interposed Everton, calmly—"anything may be tolerated. I see! I understand! But, my lord, your veiled reproof carries no conviction to me. On the contrary, I am bitterly sure that the vacillating

conduct of many of the clergy to-day is alienating the people from the comprehension of Christ's true teaching,—and I am equally and sadly positive that we shall be punished for our neglect and apathy very speedily. I hear that there are even men in your high position, my lord, who are disgracing their sacred office,—one I could myself name, who makes a companion and friend of a professing clergyman whose open immorality is the common byword of the country town he frequents,—and another——"

He paused, checked by the startled confusion in the faces of his hearers. The Archdeacon raised an impressive hand in admonition.

"Pray say no more, Mr. Everton!" he murmured, in grieved accents—"We know to whom you allude. I hardly thought the matter would have reached your ears, but as it has unfortunately done so, you surely see the advisability of dropping the subject?"

"I should hope,"—said the Bishop, solemnly—"that Mr. Everton would not, even in the utmost fervour of his zeal, ever allude to it!"

"It would certainly be unwise and regrettable to do so,"—added Mr. Carey.

Everton looked from one to another in momentary surprise. Then a sudden light seemed to flash upon him, and his face grew very cold and stern.

"I think I comprehend you!" he said, slowly. "But let me just say that I am absolutely ignorant of the details of the matter which so evidently disturbs your minds. All I know is, that a certain Bishop is, to put it plainly, an infamous criminal,—and that both the Law and the State are conniving to cover his crime and keep him in his sacred office, when by every canon of honour and decency, he should be cast out of it and publicly disgraced. You ask me not to speak of this scandal. I do not even know the name of the man concerned. But if ever I do know it, I shall not join the conspiracy of silence. Rather shall I do my best to expose this high ecclesiastical fraud as openly as possible."

The Archdeacon flamed into sudden temper.

"You will not serve the Church by such an action, sir!" he exclaimed, warmly;—"You will do infinite harm! You must learn to be diplomatic. The cause of true religion is not served by exposing the weakness of any of its ministers."

Everton looked full at him.

"Why then it would seem that we are more careful of our national finance than our national faith!" he said;—"The Government would not permit a thief or a forger to become Chancellor of the Exchequer. Why should the Church permit a criminal to officiate at her altars and tamper with the sacraments of God? It is a position I do not understand,—though I shall make every endeavour to do so!" Here he addressed the Bishop. "Will you excuse me? I have several things to attend to this afternoon——"

"One moment!" and the Bishop rose from table—"Give me a few words with you in my study, Mr. Everton,"—and he beamed upon him with a kindly cordiality;—"I am sure I shall be able to convince you, that in certain matters affecting the clergy's position with the laity, silence is best."

He led the way out of the room, and Everton followed. When the two had disappeared the Archdeacon and 'Mother Carey' exchanged glances. Then Carey gave a short angry laugh.

"An insolent fellow!"—he said—"A pity the Bishop ever asked him to preach."

The Archdeacon smiled benignantly.

"I should not say that,"—he observed, placidly;—"No, I should not say that if I were you! He is a very powerful preacher,—very powerful indeed. Moreover, he is being 'boomed'; and if the 'boom' continues, as it is likely to do, London will succumb to one of its epileptic fits of enthusiasm and he will 'draw' all society. I think she means that he shall do so."

"She?" echoed Carey, quickly—"Who is *she*?"

"Why, Mrs. Nordstein, of course."

"Mrs. Nordstein! What has she to do with him?"

"That I am quite unable to inform you,"—and the Archdeacon waved the question away with a graceful valedictory gesture;—"But I am sure she is interested in his career. It was, in fact, she who suggested to the Bishop that he should be asked to preach for our charity."

Carey's round eyes protruded and his jaw lengthened with an expression of mingled surprise and dismay.

"Mrs. Nordstein!" he again repeated—"Dear me! That makes things rather serious! He may become a power!"

"Well, if her influence can make him so, he will," replied the Archdeacon, walking with quite a stagey elegance to the window and looking out—"I see the Bishop has not detained him very long. He has just gone."

And as he spoke the Bishop himself re-entered the room, graciously smiling.

"I have allowed our enthusiastic country friend to depart," he said, amicably;—"He was anxious to get through some pressing correspondence. He's a very remarkable man. And a fine preacher. But perhaps just a little,—a little eccentric."

"Very much so, I should say!" agreed Carey;—"I suppose you told him——"

"Not all." And the Bishop suddenly frowned. "It would not have been safe. He might have started off to rouse all London! With such a man it is best to temporise."

"For how long?" inquired the Archdeacon, with an odd smile.

The darkness on the episcopal features deepened.

"I cannot say. He is a difficult character. He has the courage of his opinions."

"The rashness, rather than the courage," said the Archdeacon, severely.

"Possibly!"

And while they thus discussed him, Everton, stricken to his heart's core with the horrible amazement and shame which had been roused in his soul by the Bishop's delicately hinted warning as to the real nature of the scandal affecting one of his brothers in office, made his way back to his hotel

as quickly as he could, there to shut himself in the solitude and silence of his own room and try to think out the incidents of the morning. Even Jacynth, with her irritating smile and lazy languorous eyes, sank in the background of his consciousness in face of the greater shock he had received to all the deepest and most sacred emotions of his soul.

"My God, my God!" he groaned, in sharp agony of spirit, "If the people only knew!"

With this came the lightning flash of a suggestion:

"Why should I not tell them?"

For a moment his mental self sprang upright like a warrior fully armed for battle,—then sank again under the weary weight of a wave of deep depression. A mocking voice seemed whispering in his ears:

"O fool!"—it said—"Of what avail to speak the truth? No one listens and no one cares!"

CHAPTER XX

IT was with a strong sense of reluctance and misgiving that he found himself next day outside the door of Israel Nordstein's mansion in Portman Square, at the hour Jacynth had appointed to receive him. Twice or three times he had almost decided not to visit her, and to send a written excuse, —then the memory of her mocking glance and light laugh came back upon him and goaded his flagging intention. For, after all, she was only Jacynth! Only Jacynth, a heartless village wanton, to whom, when in ignorance of her true character, he had given the Holy Communion on many a Sunday,—only Jacynth, whom he had pitied because she had never known father or mother, and because she was just one of those illegitimate waifs and strays cast into the world without their own consent, and for ever after branded with a shame not of their seeking. Only Jacynth!—and she lived here—here in this big pretentious-looking house, painted a dazzling white, with balconies to every window, filled with flowers,—she whose home in Shadbrook had been a four-roomed cottage which neither she nor her so-called 'auntie' had ever troubled to keep clean! Truly time had worked changes in her surroundings, — and for her evil deeds she had received prosperity instead of punishment! Saddened and half angry with fate and fortune for playing such an incongruous trick, he paused on the wide stone step for a moment, hesitating; then finally rang the bell. The door opened instantly, displaying with considerable effect two gorgeous flunkeys who stood like statues on either side of the interior passage a

little to the rear, while a stately man in black advanced a step or two with great dignity and then paused, awaiting the statement of the visitor's business.

"Mrs. Nordstein?" said Everton, tentatively.

The man in black put a counter question.

"Mr. Richard Everton?"

"Yes."

And he presented his visiting-card.

The man in black immediately relaxed his severity of manner, and became almost obsequious.

"This way, if your please, sir."

Waving the flunkeys majestically aside, he preceded Richard through a magnificent hall, rich with paintings and statuary and great marble vases which brimmed over like fountains with a wealth of bloom and colour provided by masses of cut flowers and hot-house plants,—then up a wide, softly-carpeted staircase to the next landing, where, passing through a doorway hung with rich rose silk curtains, he ushered him into a long, light lovely room, exquisitely decorated and furnished, and crowded with the most costly and beautiful objects of art and luxury.

Here pausing, he said—

"Will you take a seat, sir. I will tell Mrs. Nordstein you are here."

And he made his pompous exit, bearing Everton's visiting-card before him on a massive silver salver as though it were a trophy.

In a daze of sheer bewilderment Everton stood looking about him, trying to realise that all the evidences of a lavish expenditure and easy mode of life which surrounded him were so many incontestable proofs that so far as Jacynth was concerned the result of evil was good. Who in 'society' knew, or knowing who would wish to remember, that Mrs. Nordstein had been a girl of bad character, now that she was 'respectably' married to a millionaire? A wealthy marriage is the oblivion of every woman's past indiscretions! A sudden sharp regret stung him as he thought of his dead wife Azalea,—

of her harmless little vanities,—of her excusable longings for pretty dresses and dainty things which he could not afford to give her,—of the patient way in which she had endured the dullness of Shadbrook when her whole nature was one that instinctively craved for gaiety and freedom from restraint,—and choking tears rose in his throat at the cruelty of fate. To serve God faithfully had been his proudest effort—did such service merit the destruction of all that his life held dear? There was an unspoken protest in his soul such as that expressed by Omar Khayyám:

"Almighty Potter on whose wheel of blue,
The world is fashioned, and is broken too,
Why to the race of men is heaven so dire?
In what, O Wheel, have I offended you?"

Was it right or just that Azalea, his innocent love, the mother of his child, should be done to death for no real fault of her own,—while Jacynth—she for whom there was no God—she who had recklessly and shamelessly abandoned herself to the world, the flesh and the devil, should be living in the satisfaction of full health and vitality, nourished by everything that could make life fair and pleasant——

Here his bitter thoughts were interrupted by a soft rustling sound caused by the gentle swaying aside of the silken portière. A door opened and closed again, and a light step approached him. He felt a curious reluctance to raise his eyes till the usages of civility compelled him to do so,—yet he was conscious that Jacynth had entered the room. With a mental effort as strong as though he were lifting his very soul out of a grave where it had been buried alive, he forced himself to look at her. She had advanced towards him till she was within reach of his hand, and she now stood still, smiling as sweetly as one who welcomes a dear friend after long absence.

"So you *have* come!" she said;—"I was afraid you wouldn't!"

He was silent. He wondered how it was that God could have made an evil thing so beautiful. Her loveliness was like that of a delicate rose opening into summer bloom, and the soft mystery of a gown she wore, which seemed a mere trailing sheath of old lace and silken tissue that clung to her slim figure like the calyx to a flower, defining without too boldly declaring its exquisite outline, was the finishing touch of art to nature. She met his gravely scrutinising glance with charming self-possession, and held out her hand. He barely touched it.

"Won't you sit down?" she murmured, moving to a cushioned ottoman close by, and sinking upon it in the languid grace of attitude practised by the stage favourites and toy-women of society. "You look so uncomfortable standing!"

Something lightly derisive in her tone sent a flush to his pale face. Her air and manner implied that he appeared more or less ridiculous in her eyes,—that the very cut of his clerical coat amused her, and that she was maliciously bent on making him feel that his presence as the Vicar of a parish where her whole past life was known, did not impress her with the slightest shadow of shame or remorse. Quietly he drew a chair opposite to her, and seated himself.

"Haven't you a word to throw at me?" she went on—"I know you hate me—and you are the only man who does! That's why I am interested in you." She laughed softly, and raised her wonderful eyes appealingly to his. "You mustn't be too hard upon me, Mr. Everton! I was a hopeless case from the first. I never wanted to be good. I always thought—I think still—that good people seem to have a dull drab time of it. I wanted the joy of life!—luxury, flattery, wealth, comfort, position! I have got them all. And you ought to be glad for me,—glad enough to forget the past."

He looked full at her.

"The past is not so easily forgotten," he said, in a voice that trembled a little,—"Not by me."

She smiled, indulgently.

"When there is nothing pleasant to remember, it is best to forget," she answered;—"We should copy Nature. Nature makes haste to cover up and put out of sight every ugly thing. We ought to do the same. You think too much, Mr. Everton. You always did. You are anxious to serve God,—but you do not positively know whether there is a God to serve. He exists in your imagination. Beyond that He gives no sign. You have always been a good man, yet you have had to suffer a great deal of sorrow. I have always been what you call a bad woman;—and I have suffered nothing! How is that? Your God does not care whether you are good or I am bad. Life offers the same joys to both of us."

Her careless, half-disdainful way of putting her argument sounded almost conclusive. But he caught at her last words.

"Not the same joys,"—he said, quickly;—"Not the same joys by any means! What you have chosen as happiness, to me would be utter misery."

"I do not believe you!" she declared, and her lovely face lighted up with a sudden sparkle of mirth,—"It would be a very strange parson indeed who could be miserable in a beautiful house with plenty of money, if he had the health and strength to enjoy it all. Of course you may be the wonderful exception!—but it is so odd to think of you as a man without any other wish in the world than to serve God! It must be such a lonesome sort of feeling!"

She smiled at him archly, and went on—

"I know a great many parsons,—heaps of them,—and they all want ready cash, poor things! Some of them boldly ask for it; others prefer to make love to me,—the last predominate in numbers, I think!"

She stretched out her arms lazily, and folded them above her head, leaning back on the embroidered cushions behind her.

"Let's talk of Shadbrook now," she said, "Dull, wretched little Shadbrook! The most miserable place on earth! I wonder how you can stand it! As for saving souls, there are

no souls to save! There are a lot of dirty, ugly old women who talk from morning to night about births and deaths and washing-days;—there are several old men, and a few able-bodied labourers who work eight hours and drink ten;—and what young people there are in the place get so lonely and miserable that no wonder they go together like the birds, without a priest, for sheer company's sake. That's half the cause of the drinking too. Loneliness, and the want of some one to look at me and admire me, drove *me* to drink in the old days. I loved it! It drowned all the dullness of your preaching and teaching,—it sent the colour to my cheeks and made me wild! Why, the very first time Dan Kiernan kissed me, I was drunk, and so was he!"

A sickening shock ran through Everton's nerves. He gazed at her as she lay back on her cushions, a vision of indolent beauty, with her lovely skin, clear eyes, and rose-red lips, and he marvelled at her effrontery.

"Jacynth—" And his voice almost failed him. "Jacynth—"

"Jacynth! Well! That's me!"

"That's you! Yes, I know!" he said, in low, tense accents of strong pain;—"Would it were *not* you! But for God's sake, do not speak to me of Dan Kiernan—you forget——"

"No;—I remember!" she answered, slowly,—"I remember *all*. Dan killed your wife. But,—I killed Dan!"

"You! You killed Dan!"

Every vestige of colour fled from his face, and he sprang up, amazed and horrified. She, however, did not move from her reclining position.

"How tragic you look!" she said;—"I believe you think I am an escaped murderess! Not quite! When I say I killed Dan, I mean that it was my motor-car that ran over him. Nobody knows it, of course,—it was pure accident. He was lying in the middle of a high-road in Wiltshire,—drunk, as usual, I suppose. My husband and I were touring;—we were racing at night against time, in order to reach a house where we were expected to join a party early next day. When the

car jolted I made the chauffeur stop,—and I got out and went to see what mischief we had done. Then I saw Dan. He was quite dead. I had never seen a dead man before,—and well! it was not a pleasant sight! But I recognised Dan at once. And he would have been glad if he had known!"

Everton stood staring at her, bewildered by the calm entirely matter-of-fact way in which she had related the whole incident. Had her car crushed a snail or a worm, she could not have spoken more indifferently than she did of the horrid end of her first lover.

"Glad!" he echoed, stupidly—"Glad if he had known?"

"That it was I,—Jacynth!" and her voice rang out silver clear as a note of triumph music;—"That it was I who had driven over him and crushed him to death! That it was I who looked down at his bleeding face, and rested my foot upon it! He would have been glad and proud! He would have wished no better end! Poor Parson Everton, you seem quite frightened! I suppose you do not know, in the humdrum life you lead, that a man—even a brute man such as Dan was—may idolise a woman as he would never idolise God! Every hair of my head, every inch of my body, was gold and honey to Dan! Gold and honey,—life and death! I did not care for *him*,—no, not a jot! That is why he cared so much for *me*! He made me drink with him because he knew that drink would do with me what he never could do with me himself. Why,"—and she lifted her head from the cushions and drew her slim throat upwards with a swan-like gesture of pride and defiance;—"do you, even *you*, think that if I had not been drunk, I would have given myself to Dan?"

He was speechless. Who could find reply to such a question? What man, seeing her and hearing her wild words, could utter commonplaces of regret, pity or reproach? All the ordinary things of life seemed blurred to his mind;—Drink only,—Drink, the Black Death of the nation, loomed before him like a wide-spreading cloud of pestilence in which all honest efforts for the betterment of humanity were absorbed into mere blight and miasma, and he stood stricken by the

utter hopelessness of it,—the despair of it. She rose and went to him, laying both her hands in a half-caressing way upon his arm.

"Do not look at me like that,"—she said, quite gently; "You seem so sorry;—and there is no need to be sorry. There is nothing to pity me for——"

His heart thrilled with a sudden agony.

"Nothing to pity you for!" he exclaimed—"Oh, Jacynth, Jacynth! If I had been told the truth, I might have saved you!"

Her lovely eyes opened widely upon him in something of amusement. Then she shook her head.

"Impossible! I never wanted to be saved,"—she said; "I don't understand the process. I was never a girl that any parson could teach, though I used to come to your Sunday class, and listen to your kind talk, just as I would have listened to a play. You were always so good!—you *are* so good!—and I'm ever so much sorrier for you than you ought to be for me! Because you see your goodness has brought you a lot of misfortune; and my badness, if it *is* badness, has brought me nothing but luck. And,—I've never forgotten you—I've always thought of that day when I met you in the pouring rain, and when you trusted me,—actually trusted me to keep Dan from the drink,—and told me you hoped I would be the best girl in the village. Do you remember?"

There was a mist before his eyes as they met hers.

"I remember!" he answered, simply.

"It was so strange," she went on—"to be trusted in that way! I laughed at you for it, but I liked you all the same. You seemed such a child in your faith, and in your wish to believe good of everybody. 'The best girl in the village!' Now, think for a moment, Mr. Everton! Suppose I *had* been 'the best girl,' what sort of a life would it have been for me? Look at me!—and answer me, not according to the Church and the Sunday class, but as a *man*!"

Her white fingers pressed insistently on his arm,—her face, with the soft colour flushing its flower-like delicacy, and made

almost luminous by the brilliancy of her star-like eyes, was upturned to his. He could not affect a pharisaical attitude of mind which was not true to his own inward thought, nor would he attempt to suggest, even to himself, the incongruous idea that she, with her graceful personality and physical fascination, could possibly have been content with the attainment of a 'best village girl' ideal. So he answered quietly:

"It would have been no life at all for you—not as you have chosen to live. But it might have been happy, and,—innocent!"

She laughed, and moving away from him, resumed her former indolent position on the cushioned ottoman.

"What is it to be happy? What is it to be innocent?" she demanded;—"Happiness surely consists in doing what is agreeable to one's self in this world as long as health and opportunity last. As for innocence,—you will not find it among village girls! They read too many newspapers!"

Then she looked at him where he stood, and in her eyes there was a touch of compassionate derision.

"Come and sit down again, Mr. Everton,"—she said;—and as he obeyed her, she added,—"I want a real serious talk with you. I want you to understand me better than you do, because I believe it will help you to understand other people like me."

"Other people like you!" asked Everton, incredulously—"Are there any?"

Her pretty laughter rippled out like a soft cadence of song.

"Indeed there are! Hundreds! Especially society people who have given up trying to be good. I daresay it seems odd to you to think of *me* as a 'society person,—but I am, you know! I always meant to be, and I knew from what the newspapers taught me that the stage was the shortest cut to my ambition. Especially the variety stage. To dance about there with as few clothes on as possible doesn't want much talent;—and it's the surest way to get the notice of Royalty! I got it at once. With my face and figure I had no difficulty. You don't know the society world;—if you did, you would not

find anything surprising in the fact that I, Jacynth, the worst girl in the village of Shadbrook, instead of the best, should have done well for myself. A woman I know who is hand and glove with all the smart set, once kept a bar in a Chicago Hotel, and still gets all her money from the profits of the drink concern. She is no better than I am,—she has no birth, no education and no manners;—but nobody minds that as long as she rents a big house, entertains, and throws money about. Now I *have* tried to learn a few things,—as soon as I came to London I spent some of my earnings in being trained and taught; but the Chicago woman doesn't even know how to speak English properly. And though she's years and years older than I am, and has bleached her hair because a rusty grey was less becoming than all white, she has not done having lovers yet. *I've* only just begun! Oh, don't look so shocked!"

She folded her hands like a penitent child asking pardon for some naughty prank.

"Please be patient with me!"—she said—"I'm not half so bad as some of the 'leaders' of fashion! I'm not, really! And I've thought far more of you than you have of me. Because—" and her eyes darkened with a sudden seriousness, "even in the old days you always had a certain attraction for me."

He was silent. She went on slowly—

"I had never seen a good clergyman before I saw you. The former Vicar of Shadbrook was a brute;—despised by the whole village for his hypocrisy and meanness. When he died, and you came to take his place, people wondered whether you would not perhaps be worse than he. They could not imagine you might be better. They had left off believing in clergymen at all, and it was difficult for them to trust you. But you won them round a good deal;—they began to like you. I don't think they ever liked your wife. She was too pretty."

He gave a gesture of pain and offence.

"Do not speak of her,"—he said, quickly,—"I can bear much—but not *that*!—not *that* from you!"

She sat very still, and did not lift her eyes.

"I am sorry!" she murmured,—"But I want to tell you everything——"

"And I want to hear everything,"—he answered—"Only spare me where you can!"

She looked at his pale, troubled face for a moment without speaking. Her vanity was vaguely hurt. She saw that his love for his murdered wife was still his paramount passion,—and she was curiously vexed to think that the living presence of her own matchless beauty could not drive from his mind the pale ghost of a dead woman.

"I was wretchedly brought up, as you know,"—she went on, slowly, "The drunken old thing I called Auntie,—by the way, is she still alive?"

"Yes."

"I expect she'll be like Mortar Pike,—go doddering on till she's a hundred,"—and Jacynth laughed a little;—"She is no relative of mine, and she certainly doesn't deserve that I should ever do anything for her. She used to tell me my own story every day with curses and blows. I was a love-child, she said;—my father was a gentleman, my mother a kitchen-maid. Poor kitchen-maid! She was young and pretty, and the 'gentleman,' while on a visit to the house where she was in service, took advantage of her youth and stupidity in the approved 'gentlemanlike' fashion. She died when I was born, and left me with the woman who had nursed her. This was 'Auntie,' who for some reason or other kept me till I was big enough to carry wood and coals and water about for her, when she made me a kind of general servant without wages. Of course I took every chance I could to get out of her way whenever it was possible, and to amuse myself as I liked. At the Church school I had been taught to read and write, and I spelt out almost every newspaper I could get hold of. A girl who was in service at Cheltenham used to send me penny 'society' papers—and I loved to read all about the peeresses who had been chorus girls, and the Paris women who make the fashions. I was always thinking and planning how I

could start a career of the same kind myself. Once I saw a picture in one of the papers of a woman in a swing, with only a little white drapery about her,—her legs and neck and arms were all bare,—and I read that she was the Honourable Mrs. Brazenly, formerly a 'variety artiste.' That set me on the track of the stage. To have a portrait of one's self taken like that, I thought, was splendid,—no ordinary country girl would dare to show so much of her body to a photographer,—yet this 'variety artiste' had done it, and had got well married too. I knew I was beautiful—I could see that for myself, though Bob Hadley was the first man who told me how beautiful I was. He was dreadfully in love with me and wanted to marry me—*you* know all about that! He was a carpenter—I could not have settled down in Shadbrook as the wife of a consumptive carpenter! Now, could I?"

He looked at her and was silent. She read his expression, and the corners of her mouth went up in a little smile.

"Then,"—she continued,—"then came Dan." Here she paused, and a sudden wave of rich colour rushed to her cheeks and brow. "Dan,"—she said, in a lower tone—"was a bold lover,—a man whose passions swept everything before him,—but,—the drink was bolder still! I remember,—I shall never forget—the first time I was really drunk. Drunk! Think of it!—a girl of barely sixteen! Yet I did not take much of the stuff they gave me,—but it made my head burn as though it were on fire,—my hair hurt me, and I undid it and let it fall over my shoulders,—and all the men in the public-house shouted at the sight of it, and Dan took it up and twisted it through his fingers,—and everything seemed going round and round, and I myself whirled and waltzed with the giddy wheel,—and I danced and ran,—danced and ran as hard as ever I could till the ground suddenly slipped away from me, and I fell,—into Dan's arms. Dan caught me and took me up, and carried me away——"

"Then—" Everton's voice was hoarse and unsteady;—"it was not your fault——"

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

"Oh yes, it was! I knew Dan was a drunkard;—and I knew he would make me drink with him. I went quite willingly. It amused me. There was nothing else to do in Shadbrook. It was so deadly dull! And the dullest thing of all was when the school teacher, or the district visitor,—such frights of women, both of them!—came round telling us to read the Bible and say our prayers and go to church and Communion regularly and ask God to make us good! As if God cared! Or as if *we* cared!"

His lips moved,—but no sound came from them. Of what avail to speak? What arguments could be used that this woman would not put to scorn? What were the conventional moralities of Church discipline to her?

"Look at the birds and flowers!" she said, and her voice became tuneful with sudden tenderness;—"No one calls them wicked for living their own lives in their own way. There is no law condemning them to eternal punishment for mating when and where they will, and as often as their nature inclines them. They are happy,—and every one calls them innocent. Yet if I bend like a rose, or fly like a bird to the hand that would caress me, I am called wicked and corrupt! *I* may not mate where I choose,—yet it is merely man's law that imposes this restraint on me,—God is silent about it all! Only He plainly shows us that the birds and flowers are happier and purer than we!"

Her eyes shone with a lovely limpid light,—the sunshine of a smile quivered on her lips.

Everton rose abruptly and paced the room to and fro.

"You cannot judge the spiritual by the material,"—he began.

She interrupted him.

"Why not? It is all we have to go by! Wise men of science tell us that nature is in itself the reflex or outcome of the mind of God. If that be so, the mind of God seems to hold only one idea, which is to make each living thing happy for a little while,—a *very* little while!—and then —to kill it!"

He came and stood facing her. There was a great wistfulness and sorrow in his eyes.

"Jacynth," he said, slowly;—"Is it possible you have no faith? Is there nothing in your better self,—for I believe each man and woman has a better self, however much the worser may predominate,—which tells you that death is not all?—that there is a Life Beyond,—an unknown, mysterious, but certain life whose good or ill we must determine for ourselves here and now? Can it be that when you came to me with the other young girls of Shadbrook to the Sunday class, you did not believe one word of what I was endeavouring to teach? *Is it my fault?* Is it my inefficiency as a minister of Christ that made me too weak to draw you to Him? Tell me! If I seemed to you insincere or hypocritical,—a mere clerical humbug whom you could not trust to have any compassion, patience or sympathy with you, I would like to know it. I must have been lacking in some way that you should have been lost! I cannot bear—" and his voice shook,—"I cannot bear to think that you were a partaker in Our Lord's Communion without believing in Him!"

She gazed at him with an incredulous, half-pitying amazement. Then she laughed softly.

"Poor Mr. Everton! What a child you are, for a man!" she said—"You seem to live in a dream of ages far behind our time! No one believes in Christ nowadays;—surely you know that? The Churches have to be kept up, because the clergy don't want to resign their incomes and disband,—but even *they* don't believe! If they did, they would act quite differently. Some people are trying to introduce Buddhism and Islamism as a change from Christianity,—but the best thing of all is to be rational and material, and leave transcendental nonsense alone. *You* talk as if the Crucifixion happened yesterday!"

"It happens *now*!" said Everton, with a strong vibration of emotion in his accents;—"It happens every time one creature whom Christ's love has redeemed speaks lightly of His name! If such blasphemers be of the clergy, all the

worse for them! But, Jacynth, I have not asked you what others say or what others accept,—I ask *you*! Did you never believe a word I taught you?"

She smiled up at him candidly.

"Never!"

He shrank back as though he had received a blow. She watched him curiously.

"If I *had* believed, do you think I could have taken to the drink—or to Dan?" she said;—"If I had really thought that there was an Almighty Power that cared for me and watched over me,—if I had really felt that there was a Heaven to which I should be taken after death, do you think I would, or could, have gone to the bad? But no clergyman—not even you—has ever persuaded me that such stories are true. I see with my own eyes that God,—if there is a God,—does not care; that good, really good people are made to suffer terrible things for no fault of their own, and that there is really no law except such as one makes for one's self and one's own convenience. Claude Ferrers told me that."

"Claude Ferrers!" cried Everton,—"That brute I saw with you last night at the Savoy——"

"He's not a brute," she interrupted him, with some quickness;—"He's one of the cleverest men in London. He writes plays and beautiful poetry,—and all the best critics admire him. And—he's a *very* great friend of mine just now!"

He turned from her abruptly. The utter shamelessness, the cool audacity with which she spoke were horrible to him,—and yet—her beauty was as a ravening flame! A sudden temptation suggested itself to his mind—hideous in its swiftness and subtlety,—why should not he, even he, snatch her away from the life she was leading and save her soul for Heaven! For one flashing moment it was as though the pit of Hell had opened,—the next, he had sprung back from the edge of the abyss and his spirit was in arms, boldly and ruthlessly telling itself that there was, and could be no saving of the soul of

Jacynth through him,—but merely an adding of passion to passion and sin to sin. Like a whirlwind the storm of thought went over him and left his heart like a desert heaped with burning sand, but outwardly he showed no sign of emotion, save that his face was very pale and his manner very cold.

"You've not heard the rest of my story,"—Jacynth went on, "I want you to know it all. And though you've asked me not to speak of your wife, I really must say a word or two about her, for I owe her an immense debt of gratitude. Indeed if it had not been for her I might never have left Shadbrook."

Standing where he was, some little distance apart from her near a grand piano, on which the principal object set forth for notice was the signed portrait of a king, his eyes fastened upon her piteously as though she were a strong magnet drawing all the buried grief of his soul out of the soothing darkness of tears into the fierce light of despair. But he was silent.

"That night when you were so anxious about Dan,—met you and told you that I'd take care he didn't get an drink," she continued;—"I stayed with him in his cottage, and I promised him that if Jennie died I would be his wife. It was a foolish promise," she hesitated, and the colour sprang to her face in a warm glow, "but—there were reasons for making it. Perhaps,—if Jennie had died then, quickly,—and,—if my little child had lived,—I should have been content to settle down in Shadbrook, not because I loved Dan, but because *he* loved *me*. It was fine to be loved so utterly and desperately!—it is not every day that one comes across a man who is willing to give up everything for the love of a girl,—and well!"—her eyes shot a malicious gleam from under their dark lashes—"I don't think Jennie would have lived long anyway! But next morning your wife came,—and *she* knew what was being said in the village about me and Dan, and when she heard I had been in the cottage with Dan all night she told Jennie all the tale. That evening when Dan went home, Jennie cried out to him—'Is it true?'—and Dan couldn't understand at first, but when he did he was like a madman. He shook Jennie in her bed till she fainted away,—then he ran

out of the house and drank till he was blind and deaf, and black in the face with rage. Then he came to me, storming and cursing. He asked me to go away with him at once from Shadbrook. 'If you don't,' he shouted—'There'll be murder here! I'll finish off the d——d parson and his meddlesome wife,—and I'll make short work of Jennie! But if you'll come along with me I'll leave them all alone.' I knew what that meant,—Dan was always a man of his word, even in drink,—but I managed to quiet him for the moment, and I told him I'd go with him in a day or two. I knew the time had come for me to decide my own future, and I wasn't long making up my mind. There was a man I had got acquainted with, a sort of actor-manager who 'coached' amateur Shakespeare reading-societies,—he told me he did it for the purpose of getting into the houses of the aristocracy, and becoming acquainted with people of title and position who wanted to show themselves off on the stage and who were too stupid to know how to read or to act. He was always talking about duchesses and princesses who sent for him and asked his advice about their amateur theatricals, and he played at being quite the fine gentleman. He had fallen in love with me one day when he met me taking a glass at the 'Ram's Head,'—he was motoring to Cheltenham,—and he said that if I would go to London with him, he'd find me a place on the variety stage. So when your wife had brought everything to a finish for me in Shadbrook, I wrote to him to come and fetch me away. He came, and I went with him straight to London one night,—he had his motor waiting in a bye-lane about a mile outside the village, and we did the whole journey at top speed. It was a splendid run! I was not sorry to go,—I was only just a little sorry for Dan—and *you*!"

Everton started as from a heavy dream.

"Me? Sorry for me?" he echoed—"In what way?"

She rose and moved towards him with a lithe, slow grace, and resting one elbow on the piano stood regarding him fixedly.

"Because I knew you would be disappointed in me," she

answered, slowly, "because I felt that when you heard all, you would think of me as a beautiful thing broken and spoilt; that you would be pained and angry,—for I knew,—I couldn't help seeing that though as a parson you could not approve of me, yet as a man you admired me. I know and see that still!"

There was a pause. So long it seemed,—so weighted with deep silence that the rays of sunshine dancing on the wall seemed more expressive of sound than light. Her eyes flashed a challenge to his, but they met with no response. She gave a little petulant movement of her shoulders.

"I'm afraid I'm boring you," she said;—"But there isn't much more to tell. I heard of Jennie Kiernan's death through a girl I knew,—and I felt sure Dan had killed her——"

Everton made a slight sign of protest.

"Do not accuse him of a guilt that was not his," he said, in low, strained accents,—"She died of grief and shock. She should never have been told of her husband's unfaithfulness."

Jacynth gave him a glance of open wonderment.

"*You* say that? But it was your wife who told her——"

He checked her by an imperative gesture.

"I know it!" he said—"And my wife is—dead!"

A shadowy pallor made his face look grey and old as he spoke;—instinctively he covered his eyes with one hand. Some faint touch of compunction moved her, and she drew closer to him.

"Mr. Everton," she murmured; "I have always been so sorry—it was such a terrible blow to you—you loved her——"

He lifted his hand from his eyes and looked at her sadly and searchingly.

"Yes, I loved her!" he answered,—"With a love you have never known. With a love you will never know!"

Her head drooped. Her slim white hands clasped and unclasped themselves restlessly.

"Poor Jacynth!' he said, in a strange half-sighing tone.

"With all your plans for your own happiness you have missed the best of life!—and I, with all my sorrows, still hold the chief prize! I would not change my griefs for your joys—no, not for the whole world! I would not lose the memory of the woman I loved—and love—for all your social triumphs! You do not know what it is to a man to feel that a sweet and sinless woman's life has been linked to his own in the sacrament of marriage;—you do not know,—how should you!—that even death itself fails to destroy such love if it be true. And with all your wealth and influence and power I pity you!"

She smiled.

"Not half so much,"—she said—"as *I* pity you!"

And she threw back her head with an air of sudden defiance.

"I pity you," she went on, "because you are only half a man,—because your stupid religion has chilled your blood and taught you to measure out natural feelings by rule and line,—because you always turn to the deaf blind Fancy you call God, and ask It whether you may or may not be happy! It answers nothing! It does not care! Yet your own imagination, speaking for It, says: 'No, you shall not do this or that;—you must not love,—you may not hate! The lion may tear his prey,—but you must give food to your enemy! The bird may choose many mates, but you must only have one in youth and in age.' And so you live in restraint and make yourself miserable for a dream!—while all the world of nature smiles on in perfect happiness without any of man's laws to control it. Its only law is to live, love and die;—and after death it gives no proof of any further kind of life that any sensible person would wish for. Dead things rot away and breed germs of disease,—I would not care to live again as a *bacillus*!"

Her tragedy-queen expression here broke up into charming dimples of mirth which made her lovely face still lovelier, and she laughed.

"No, Mr. Everton! It's no use your looking so solemn! Neither you nor any man of your calling will ever persuade me

that it is not good to live one's life according to one's own temperament,—it is the lesson of nature,—and if God made nature, then it is the teaching of God. The Bible and all the codes of morality are merely man's work. You see I've read heaps of books since I left Shadbrook;—and I've had lessons from the best teachers in languages, music, literature, card-playing and all the fine-lady accomplishments,—and I've learned as many 'up-to-date' things as I can,—but my creed is the same as it always was,—live, love and die!—and there an end! It is enough!"

He stood quite motionless, wondering a little at the melodramatic passion she had thrown into the utterance of her words,—then he remembered she had been on the stage. And he questioned whether her brusque admission of utter atheism was only part of the society rôle she had elected to play, or whether it was her real attitude of mind. Had she any real attitude of mind? Many a woman has none, preferring to feign the similitude of the mind of another person. This, he divined, was likely to be the case with Jacynth, and her glib utterances concerning nature and God were probably the mere reflection, as in a mirror, of the mind of her 'great friend,' Claude Ferrers.

"You say I don't know what love is,"—she went on, "You are quite right. I don't know what *your* kind of love is—it must be some idea of your own, for it doesn't exist among the men and women of the world. Love that lasts for ever would be terribly boresome!" here she smiled enchantingly—"besides it doesn't last and can't last!—if it did, we should not see so many disconsolate widows and widowers marrying again! And so far as women go, I always notice that if a woman is really fond of a man he at once avoids her and goes after somebody else. Now men rave about *me* because I don't care for any one of them in particular—they're all alike in my opinion. And that you should pity me, makes me laugh! It does really! Because as I've already told you, the one to be pitied is yourself. *I* am perfectly happy."

"For how long will your happiness last?" he asked, suddenly.

She gave a playful gesture of indifference.

"Till I lose my beauty,"—she answered,—"But when that happens, a little over-dose of morphia will finish me off prettily before age and ugliness fairly set in."

"Then with no heart, you have no hope, Jacynth!" he said, sadly.

Her laughter rang out like a little chime.

"Heart is a mistake—hope is a mistake," she rejoined, lightly;—"If you have heart, everybody despises you for a fool,—if you hope for anything, people take pleasure in disappointing you! The only way to live with comfort is to get all you can for yourself out of everything and every one, and *enjoy* what you get! In the social life of to-day there's no time for any sentiment."

She pulled some roses out of a vase close by and began putting them together in a cluster.

"Ever since I left Shadbrook," she said, "I have had no time to think about the past. The actor I ran away with introduced me to his friends as his pupil,—it was understood that I was studying for the stage under his care. We went to Paris for a time,—and,—Dan's child was born there,—dead. *That* was a piece of luck for me. But if it had lived I should have sent it to Dan. He was such a curious sort of fellow that I think he would have loved it."

She paused, half expecting him to speak; but his face was averted from her, and he said nothing.

"Well!" she resumed, somewhat impatiently,—"then I came back to London and made an instant success. I had nothing to do but wear lovely frocks and move my arms and legs about in different postures, and crowds came just to stare at me. Israel Nordstein was the owner of the theatre at which I appeared—he had great influence with the 'Upper Ten' because so many of them borrowed money off him; and he made me the fashion. And then,—when any number of men were in love with me, peers and statesmen and all sorts, he suddenly took me off the stage and married me. And here I am,—well established for life!—my husband settled ten

thousand a year upon me on our marriage,—and he gives me so much besides that I hardly ever touch my own allowance. I have jewels worth a hundred thousand pounds,—horses, carriages, motor-cars, a lovely yacht, a box at the opera and everything I want;—I was presented at Court by a tiptop peeress who never asked who I was or where I came from,—she owes my husband heaps of money!—and I got into the swim at once. Just a year after my marriage the newspapers were full of the account of the murder of your poor wife,—and I was horribly shocked! I knew Dan must have done it,—and I was a little afraid lest he should come to London and perhaps find me out. But—with my usual good fortune—my car ran over him the very night of the murder! Wasn't that strange! It makes one believe in Providence after all!"

He looked at her with a sudden and close scrutiny.

"And have you never thought,"—he said—"that you, Jacynth, are mainly responsible for that murder?—more so than for his death?"

She lifted her head in haughty amaze.

"I?" she ejaculated;—"Why, what had I to do with it?"

"You made Dan unfaithful to his wife——"

"No woman makes a man unfaithful to his wife unless he is more than willing to be faithless,"—she interrupted him, disdainfully—"I was certainly not to blame for being handsomer than Jennie!"

"You prevaricate," he said, with some annoyance,—"His infidelity killed her——"

She pointed her cluster of roses reproachfully at him.

"No!" she said, emphatically, "His infidelity would never have killed her, *if she had never known of it!* Who was to blame for telling her? Your wife! Your wife! No one else!"

His hand clenched the woodwork of the piano against which he leaned—,if he could have flung the assertion back at her as a lie it would have relieved the tension of his nerves, but he knew he could not.

"If every woman in London to-day were told of her

husband's infidelities," went on Jacynth, still pointing her roses at him, "and died of the news, the streets would be strewn with dead bodies!"

And her lips parted in a little peal of laughter.

"Dear Parson Everton! I wish you would be happy! It's so easy! The world is so pleasant, and so full of pretty things! The past is past! Try and like me a little in the future!"

Over his pale face swept a shadow; the shadow of an intense repulsion and futile wrath.

"Try and like you!" he echoed, bitterly,—"*Like* you——"

"Yes,—or love me!—which you please!" she answered, gaily, the smile dancing with jewel-like radiance in her eyes—"But don't be hard upon me! You ought to think better of me than you do! If I had been an ugly woman I should have been good, I suppose. But what's the use of being good and ugly? Christ was very kind to Mary Magdalen,—she was wicked, but I'm sure she was beautiful. And her sins, which were many, were forgiven because she loved much. That's me! I love much!—I love everything that gives me pleasure! Not all the sermons that were ever preached could ever alter me,—I want to be happy as long as I can and in my own way,—"

"Are you happy in your marriage?" he demanded, with an almost angry abruptness.

"Of course! Why should I not be? Isra is devoted to me,—he's old and not much to look at,—but he lets me do just as I like——"

"I see!" said Everton, with quiet scorn,—"Life, love and death, and all the things belonging to these, are summed up for you in 'doing as you like'!"

She laughed;—a soft little laugh of perfect satisfaction.

"Exactly!" she said—"What can a woman want more?" And, detaching a rose from the little bouquet she held, she offered it to him—"Will you have it?"

Swift as running fire his thoughts flew back to the moment when his wife had pinned a rosebud in his coat before she had

gone out in all her winsome prettiness innocently and unwittingly to meet a cruel death,—and he waved away her outstretched hand with a kind of horror.

"No,—no!" he said, in low, hoarse tones,—"Keep your roses for the men who let you fool them, Jacynth! I am not one of them!"

She looked at him with a sudden air of serious musing.

"You are rather unkind,"—she said slowly,—"Considering that I have made you famous."

He started as though he had been stung.

"You! You—you have——"

"Worked you up,"—she rejoined, with tranquil bluntness. "Given you a big boom in my husband's newspaper syndicate. That's what I've done. Do you suppose you would ever have been heard of as a preacher if I hadn't?"

He flung out his hands with an unconsciously desperate action.

"My God!" he cried, passionately;—"This is the hardest blow of all! I would rather have died than owe anything to you!"

CHAPTER XXI

A MOMENT'S silence followed.

She looked at him and smiled. Her eyes, large and luminous, seemed to hold strange thoughts and memories mirrored in their wells of living light.

"Men are proverbially ungrateful," she said at last, her voice breaking the stillness with a charm of honey-sweet sound, "And you are no exception to the rule, Mr. Everton! You would rather have died than owe anything to me, you say? Well, as it happens, you owe everything to me,—everything that makes you known to the world! Ever since Dan murdered your wife I have pitied you in your loneliness at Shadbrook—and I have tried to help you on in all the best ways I could think of. I have striven to fill your life and make you forget your grief in ambition. I knew you were a clever man and a good man,—and that both your cleverness and goodness were lost in the wretched little village where your lot is cast. When you preached for the first time after your wife's death, I had a special representative of the press sent down to hear you;—your sermon was reported in quite a dozen newspapers,—and that was the beginning of the 'boom.' It has been very successful so far,—you are named everywhere as one among the few great preachers of the day,—your influence is widening,—your theories are quoted and admired, but,—if you are tired of your growing celebrity, it can be easily stopped!—one word from me, and neither the press nor the world will know you any more!"

As she spoke she clenched her hand and unclenched it

again as though she allowed some worthless thing to fall to the ground.

He looked full at her.

"Speak that word then!" he said,—"And without delay! I would prefer never to preach again than be degraded by the thought that *you* are at work to make my preaching known! I would wish every word I ever utter to sink into oblivion rather than that *you* should help to keep it in the public memory! Let me remain in my own obscurity, disregarded and forgotten,—but spare me the indignity and suffering of any obligation to you!"

His breath came and went quickly; he was strongly moved. She gave him a half-amused, half-surprised glance.

"Why are you so bitter with me?" she asked;—"Because I am what I am?—or—because Dan Kiernan was my lover?"

He uttered a sharp exclamation. Something rose in him that would not be gainsaid. He went up to her and took her by the hands almost roughly.

"If you will have the truth as a man may tell it you," he said—"because Dan Kiernan was your lover! Because you were a living lie to me when you knelt before me at the Communion Table and took God's Holy Name in vain! Because you, a child, a girl whose aspect was that of purity itself, could give yourself without any thought or after regret to a brutal sot——"

"Have I not told you I was drunk?"—she said—"You forget that!"

He dropped her hands. Drunk! Yes, she *had* told him. She,—this exquisite dainty woman of perfect form and feature had begun her callous career of shame in Drink. Bewildering thoughts flew through his brain,—he had meant to reproach her,—should he not rather, in the very name of Christianity itself, compassionate and forgive her? Had he not pronounced a pardon from his own pulpit on his wife's murderer, Dan Kiernan? The very words he had said came back to him in a flash of recollection: "I fasten no blame on the memory of the evil-doer of the deed that has left me

desolate, for he never was, and never could be considered as fully responsible for his actions. A man drugged by poison which the laws of the realm most wickedly allow to be sold to him as pure and wholesome liquor, cannot be held as personally guilty of any crime,—therefore I have only to say that even as God has punished the unhappy sinner, so may God forgive him! And so may God equally forgive all sinners who are led astray by sinners worse than themselves!"

Did not this apply to Jacynth even more than to Dan? Then he dwelt on the phrase;—'Even as God has punished the unhappy sinner, so may God forgive him!' In Jacynth's case God had not punished sin but had apparently rewarded it. Then was he to be her judge? And while his mind was swept by cross currents of contradictory feeling, her voice, calm and a little sorrowful, went on:—

"You make no allowances for me," she said,—"And in that I think you fail in charity! I know how strongly you have always fought against the drink curse,—and I thought I might perhaps help you, now that I have plenty of money and influence. It has been a hope and dream of mine that I might be useful to you,—and so be a sort of 'best girl in the village' after all! That is why I have done my utmost to bring your preaching into public notice. I wanted you to be heard in London, and I asked that particular Bishop you met yesterday to write and invite you to preach for the charity in which so many people of distinction are interested——"

"You again! It is through you I came?" he said, bitterly.

A flicker of disdain for his slowness of comprehension passed over her face. He was entangled in her meshes and yet did not appear to realise his own helplessness.

"Through me, of course!" she answered, quietly;—"It is generally through a woman that a man makes his mark, though he will never own it! I wanted your coming to be the beginning of a great social campaign for you,—for there is quite as much to be done among the upper classes as among the lower, where the Drink is concerned. Dan Kiernan was a

drunkard, but he was not more so than many a fine gentleman I could name!"

Her delicate eyebrows drew together in a little pucker of contempt.

"The 'lower classes'!" she said,—"That is the name given to the best and biggest half of the people! The 'lower classes' are ever so much kinder, more patient, and more temperate than the 'upper ten' of to-day. I say this from my heart,—I who came from the 'lower' and am now in the 'upper' ranks, through the power of my husband's money. The 'lower classes' drink because they have nothing else to do out of working hours,—and they crowd the public-houses because their homes are often comfortless. But the 'upper-class' drunkards drink for sheer vice and bestiality,—women as well as men,—and I have seen so much of it since I married that I am angry to think that the poor should always be blamed for this failing, when the rich are often twenty times worse. Most of the men I meet in society seem to use whisky as a perfume!"

He looked at her in vague surprise that she could make a jest of the vice that had been her own ruin. She laughed a little.

"It's a fact!" she said;—"Everybody doesn't drink beer, but everybody drinks whisky, even girls and women. Their doctors order it for them, and tell them it's the only 'safe' drink. Safe!" And she gave a gesture of cynical impatience. "They might as well say that to put your hand in a lion's mouth is safe if only the lion will promise not to bite! And whisky,—by medical advice!—is always on the sideboard in every dining-room or smoke-room,—it would be difficult to find any statesman, politician, diplomat, financier, or for that matter any clergyman, in London who would refuse a glass of whisky-and-soda at any hour of the day. Not *all* the clergy are set against the drink, you know! Some of them are good old humbugs, I can tell you! They talk a lot in their Church congresses about the 'national curse'—but many of the very fellows who talk, have invested money in breweries and

distilleries, and get a good slice of their incomes out of the 'curse' they condemn. So encouraging to the cause of religion, isn't it, to see such hypocrites in the pulpit preaching 'truth'!"

Everton was perplexed and embarrassed. It was not easy to answer her or to deny her words. Moreover, she spoke not at all like the Jacynth of the old days, though even then she had always possessed a certain fluency of utterance, but like a woman of the world whose experience had taught her much that could not be contradicted.

"I never get drunk now,"—she continued, with an almost brutal frankness;—"You might perhaps think I do,—so I just tell you at once that I don't. I've plenty of opportunities for drinking—but I don't take them. However, I should not scandalise 'high' society very much if I did,—because so many 'distinguished' persons would be in the same boat with me. They don't reel about the street and curse and swear as Dan used to do,—some of them take a drug to counteract all that—but they've got into the habit of a standing-straight, set-faced drunkenness which almost disguises the fact that they *are* drunk. I know a Duchess who is in that condition nearly every night, and when she goes out to dinner you can always tell if she's very much 'on' because she tells awful stories that shock every one at table, with a perfectly pale, grave face as though she were reading prayers! People think she's eccentric, and say 'Poor dear Duchess!'—but the matter with the poor dear Duchess is that she's drunk. That's all!"

She laughed again, and went on with a kind of quick recklessness:

"The actor who took me away from Shadbrook was a drunkard of the 'artistic' type,—he never turned colour or tumbled about,—he simply sat and talked by the hour to himself about his own genius till it made one perfectly sick to hear him. I married Israel Nordstein quite as much because he was a sober man as because he was a rich one. *He* never loses his head—not he! He would not be so successful in

money-making if he did. I watch drunken men fall into the financial nets he spreads for them—and I am glad when they are trapped. It serves them right!"

A sudden flash of wicked malice lit up her eyes, and Everton saw it. As in a defective mirror which reflects only the ugly distortion of a face, he obtained for one instant the view of her whole nature, and realised that the object she had in using her influence for him and creating a public interest in his name and work, was not, as she had professed, to do him good, but only to serve her own ends,—that she might assume to show to the world a new kind of conquest,—a protégé whom as a preacher she might claim to patronise, and in whose possible success she would assuredly assert her own social share. And, as he mentally got a grasp of the situation, he rose to it with cool resolution and nerve.

"So, though you tell me that I make no allowance for you, Jacynth, and that I fail in charity towards you," he said; "you yourself have no pity for others who are victimised and fooled by the very same evil that has been your destruction! And yet you would help me in my work! Impossible! I could not travel along your lines! I should feel compelled to make public protest against your husband's 'trapping' of drugged and poisoned men! I should judge both your husband and you as ten times worse than they!"

Her face crimsoned,—she lifted her beautiful head with a haughty movement of indignation. He held up his hand.

"Hear me for one moment, Jacynth! Remember that to me you are nothing but the Shadbrook village girl,—that all your wealth makes you no whit better or higher in my eyes, because, if anything, your social position has not improved your character so much as it has hardened it. You speak of the vulgarities and indecencies of that section of upper-class society in which, most strangely, you are now elected to move! I believe such vulgarities and indecencies do exist,—but why? Because money,—money in millions, such as your husband possesses, buys an entrance into society for women like *you*! Women, selfish, cruel and vain!—to whom the heart of an

honest man is no more than a clod of clay to trample on,—for whom love is a delusion, and God Himself a fraud!"

He spoke with heat and passion,—his voice trembled. She looked at him intently,—there was a faint smile on her lips.

"You talk of my work,"—he went on—"and of your wish to be useful to me. Why, you have cut the very ground from under my feet by telling me that the praise of the press is *your* doing!—the mere 'boom' of your husband's syndicated newspapers! Who, that is sane, cares for any praise in the press if it is only the result of an individual influence?"

"It never is more than that nowadays,"—she murmured, with ironical meekness;—"Both praise and blame are administered similarly, but the blame is more easily secured, and costs less than the praise!"

A shadow of stern pain darkened his face.

"Jacynth,"—he said, and his grave blue eyes expressed a mingled sorrow and entreaty—"Wayward girl whom I would have saved from ruin had it been possible!—I never thought I should have to ask a favour at your hands, but you have thrust this hard position on me! And so I ask you to altogether dismiss me from your thoughts, and never to speak of me to any 'persons of influence' as you consider them, or attempt to help me, through the press or by any other means whatsoever! Let me go my own way unaided; let me sink back into the obscurity of Shadbrook, from whence I should never have emerged!"

She was silent. Some small jewels sewn among the delicate laces of her gown sparkled restlessly with the quick heaving of her bosom.

"I am content,"—he went on, slowly—"to persuade and encourage the few rather than the many. Mine has always been the very limited area of labour——"

"I have widened it,"—she said, insistently—"You know I have! And you cannot undo what I have done! You will always owe something to me!"

He sighed heavily. A sense of unreality had come upon

him like the first vague feeling of 'wandering' which affects those who sicken for fever.

"I shall try to discharge the debt," he answered,—"by causing myself to be forgotten as quickly as possible."

A faint colour flushed her face;—then ebbed away, leaving her very pale.

"How unjust you are!" she murmured—"Yes,—how unjust,—how unkind! You would make others suffer for what to you is a personal matter of annoyance!—you would deprive the social world of your inspiration and eloquence, simply because I—poor Jacynth!—have the means and influence to make that world listen to you——"

He made a movement of impatience.

"It would never listen,"—he said—"it never listens. You know that as well as I do. It never listened to Christ Himself. He preached to the People; not to the 'social world.' The social world battens on lies; without such provender it would starve. Truth is its spectre of famine, and any preacher of truth—any preacher who disregards personal considerations and conventionalities is excluded from its centres. The very Bishops and Archbishops lend their aid to effectually silence Him! Do I not know this? Do you not know it? You do! You are as conscious as I am that I could never preach to your 'social' set without becoming a firebrand of offence. For to 'an evil and adulterous generation' I should be bound to give the 'sign' of their coming doom."

Her eyebrows went up quizzically.

"How solemn!" she exclaimed, laughingly—"Do you really think a 'doom' is coming? For them? For me?"

He lifted his eyes. There was a deep stillness of thought in them,—a look that he himself was unaware of,—a look that checked the laughter on her lips, and sent a faint tremor though her veins as of sudden cold.

"A doom *is* coming!" he said, slowly—"A doom is coming on the modern world, because a doom is bound to come! Not because of this or that form of creed or preaching; not because of the things of prophecy or the progress of time,

but because of the Law. The eternal and Obvious Law!—so much the Obvious that it is passed over as a thing unknown and Unseen! The Law which steadily makes for good, and as steadily discards evil,—the Law which evolves Right and destroys Wrong,—it is always at work, Jacynth!—and it will work upon you, as upon all, in due season. For even if there were not a God, there *is*,—without doubt or denial—the inevitable Law!"

He broke off,—something seemed to affect him with a sudden sense of foreboding. "Jacynth,"—and he moved a step towards her—"I wish I could hope good things for you——"

"Repentance counts for nothing, I suppose?" she queried, lightly.

"Repentance! *You* do not repent! You never will!"

"Why should I? If I have offended God or the Law, the result of my offences is very satisfactory!"

He stood still, looking at her.

"The result is not yet,"—he said.

She smiled.

"And when my 'doom' comes, it will be because I am base-born but beautiful enough to make men fall in love with me, and because I got drunk in my girlhood!" she ejaculated;—"What a good, kind God it must be that punishes a poor human creature for no heavier faults than these! One might as well murder a child for being pretty and for eating too many sweets. *I* would not be so unkind!—why should the God you preach of be worse than I?"

He was silent. The audacious remark of Mrs. Moddley's hopeful son recurred to him—"Please, sir, mother says she don't see 'ow God can bear to live watchin' all the poor folks die what He's made Hisself!" There was something not without point in the suggestion. Human error, human folly, human happiness or misery seem such slight matters in comparison with the tremendous forces of the Universe, rolling their great wheels eternally through endless space,—and yet we cannot escape from the fact that humanity itself is part of the mystic plan,—so much so that even the thoughts

of one human brain may revolutionise a nation, or, as in the teaching of Christ, a world.

"You argue as an animal or an insect might argue if it could speak," he said, presently—"Not as a woman, to whom God has given an immortal soul! What you have done—what you are doing with that soul is between yourself and God. Between yourself and God! Remember! For as surely as we two stand here the moment will come when there will be nothing in life or death for you but this: Yourself and God! No friend or lover will then be near to counsel or command,—you will be alone, Jacynth,—alone with the Almighty Power whom your very thoughts blaspheme!"

She smiled proudly at him.

"So be it!" she said—"I shall not care! For if He is All Mighty, surely He made me what I am!"

She drew herself up with an air of defiance,—her beauty seemed to glow and burn with a kind of inward radiance. He gazed at her for a moment, fascinated,—then a faint shuddering sense of repugnance stole over him, and he instinctively recoiled from her as though he had seen some brilliant coloured snake lift its head from a thicket ready to sting. She saw the movement, and bit her rosy under-lip vexedly.

"How you hate me!" she murmured—"Not all the good I have tried to do for you would ever move you to a kind thought of me! Do you think you are quite just? Or even quite Christian? But there! I will not worry you any more. You shall go your own way. You shall keep to your narrow round of work in Shadbrook,—miserable, mean little Shadbrook!—I promise you that you shall be forgotten,—even by me—after to-day!"

He bent his head.

"So it will be best," he answered.

Suddenly she went straight up to him and laid a hand on his arm. She raised her face,—that lovely pure oval of perfect pearl and rose, with the large eyes lighting it up like stars,—till it was close to his own.

"Parson Everton," she said, in a half whisper,—"I believe you are afraid of me!"

He met her bewitching glance with a sad steadfastness. He knew his own strength and weakness, and made no hypocritical pretence to himself of being 'not as other men are.'

"You are right," he replied, in cold, quiet tones—"I am afraid of you. I am not such a coward as to refuse to admit it."

A smile trembled on the sweet mouth.

"You might—even *you*!—might love me a little some day!" she murmured.

His eyes looked down into hers unflinchingly.

"If I were made drunk,—as *you* were when you gave yourself to Dan Kiernan," he said, with stern and deliberate emphasis—"I might love you as other men do,—for the moment! And that moment would be my soul's damnation!"

She drew herself away from him with a gesture of anger and offence. Her bosom heaved quickly.

"Oh, you are cruel—you are brutal!" she said;—"You are not a true Christian!"

He caught at the words with a sudden passion of feeling.

"True Christian! What is that? Do you know? Is it to be a man whose broadness of so-called 'Christianity' degenerates into licence? Is it to be like some of the 'true Christian' clergy who are so anxious for the 'social purity' of the nation that they will crowd music-halls to applaud and approve a half-nude dancer. Is it to dabble secretly in unnameable vice, and yet present an external front of sham virtue to the world? Is it to tolerate without reproach, women like you,—men like your husband,—who pay large sums of money to Church charities in order that their careers of social vice may be covered and condoned by the support of such members of the 'Christian' ministry whose consciences can be bought for so much cash down?

Jacynth, the word 'Christian' has been made to stand for many a wicked deed since the hour in which Judas betrayed his Master!"

She stood apart, gazing at him in a kind of whimsical surprise. Then she appeared to gather a sort of stage dignity about her—an air such as that assumed by some tinsel queen of the footlights in an impressive rôle.

"You are too emotional, Mr. Everton,"—she said, with quite a superior air,—"You take the sins of society too seriously. And you are rather hard on your own clerical brethren. They have a very difficult part to play, you know! They have to preach a religion which very few *educated* people believe in;—and then, of course, society doesn't like to be preached at and told disagreeable truths unless it's done in a sort of theatrical way, when they think it's rather fun,—a Sunday morning 'variety entertainment.' But really a clergyman needs to have plenty of tact to avoid unpleasantness. Take Royal people, for example!—suppose a parson were to dare to tell them the truth of themselves! Why, he would never be asked to preach before Royalty again! Think what a disgrace that would be for him! Now"—and she nodded at him patronisingly,—"if you had only let me go on helping you, I would have had you preach before the King! I could easily have arranged it."

He smiled coldly at her complete effrontery.

"You would have chosen a most unsuitable preacher,"—he said.

"Not at all! I could have told you exactly what to say," and she laughed like an amused child—"Pretty and pleasant things,—about peace and universal harmony—things he wouldn't mind hearing just for ten minutes; how kings are always the Lord's Anointed, and get their places in heaven before any one else has a chance,—and how their very faults only arise from the 'difficulties of their position'! That's the sort of thing that doesn't offend. Why, with a little diplomacy and push I would have made you a Bishop in a few years! Yet you prefer the obscurity of Shadbrook!"

"As one may prefer heaven to hell, I prefer the obscurity of Shadbrook,"—he answered.

"And you shall have it!" she said, with a sudden burst of impatience—"You shall never again come out of it! Be quite sure of that! But to-day,—just for to-day,—be kind to me!"

He looked at her. Her eyes filled with tears. They welled up and fell down her fair cheeks. He hesitated,—then went up to her gently and took her hand.

"Jacynth," he said—"I cannot be kind—to *you*. I know you too well! I doubt you too much! You asked me to come and see you to-day, and I came, simply as your former Vicar. And in coming, I intended to point out to you what I feel to be the truth,—that if it had not been for your cruelty and heartlessness, and the secret wickedness of your relations with Dan Kiernan,—my wife," he paused, and a shuddering sigh broke from him—"my poor little wife would not have been murdered. I have imagined,—at times,—that her death lies quite as much with *you*, as with your brutal lover!"

She gave a half-sobbing cry.

"Mr. Everton!"

"I say I have imagined it," he continued, with a kind of pathetic weariness;—"And I cannot think of *her*, in her innocent beauty, dead,—and look 'kindly' upon *you*, living! I am sorry to be hard,—but I cannot help myself. Of course, after what you have told me, I find that I must set the chief blame on the one devil of mischief that makes havoc of all men and women's souls—the Drink. Well!—I admit this. But now that I have seen you,—now that I know you have no need of me to help you, advise or console,—now that you show me that you have chosen ways of life in which I can have no sympathy and wish to claim no memory, it only remains for me to go from you for ever. And, Jacynth," here he looked down at the slim white hand he held, on which the marriage ring gleamed, surmounted by a second circlet of purest diamonds, "I cannot say God bless you!—for I do not think He can, or will;—but I *do* say God save you!"

The tears were still thick in her eyes;—she withdrew her hand slowly from his clasp.

"Thank-you!" she said, and a smile softened the momentarily vexed lines of her mouth. "You would be such a splendid man, Mr. Everton, if you were not a parson! You make so much of your religion that you cramp yourself in its fetters,—like a strong, handsome bear dancing in chains! Poor bear!" The dewdrops on her lashes melted away in a swift gleam of sunny mirth which rippled into a soft laugh. "But you will never alter! You will always be the same anxious-to-be-good Church of England man!" All her gravity vanished, and she went on like a chattering school-girl, "Now if you want to see a real angel,—one who actually 'ascends into heaven' before your very eyes, come with me in my car to Hurlingham to-day. I promise to fly most gracefully away from you!"

He turned a questioning glance upon her.

"I will go and change my gown,"—she continued—"And we'll start at once—for I'm due at Hurlingham at half-past seven. It is quite a quick run, and the car can take you back to your hotel after I am gone."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Have I not told you? To Heaven! 'Up among the clouds so high, Like a diamond in the sky!'"

Her cheeks flushed, and the laughing light upon her face would have been the despair of a Romney.

"You look so surprised!" she said—"I am only going up for a couple of hours in Mr. Ferrers's wonderful balloon 'Shooting Star.' It's my favourite way of seeing the world. *Such* a world as it looks too from the balloon!—so small a plaything! With its chequered little patterns of fields and roads, it is just as though a child had laid out a doll's garden on a tea-tray! And as one soars higher and higher,"—here, in real or feigned enthusiasm, she clasped her hands and looked up like a glorified saint approaching the gate of paradise,—"one feels far above all the stupid commonness of everyday things!—loftier than mountains!—prouder than oceans!—supreme and

great and powerful!—almost *good*!" She let her hands fall at her sides again and laughed. "Yes, dear Parson Everton! Almost *good*!"

"In the company of Mr. Claude Ferrers?" he queried, with a flash of scorn.

A light blush flew over her face.

"Claude Ferrers is a poet!" she answered,—then, with a sudden theatrical air, she added—"To him the clouds speak and the stars sing! To him sin is wildly delightful, and corruption ineffably delicious! He is of the new 'cult'—(and the most fashionable!) which transfers the dullness of virtue into the fervour of vice! Ah!"—and she heaved a profound melodramatic sigh;—"The 'common herd'—the People—cannot understand these subtle shades of fine emotion! It takes culture, wealth, and an ultra-refinement of training, combined with exquisite languors of idleness, to comprehend the delicacies of 'smart' sensuality!" She broke into a peal of laughter and clapped her hands. "Didn't I do that well!" she exclaimed—"I might have been on the boards! That's a bit of Claude Ferrers. He talks in that kind of way when he's been drinking several whisky-sodas, or several brandies and champagnes mixed. But he's really quite a clever man. He designed his own balloon, and it is such a wonderful patent that people say he'll make thousands of pounds with it. He can steer it in any direction, even in a gale of wind. You *will* come and see me ascend, won't you?"

He hesitated. A strong instinct urged him to go with her, and yet an equally strong disinclination to be seen in her company held him back.

"I would rather not,"—he began—

"Oh, nonsense! It won't take much more of your time; besides, you've made it perfectly clear that you never wish to see me again after to-day, so you may as well be amiable and finish the afternoon pleasantly!" She smiled and added—"It will be something for you to think about and remember when you get back to stupid little Shadbrook. Wait here for me,—I won't be long."

She left the room before he could speak another word;—and he paced up and down wretchedly, angry with himself that he could do nothing with her,—neither reproach, nor condemn, nor persuade, nor intimidate. He asked himself bitterly of what use was the influence of the Church or the teaching of the Gospel to a woman such as she was, endowed with extraordinary beauty, and now by fortune's hazard, possessed of sufficient wealth to move in whatever social sphere of influence she chose. For it is only necessary to read the lists of guests who are received by King, Queen, and nobility nowadays to realise that it is certainly not distinctive merit or fine character which effect an entrance into the circles once renowned for an honourable exclusiveness,—but simply Cash. The man who pays liberally in one way or the other for a peerage obtains it,—the natural result being that lords are nowadays made up of commons. Very soon the prestige of a name will rest upon its remaining that of a simple squire or dame, untainted by political intrigues or party bribery. According to modern methods of 'honours' conferred, there was nothing to prevent Jacynth's husband from becoming a peer of the realm if he decided to play the game and give a couple of hundred thousand pounds to a hospital, or for educational purposes,—and nothing to hinder Jacynth herself, though formerly a day-labourer's light-o'-love, from wearing a coronet with the proudest ladies in the land. No one in London knew her early history, and even if it ever came to be known, it was certain that, in the general *omnium gatherum* of anybodies and everybodies, clean and unclean, moral and immoral, who now compose 'Court and Society' in Great Britain, no one would care. She was absolutely without a conscience,—if she had ever possessed the germ of one it had been withered in her orgies of drink with Dan Kiernan. Her woman's nature had been warped, and the faculties of her brain perverted by the foul and degrading habit which works disaster on so many thousands of human lives,—and though chance had now placed her in such a position that she might probably, for pure vanity's sake, if for no other cause, resist temptation for a time, there

was no certainty that the mischief generated in her blood by the horrible experience of her youth, might not break out in future years all the more violently for its present repression. Drink was the beginning of her career; Drink would surely be the end!

And while his thoughts thus dwelt upon her with a strange sorrow, not altogether unmixed with a poignant and personal bitterness to which he could not give a name, she re-entered the room, clad in a dainty out-of-door costume of ivory-coloured cloth, with a coquettishly contrived hood of the same hue, which she wore closely drawn over her luxuriant hair, and tied with a knot of velvet ribbon under the chin. She looked like the nymph-embodiment of a white rose,—the dull cream of her dress enhancing the delicate tint of her skin and the dark lustre of her wonderful eyes. And Everton, looking at her, was suddenly reminded, though he knew not why, of a verse in the Apocryphal 'Book of Enoch'—

'This spirit of light was given unto thee, a virgin clothed with the heavens; take heed, I charge thee, that thou keep her pure, that thou preserve her from all stain. Let her be free from worldliness and sin, as the snow upon the mountain-top. Let her venerate the Lord God and walk in His holy laws.'

And his heart ached heavily, for he could not forget that she had been one of his 'little flock'—and that upon him, perchance, as much as any one had fallen the charge to 'keep her pure'—to 'preserve her from all stain.' He had been deceived in her;—but was it not his fault? Should he not, as her Vicar, when he first went to Shadbrock, have tried to know her better? Could he not have gained her confidence and by sympathy and help prevented her ruin? And the cry of Bob Hadley rang again in his ears—"Save Jacynth! She's lost—lost! Try if you can do anything—save her from herself!—from the shame . . . "

Had he obeyed this last request of the dead? Had he 'tried' to save her? Had he not rather been like so many country parsons, content to wait the course of events and listen

to what other people said before going steadily to work to form his own opinion? Surely he might have done some good before all good for her was past his power! A wave of self-tormenting memory swept over him, while she, all unconscious of his feeling, only saw that he seemed to be looking at her very intently, and in her own mind she decided that he must be admiring the becoming effect of her cream-coloured hood.

"I'm quite ready,"—she said, smiling radiantly; "And the car is at the door. Come along, Mr. Everton! We'll get to Hurlingham in less than half an hour. You've no train to catch, have you? You're not going back to Shadbrook to-night?"

"No. Not till to-morrow morning," he replied.

"You stayed in town a day longer to please me, didn't you?" she asked, with a sparkling glance at him.

"I stayed, because you wished it,—certainly,"—he said; then on a sudden impulse he added—"I thought I might perhaps be of some service to you——"

"In reading the Prayers for the Sick, or the Prayers for the Dying?" she queried, lightly.

His brows darkened.

"You jest with me, of course," he said;—"Nothing is of serious import to you any more. Life has become to you a mere comedy in which for the moment you play a leading part. I understand your humour——"

"It is *quite* a good humour!" she smilingly assured him.

"You may think so; it is the natural outcome of your 'social' position and surroundings,"—he answered her, with a tinge of scorn,—"The men and women with whom you associate are modern degenerates who have no belief in God or a future state—you imbibe their theories and think them clever—even intellectual,—though there is no more intellect in atheism than there is in the spectacle of an ape chattering at the sun. I cannot change your views; it would be useless for me to try—*now*. But I wish you would tell me one thing——"

She drew nearer to him.

"What is that?" she asked, with such sudden gentleness that he was vaguely moved and startled.

"Just this,"—and the deep, tender voice trembled; "In the old days,—when I first went to Shadbrook,—when I knew you as a young girl,—a child almost—could I have helped and guided you at any time when I did not?"

She looked at him with soft eyes that held an infinity of dreams.

"Could you have helped and guided me?" she echoed;—"I think not! Unless,"—and her lips parted in a slow, enchanting smile—"Unless you had come to Shadbrook unmarried,—unless it had chanced that you had been one of those much-sought-after male creatures, a bachelor parson!—then I would have made you fall in love with me! I am sure," and she paused, watching the flush on his face die away into pallor—"it would have been easy!" She paused again,—and he stood before her mute and rigid. "Then perhaps,"—and she laughed,—"You might have married me, and as the children's stories say, we should have been 'happy ever afterwards.' And I should have been good and respectable, and—*dull*! Oh, very dull! No, Parson Everton, you could never have 'helped' or 'guided' me! Be quite easy on that score! You could never have made me believe anything I didn't want to believe. I was always a 'bad lot'! But there are many others equally bad,—quite 'distinguished' ladies too! Don't look so dreadfully serious! Come to Hurlingham—we'll say good-bye there!

For a moment he stood irresolute; then, as she went towards the door and beckoned him out of the room, he followed. A certain curiosity impelled him to accompany her,—and also an odd but distinct reluctance to bid her farewell.

Her car, as she had said, was in waiting,—a luxurious vehicle upholstered in dark blue with gold and ivory fittings, guided by a French chauffeur in livery. She sprang lightly in, her butler or major-domo standing on guard while one of the two attendant flunkeys obsequiously handed her a cloak of superb sables.

"I shall not be home to dinner," she said to these, her menials,—"Tell your master I have gone ballooning with Mr. Ferrers."

The butler received the statement with a well-trained bow. What the respectable man thought of her 'ballooning with Mr. Ferrers' did not appear on his carefully composed countenance.

"Come, Mr. Everton!" she called, a trifle imperiously.

Everton obeyed the summons, and entering the car, took his seat beside her. In another moment they were gliding swiftly out of Portman Square and threading their way through the crowded streets of the metropolis, amid the roar and crush of traffic more dangerous to life and limb than any other known means of hazardous wayfaring.

"This is not the car that ran over Dan Kiernan,"—she then observed, with the simple air of making quite an ordinary remark—"But it is the same chauffeur."

Everton shuddered.

"Was it necessary to tell me that?" he asked.

She laughed.

"Have I given you a thrill? So sorry! I am always forgetting that you live out of the world and don't 'go' with the time. But, really, the motor-cars run over and kill so many people that one ceases to think about it. It's part of the fun. And most of the lives are of no value."

"Except to their families and friends!" said Everton, with indignant emphasis.

She laughed again.

"Families? Friends? Oh dear! Families seem to exist merely to quarrel among themselves;—see how they'll wrangle over a Will! And as for friends!—surely you know what *they* are?—pleasant to your face—slanderous behind your back!"

"Those are not friends,"—he answered;—"They are mere time-servers and hypocrites."

"Of course! But they are the only sort of 'friends' one gets nowadays. People are only kind to you when they fancy you can be useful to them; when once they are sure you

can't or won't be useful, they 'drop' you. That's quite understood."

"Then you do not believe even in friendship, Jacynth!" he said.

She shook her head.

"No, indeed! I'm not so silly! I've told you my creed—it is—To Enjoy! Never mind how the enjoyment is got or where it comes in—Enjoy! I am enjoying myself now!"

"In any special way?" he asked, coldly.

"Oh yes—in a *very* special way!" she answered, smiling. "I'm enjoying the company of the dear kind parson who wanted to make me a good girl! I am, indeed! It is a pleasure to me to have you beside me. I'm not a good girl, you know,—I'm a bad one, according to your view of life, and I've told you all about myself—yet *here you are*!"

He was silent. She gave him a covert glance.

"Don't worry, Mr. Everton! A parson may be seen anywhere, and with any one. That's why so many of your calling turn up at the music-halls and hang around the stage-doors! It's all for the Christian saving of souls!"

A profound disgust filled him as he heard her. Yet, to defend any position taken up by a woman of her type was mere waste of breath. Even to show offence at her manner of attacking the Christian ministry was to pay her too much honour. He, therefore, kept silence. His calm demeanour evidently irritated her,—his composed face, with just the faintest touch of wondering pity and contempt expressed upon it, conveyed a hint to her mind, full of egotism as she was, that her raillery did not seem to him clever, as she thought it, but merely vulgar. She looked at him once or twice half angrily and hummed a little tune under her breath.

"I suppose when you go back to Shadbrook to-morrow," she said, presently—"You will stay there all your life!"

"I hope so," he answered, quietly.

"Will you tell them you have seen me?"

"Tell them? You mean the villagers? No; I shall not mention your name."

"Why not? I should like them to know how much better off I am than they are!"

"No doubt you would!"—he said—"You would like them to know that the wages of sin is not death in your case, but life,—such life as you live—which is not life at all. You would like them to envy your clothes, your jewels, your possessions;—you would like to sow the seeds of restlessness, evil desire and discontent in the hearts of the girls who knew you, and who, as yet, are innocent of your wrong-doing,—you would like this,—it would be a pleasure to you! But if such mischief is to be worked I shall have no hand in it. I shall let the village think as it thinks now, that you are among those whom it is best and kindest to forget."

Her cheeks crimsoned, her eyes flashed.

"Thank-you!" she smiled—"It is so easy to forget me, isn't it!"

He made no reply. Her beauty was almost aggressive in its brilliancy as she turned her face towards him. The afternoon sunlight set warm ripples of living gold in her rich brown hair, and she looked so lovely, that even as the car raced along, being now out of the more crowded thoroughfares, men turned and stared, amazed by the vision that flew past them. If ever the goddess of a poet's dream could be supposed to take mortal shape, then Jacynth represented in herself the external embodiment of all the love-lyrics of the world. Yet inwardly she was corrupt and cruel; a very devil in woman's fairest shape; and Richard Everton, fighting strenuously between the strong attraction of her physical charm and his own spiritual knowledge of her innate wickedness, found the stress of the battle gradually diminishing, and the storm clearing to calm. Temptation had assailed him; but his strength had lain in the consciousness that he was not above temptation. And the victory was now being given into his hands.

They reached Hurlingham ten minutes before the appointed hour, and on descending from her motor-carriage, Jacynth led the way to an open part of the grounds where several groups

of gaily-dressed people were standing and sitting about or sauntering round a broad expanse of greensward in the centre of which a huge balloon, nearly filled with gas, was swaying uneasily to and fro as though struggling to release itself and tear asunder its cords from the sand-bags that held it to the ground. The afternoon was one of clear light and warm air,—the London 'season,' though wearing on apace, had not yet closed—and the women who were gathered together to watch the ascent of the aerial monster of the sky were all elegantly, not to say extravagantly attired in dainty muslin and chiffon toilettes, with hats perched on their marvellous artificial coiffures like miniature flower-gardens, and parasols of painted silk designed to match their gowns. Some pretty faces and figures were among them,—but all paled into humblest insignificance when Jacynth, in her plainly cut white cloth frock, with her radiant face smiling out of its coquettish hood, appeared on the scene. Then every man left every other woman to crowd round the fair heroine of the hour,—and the women, in consequence of being so 'left,' looked coldly critical or spitefully derisive, indulging in light raillery among themselves as to the identity and personality of Mrs. Nordstein's companion—"Another clerical capture, my dear! Just fancy! I thought Cardinal Lyall was the latest victim! How many gentlemen of all the Churches does she intend to fool!" Jacynth herself, conscious of the sensation she made, yet assuming a perfectly graceful *un*-consciousness of it, moved among her acquaintances with an easy pleasantness, shaking hands with this person, bowing to that, but introducing Everton to nobody till the massive figure of Claude Ferrers raised itself from somewhere among the ropes and cords of the balloon and advanced to meet her. The 'poet' and aeronaut looked very pale, and the expression of his glassy blue eyes was a staring enigma.

"Ah, most beautiful lady!" he exclaimed—"At last! I was beginning to fear you would fail me!"

"Have I ever done so?" she asked, with a charming upward glance,—then she added—"I've been talking all the

afternoon to an old friend who knew me when I was a little girl! Let me introduce you to each other—Mr. Richard Everton: Mr. Claude Ferrers."

The two men acknowledged each other by the very slightest salutation. Ferrers looked with a cynical air at Everton's tall slim figure arrayed in its clerical suit—then he said in a slow drawling voice:

"I see you are of the other-world persuasion, Mr. Everton! You teach us how to get to heaven after death,—but I and my 'Shooting Star'" (and he pointed to the balloon) "will take you there during life! What do you say? Will you come?"

Everton's clear blue eyes rested upon him fixedly, expressing in their grave scrutiny a complete comprehension of his temperament and character.

"Your heaven and mine are possibly dissimilar," he answered, with constrained civility—"We should probably have to journey in different directions."

Ferrers laughed softly, and stroked his clean-shaven flabby chin with one fat white hand on which a large diamond sparkled.

"Very much so!" he agreed, nodding condescendingly—"You would keep to the narrow line of dogma,—I to the broad high-road of science. We should never meet!" And he turned with a smile to Jacynth—"Magic Crystal, are you ready?"

"Quite!" she answered, whereupon he made a sign to the men who were busy filling the balloon with gas, to hasten the completion of their work. The scattered people in the grounds of Hurlingham now began to collect in groups, which speedily extended till there was a considerably large crowd watching, like curious children, the turning off of the gas and the removal of the india-rubber pipe which had supplied the balloon with its soaring power. Preparations were now made to fix the wicker car to the bottom of the balloon—and while this business was going on, several persons entered into conversation with both Ferrers and Jacynth, and Everton was

left for a moment alone and apart. A vague sense of pain and foreboding crept over him as he looked round upon the brilliant scene; he wondered how it was that no one present appeared to entertain the slightest anxiety as to the safety of the voyagers who were about to sail the seas of space. It seemed to be taken for granted that to go up in a balloon was as simple and ordinary as to drive in a carriage. And while he was yet considering the various probabilities of risk in the undertaking, Jacynth came up to him with outstretched hand and said:

"Good-bye!"

"Are you going now?" he said.

"At once."

"Do you know *where* you are going?"

She laughed.

"Ah, that is never quite certain! It depends on Mr. Ferrers."

"Are you alone with him? Does no one else accompany you?"

She opened her large eyes in smiling wonder.

"Certainly not! Why should any one go with us? We have travelled in the sky together scores of times!"

"And you have no fear?"

"None!"

His face expressed a certain anxiety, and she saw it.

"Why, you surely don't mind what becomes of me, do you?" she said, lightly—"This is our long good-bye, you must remember! You wish it to be so."

"Yes, I wish it to be so,"—he repeated, almost mechanically.

"You wish me to do nothing more at any time to make the world listen to you?"

"Nothing more! Never, never at any time!"

"Well, if I never speak to you again or attempt to help you in any way, will you try and think more kindly of me some day?"

A thrill of compassion and regret moved him—he gently pressed her hand.

"I will, Jacynth! I will do my best."

"That's right!" and all suddenly she moved up closely to him and spoke in swift low accents—"Parson Everton, it is only your God that stands between us!—the God of the Churches—not the God of Nature! It is your religion that makes you narrow and miserable!—a religion that was not strong enough to save Dan—or me! Think of that! Think that we both heard you preach of Christ every Sunday, and that neither of us were a bit the better for it! Think of *that*, I say, when I am gone! For it wants thinking about!"

And with this she turned and obeyed the beckoning hand of Claude Ferrers, who had been for the past few minutes supervising the final preparations for the ascent of his 'Shooting Star.' Everything was now ready,—and Jacynth, amid some cheering and hand-clapping from the concourse of spectators who had gathered round the balloon in a circle, entered the wicker car and waved her hand smilingly to her various acquaintances. Ferrers took his place beside her, and gave the signal to let go. The cords were loosened, and the balloon rose, floating over the surface of the ground in a light wind. Once more Jacynth waved her hand—

"Parson Everton, good-bye!"

He pressed to the edge of the crowd, watching her fair face as it was borne upward into the translucent light and air of which it seemed a part.

"Good-bye!" he called.

And like a silver note of music played afar off and dropping liquidly through space, came the farewell echo of her voice once more—

"Good-bye!"

Up—up—still up, and ever higher the 'Shooting Star' soared; and every eye in the crowd was strained to follow its progress till it looked no bigger than a child's kite straying in the sky. Then it began to travel swiftly towards the south-west, with almost as much steadiness as a vessel traversing the ocean, and within less than a quarter of an hour had entirely disappeared. The spectators began to disperse; the

men and women laughing and chatting and laying bets on the distance the balloon would travel, and on the probable point of its descent, while Everton, with a sense of unreality upon him as though he had been, and were still moving in a wild dream, made his way to the spot where Jacynth's motor-car, by her orders, waited to take him back to his hotel. As he walked slowly along his attention was suddenly riveted by some words spoken among a group of persons who were leaving Hurlingham by the same exit as himself.

"Yes, Ferrers was drunk,"—said one man;—"Not a doubt of it! But the air will sober him."

"I'm not so sure of that!"—said another;—"If he throws out too much ballast by mistake——"

There was a laugh.

"Then it will be all U.P.," said the first man—"And no great loss."

"But the lovely Mrs. Nordstein——"

"Oh, she'll take care of herself, you bet! She'll bring him down to earth with a bang!"

Everton could no longer restrain himself.

"I beg your pardon!"—he said, courteously, addressing one of the party;—"But did I hear you say that Mr. Ferrers, the owner of the balloon that has just gone up, was—was——"

"Not quite as he should be?" finished the man spoken to, with a good-humoured smile—"Yes. I said he was drunk, and he is. But Mr. Ferrers lives in that condition for the most part; so it is nothing unusual."

"But——" and Everton looked troubled—"he seemed perfectly sober——"

"Oh, he always *seems*! That's the worst part of it. He stands straight, looks straight and talks straight;—but he's drunk,—and his talk is most clever when he's most drunk."

"Then—the lady with him,—should she not have been told——?"

"I presume the lady with him knew all about it," was the careless reply;—"She ought to if she doesn't!"

He laughed again, and Everton drew back.

"There's no danger, I suppose?" he said, as a last word.

"Oh, not the least in the world! If there were, no one could help it!"

The group passed on. He felt he could ask no more questions; and entering with reluctance Jacynth's luxurious motor-car, he was driven at something of a rush back to his hotel, with the sickening consciousness upon him all the time that the chauffeur who raced the car along at such a rate was the very man who had swept the life out of Dan Kiernan. Surely fate had an unkind way of entangling him in unforeseen meshes, and of bringing him into contact with all that he most sought to avoid! And he who had at one time been disposed to regret the limitation of his ministering efforts to one small field of work,—he of whom a whispering demon of discontent had so often asked:—"Are you going to pass all your life in Shadbrook?" now longed for Shadbrook as ardently as though the dull little Cotswold village were a paradise on earth. He longed for the quiet of it,—for the murmur of the trees, the scent of the flowers; he had only been absent from it a bare three days,—and those three days seemed a century! A century of strange impressions, and bitter memories, and drifting visions, the last and most vivid of all these being the exquisite face of Jacynth, floating wondrously away into the rose and amber glory of the sunset with a softly called 'Good-bye!'

CHAPTER XXII

NEXT day when he woke from sleep, he felt as though he had been through a sharp attack of fever, in which every nerve had been stretched on a rack and tortured to the last point of endurance, but that now, thanks to some unknown spirit of healing, the suffering was past, and health was rapidly returning. A great peace was upon him; a sense of relaxation and ease; and as he reviewed the experience of the past three days point by point, he saw that his visit to London had been a matter of the Higher Guidance rather than his own choice and volition. For not only had he come, ostensibly to plead for a charitable public cause, but he had been brought to discover the undesirable means whereby his temporary 'celebrity,' such as it was, had been gained; and he had been able to put a stop to this fictitious 'boom,' as also to Jacynth's intended patronage of him, which to his mind would have been an intolerable indignity. That she, for whose sake and memory his innocent wife had been brutally murdered, should now presume to boast of her 'influence' in making him known to the world, was a thought too horrible to be borne. Better a thousand times the obscurity of Shadbrook for all the days of his life than such fame, owed to such a woman! And the impression of her brilliant beauty began to grow dim and to fade from his inward view, even as her face had faded away into the air and light with the balloon which had carried her aloft among the illimitable reaches of the sky,—a mode of leave-taking which he felt sure she had designed purposely for 'sensational' effect. Her keen desire that he should go with her to witness her ascent from Hurlingham was simply to

gratify her vanity; — that he might see her among her 'society' lovers and friends, and perhaps be led to report her triumphs among her former neighbours when he returned to Shadbrook, — or that he might, at any rate, note how much she was admired, and in turn admire, and compliment her on the nerve and daring she displayed in committing herself to a voyage in mid-air with but one companion, and that companion a drunkard! For it was not likely she could be ignorant of the vices of Claude Ferrers. She had said he was her 'great friend'; possibly a sort of 'gentleman' Dan Kiernan! With a thrill of disgust Everton for a moment wondered at what hour the reckless and strangely assorted pair had returned, or would return from their aerial wanderings; then he resolutely dismissed the incident from his mind and turned his thoughts to other things,—things grave and sorrowful affecting the safety and stability of the Church,—things scandalous and terrible touching the honour of one at least of the Church's high dignitaries,—and, acting on a sudden impulse, he wrote a letter expressing something of his feeling to the Bishop with whom he had lunched on the previous day. And the letter was as follows:

"My Lord,—

"If but half your hint of yesterday respecting the Bishop of —— conveyed any truth, then surely it would be more honest of the clergy, as servants of Christ, to search out and verify the facts; and, when verified, to submit them in private to the Primate of England, urging him to depose from office one who is criminally unfit to officiate at the altars of God. To shield and defend such an one, and above all, to permit him to rule over and instruct others in their sacred duties, is a disgrace to the election and ordainment of all ministers of the Gospel. And though you, my Lord, hold no jurisdiction over me, and probably have no sympathy with my poor efforts to be faithful in the work I have undertaken to perform, I still venture to approach you with a most solemn appeal on behalf of the laity, whose religious beliefs are being

undermined and shaken by evil influences from all quarters of the world in these 'last days,' that it shall not be made possible for them to feel that a known criminal has been permitted to lay hands in holy Confirmation on the heads of the innocent, without one protest from the Church he defiles. I understand from you that both Church and Throne dread publicity in this affair; but there is no need for a wide blazoning of the offence. The offender should, and could be persuaded to quietly resign his post,—and to this end, I hope you, my Lord, and your colleagues will work;—and not leave it for me, a mere country cleric, to show a greater boldness than should be my portion, and denounce not only the criminal in question, but also the monstrous apathy of the Church that shelters his crime. This letter is, I know, unusual, unconventional, and out of all rule and order, wherefore your Lordship may,—from the rule and order point of view,—condemn me for writing it. But if Church conventionality can be used to cover Church corruption, I shall not regret that I have tried to break through the barrier which too often fences in a Bishop from the righteous representations of such honest clergy who, aware of scandals in the Church, are given no chance of saving the situation because of the restrictions and formalities imposed upon them by their frequently lax and indolent superiors.—I am, my Lord, Your Lordship's obedient servant, RICHARD EVERTON."

A weight was lifted from his soul with the writing of these plain and audacious words, though he knew the man to whom they were addressed would probably fling them aside with contempt and forget them. Yet he felt he ought to write them: he was convinced that a Bishop ought to be in earnest about more important matters than the shapeliness of his own legs. He went out and posted the letter himself, and on returning to the hotel for breakfast, was met by his American acquaintance, Clarence Howard, with the morning's paper in his hand.

"Here's news that will very likely interest you,—he said;—"Isn't this near your place?"

He held out the paper, pointing to a prominent headline.

Everton stared hard, scarcely believing his eyes.

GREAT FIRE ON THE COTSWOLDS

BREWERY BURNT TO THE GROUND

Eagerly, almost breathlessly, he scanned every word. Was it—could it be true?

"The extensive premises of Messrs. Minchin and Co."

No, no, not possible! Minchin's Brewery burnt to the ground! Then was the great Curse of the neighbourhood lifted? Could Heaven be so kind? The printed page swam before him,—his pulses thrilled.

"Hullo, what's up?" ejaculated Howard—"You look as if you'd been given a fortune!"

Everton raised his head. His eyes shone with a great gladness.

"So I have!" he answered;—"If this be true, it means more to me than millions of money! It means the health and safety, the thrift and honour and peace of the people of my parish,—the people I have devoted my life to serve! It means,—why, you cannot imagine what it means! The greatest obstacle to my work is removed,—do you know I can hardly believe it! For the influence of that brewery in the neighbourhood was as that of a devil in a paradise!—and that the devil should be so suddenly cast out is something of a positive miracle!"

Howard smiled.

"The devil may come back again,"—he said;—"That is to say Minchin may re-build!"

Everton shook his head.

"They haven't the money. The company has paid no dividends for some time;—the business has been steadily failing since—" he paused, and a shadow crossed his face, "since my wife was murdered."

Howard looked at him with kindly sympathy.

"I have heard the story,"—he said, in a low tone.

"The murderer was a brewery hand,"—went on Everton, slowly—"He had been one of my parishioners—but—he

left to work for Mr. Minchin. I can only suppose he was drunk when he committed the crime. He was always more or less in that condition—and Mr. Minchin had been warned that he was dangerous. But I believe — " he paused,— "that so far from heeding the warning, he gave the miserable man every possible opportunity to drink all the more. Mr. Howard, there are more causes for evil than are generally supposed! It is very often not the actual sinner who is most to be blamed, but the man—or woman—who leads that sinner into sin!"

Howard was silent.

"Now if I were a rich man,"—said Everton, with a sudden smile, glancing again at the newspaper—"I would buy the land on which that brewery stood——"

"Would you?" Howard looked up quickly—"And why?"

"I would build there a picturesquely gabled School of Arts and Crafts;—a kind of Guild, formed on the ethics of Ruskin, and it should have a Social Club, where both men and women who were working at their various trades could meet together;—it should have its own orchestra,—its own folk-lore society — its concerts, its amusements, and a garden where husbands and wives and children could go and sit in the summer-time when work was done, and have their tea or coffee as they do on the Continent, listening to the music; where they could even have their beer — yes! — provided it were *pure* beer and non-intoxicant, such as is sold to the people in Germany. The Germans drink much more beer than the English, yet it does not make them drunk. But we, for a paltry and wicked profit, would rather poison our working-men than see to it that they get wholesome stuff for their money, — and as if poisoned beer were not bad enough, we permit the sale of spirits which are often so heavily adulterated that one glass taken raw would almost kill a man whose system was not accustomed to drugging. Yes! If I were a rich man I would do something that would prove of more practical help towards the general sobriety of the nation than all the talking in Parliament!"

Howard listened with keen interest. Here was a clergyman who accepted his 'Holy Orders' in the true spirit of a high command, — who saw in those 'Orders' a responsibility resting upon himself for the care of the bodies, as well as the souls of those human beings over whom he exercised a pastor's control. And he wondered, supposing that every clergyman in every parish of Great Britain were to take up the Drink question from Everton's practical and earnest point of view, whether greater reforms might not result than from any Government statute? He said something to this effect, but Everton shook his head.

"Our hands are tied,"—he said—"That is what I want you, and every one else to understand. Our hands are tied. Wherever a brewery or a distillery dominates any particular section of a country, the clergy can seldom do anything to check the drink habits of the community. To begin with, there are the men who work at the brewery or the distillery. These fellows get a certain quantity of 'free' beer and spirit. What are you to do against that? Then, there is another point which is never sufficiently considered—the want of method and the thriftlessness of British working-men's wives, who never feed their husbands properly for the hard work of the day. Very few of these women can cook,—efforts have been made to teach them, but they will not learn,—and the majority of working-men, especially agricultural labourers, start off in the early dawn with a mere crust of bread and a jug of badly-made tea or coffee, half cold,—which is not sufficient to keep up their strength for several hours of hard manual labour. Naturally they feel the want of nourishment long before noon, and if there's a public-house handy, they get some beer. The stuff sold to them destroys their appetites for the poor noonday meal their wives send out to them, and it creates an unnatural thirst which must be quenched by more and still more beer. And so the mischief goes on, and *will* go on. If I had my way there should be movable half-way houses in every part of the country where agricultural labour is employed——"

"Half-way houses?" repeated Howard,—"For what purpose?"

"For the supply of proper food to the tillers of the soil,"—said Everton;—"Where they might for a penny get a proper breakfast,—and for twopence or threepence a proper dinner, with one glass of pure beer to wash it down! These men are unconscious sufferers from their ignorance of the laws of health, and they cannot be taught all at once;—besides they have no time to learn. Their wives, for the most part, are unpractical;—one woman with three or four young children is more often in a 'muddle' in the early morning than not, and the husband's breakfast is a secondary matter to that of the babies, so that the actual breadwinner frequently goes to his work in a semi-starved condition, while his little ones get the best of whatever there is to eat. I've seen it all, I tell you! And I say that the British working-man is *not* to be set down as a chronic drunkard. He would be as sober and straight as any man under the sun, if he could get the proper food to work on. And the proper drink! We have no right to condemn him for insobriety;—it is the *makers* of the stuff he swallows that are the real sinners! If you feed a man on absinthe, he ends in a lunatic asylum; in the same way if you feed a man on doctored beer and adulterated whisky, you make him a criminal and the father of criminals. Yet the Government, in their efforts for Temperance Reform, try to lop off the branches of the deadly upas-tree of Drink, and never strike at the root. The root is the Trade adulteration of what *should* be pure and wholesome."

"But there are penalties under the law——" began Howard.

"Penalties that are never enacted,"—rejoined Everton, quickly;—"because brewers and distillers are all in league with publicans, wine-merchants and *grocers*; we mustn't forget this latter branch of the Drink trade!—to throw dust in the eyes of the officers of the Excise. These men no doubt do their duty, and are possibly above bribery;—but they can be cheated in 'sampling' as well as other folks in other trades. The well-known existence of 'brewers' druggists' ought to be

sufficient to show that drugging goes on. To me the idea that men should build up huge fortunes out of the sale of liquor that ruins the bodies and souls of their fellow-men, is the most horrible and appalling thing in the world!"

"And what of the upper classes?" asked Howard, presently. "In your zeal for the working-men of Great Britain, you have forgotten the drones! What kind of reform would you suggest in that direction?"

A sudden sternness came into Everton's eyes.

"The upper classes?" he echoed, — "The upper classes—"

"Yes;—the upper classes,"—repeated Howard, with emphasis—"*They* lead! They drink like fish in the sea, without the fish necessity. The men swill whisky,—the women do the same, except when they prefer morphia. The extent of the evil is almost measureless,—because half of it is secret. Men drink in secret;—women drink in secret. Only the eye that is trained like a physician's to note the unsteadiness of lip-lines, the nervous contraction of hands, the restlessness of movement and the wandering of attention, can detect the working of the vice on the apparently sober 'lady of fashion' or 'man about town,' but Drink is as much the curse of the 'Upper Ten' as it is of the Lowest Million. How would you set about reforming 'Court and Society'? Tell me! For if ever Court and Society were in a bad way they are at this present day!"

Everton was silent for a little space. His thoughts returned to Jacynth;—again he seemed to see the exquisite face fading away into the sunset, beside the heavy sensual countenance of Claude Ferrers,—again his inner consciousness told him that for the sins these two were sinning they had no regret and no repentance; and that for hundreds of other men and women like them there was no hope, because there was no faith.

"I am afraid,"—he said, at last,—"that for Court and Society I can suggest nothing save that remedy which God enforces at given times,—Change! What change it may be, or how it will be brought about, I cannot even picture. But

it is easier to raise the poor to a higher level of thought and feeling than it is to bring so-called 'cultured' persons down from the summit of supreme Egotism which they appear to have reached at this present time. My work will never lead me into 'society' surroundings,"—he paused, and his pale face flushed a little—then he added—"I should perhaps tell you that you were quite right when you said that I was being helped along by a 'boom' in the press. I found it all out,—yesterday. And I have put a stop to it."

Howard opened his eyes in astonishment.

"You have put a stop to it?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. I shall not be heard of in the newspapers any more!" And Everton's smile was very happy as he said this:—"I hope you understand that nothing would more offend my sense of right than a fictitious renown?—to feel that I was being 'backed up' like a race-horse, by some influence of which I did not approve, and for which I could never be grateful? I am merely the Vicar of Shadbrook;—and my preaching is for the people of my parish. The wider world has no need of me."

Howard looked at him fixedly as though he were some curious natural phenomenon.

"That's your opinion, is it?" he said, cheerily,—and a broad smile lightened his visage—"Well! We'll see how far you're proved correct! Meantime, look here,—if you'll ask me down to this Shadbrook of yours some day, I'll come! I guess I'll find business there to suit me! Let me know how you find things when you get back, and,—if this brewery is really burnt out,—tell me when the land's for sale!"

Everton laughed and promised, treating his words as a joke. They had some further talk, and then parted on terms of mutual liking, arranging to see each other soon again. Once or twice Everton was half-inclined to tell so genial an acquaintance of his yesterday's experience, but as it would have involved an explanation of his former knowledge of Jacynth, he decided on the wiser course of silence.

He left London for Shadbrook that morning before noon,

thinking all the way in the train of the unexpected news that was fraught with such important changes to him and to his parish — the burning down of Minchin's Brewery. When he arrived at the station where his old mare with the high dog-cart awaited him, he was addressed at once by the porter who took his luggage.

"'Twas a big blaze at Minchin's last night, sir!"

"Yes — I've seen an account of it in the papers," he said;—"Is the place quite destroyed?"

"To the very ground, sir! The fire broke out about half-past seven in the evening, and what was a queer thing, it seemed to come not only from one but from all sides of the Brewery buildings! We telegraphed all over the place for fire-engines, which as you know, sir, are a terrible time coming when they're wanted in outlying country districts, and when they did come, the fire had got it all its own way. The flames were seen for miles and miles around!"

Everton could not look very concerned; there was too much joy and thankfulness in his eyes.

"Any cause assigned?" he asked.

"Well, sir, they do say that Mr. Minchin, being so hard up, set fire to it himself, hoping to get the insurance money! But you know what a rare place this is for talk, and it's only a tale!"

Everton smiled, nodded kindly, and drove off through the scented dewy lanes with a wonderful lightness of heart. Only one saddened thought crossed his mind,—that Azalea was not alive to rejoice with him at the unexpected deliverance now granted to the neighbourhood. And why could not such deliverance have come earlier, before all the trouble and disaster and tragedy had occurred of which the Brewery was the latent cause? Surely the ways of destiny were hard and past finding out! As the mare trotted across the bridge between 'old' Shadbrook and 'new,' a sudden flashing recollection of Jacynth came before him, and he saw, as it were, three pictures of her—one as the village girl, in her simple blue cotton frock with the bunch of spring flowers at her

throat, another as the 'society' beauty in her wonderful gown of clinging lace with the sparkle of jewels about her — and last of all, as a face only, a face of exquisite human perfection, vanishing, vanishing into thin air!

"So must she vanish from my life!" he said to his inward self; — "She, to whom my senses might have yielded had not my soul repelled her, must disappear,—out of my sight for ever!"

He turned into the Vicarage gate. His heart thrilled with a quick pang as he thought what a different home-coming his would have been could he have seen Azalea's sweet presence smiling at him from the doorway as he approached the house. But he was not allowed to feel utterly lonely, for half-way along the drive he was met by a little flying figure with curly hair shining like a mop of gold in the sun.

"Dad! Dad! Home again! Hurra!"

And Laurence, rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed, with restless feet that danced to and fro for sheer delight at sight of his father, ran alongside the old mare in a state of the wildest excitement.

"Brewery's all burnt!" he shouted, breathlessly;—"Nursie and I could see all the fire from the windows! The sky was red—ever so red!—and such lots of smoke!"

Everton drew up at his own house door, and springing down from the dog-cart caught his little son in his arms and kissed him fondly, then lifted him and set him on his shoulder.

"Brewery burnt, eh?" — he said — "A nice big bonfire for you, wasn't it! Bigger than any bonfire you've ever seen!"

"Oh, much, much bigger!" exclaimed Laurence, enthusiastically;—"But nobody was hurted! It was the beer that was burnt—and the barley, and the hops—and the malt—"

"And the poison!" finished Everton;—"Well, that's not much loss, my boy! And how have you got on with the lessons I left you to do?"

Forthwith Laurence began to chatter,—and by tea-time the Vicar had well-nigh forgotten there was such a place as

London on the earth, or that he had ever been to it. Sitting peacefully in his own garden, amid a wealth of roses and other summer blossoms, he listened, enchanted, to the child's vivacious and eager talk about the way the time had passed during his absence; the little voice, with a sweet ring in it like that of Azalea's, was music to his soul.

"On Sunday it was a bit slow," said the boy, with a comical expression of solemnity; — "I don't know what *you* were doing, but *we* weren't doing much. The man who preached the sermon in church was all right, but of course he wasn't *you*. And a lot of old women waited about in the churchyard to grumble—and one of them said to me: 'Good-morning, Master Laurence, I hope your good papa won't be very long away,'—and I said: 'No, ma'am, don't worry, please; Dad's coming home directly!' — and she said: 'Thank goodness to the Lord, for we misses him badly.'" Here Laurence laughed merrily. "And after dinner Nursie said I was to sit in the garden with a book, so I got Andersen's *Tales* and read about 'What the Moon Saw.' I like that. But I think I like 'The Shadow' better. You see the Shadow got all the good things instead of the Learned Man, and I suppose that's likely to be true. Then I read some poetry, and wrote some."

Everton smiled.

"You wrote some, did you?"

"Oh yes, I often do. Things I think about go into rhyme by themselves. I'll show you how some day. But I've got all my lessons ready for you. Oh, and Dad! Father Douay came over yesterday afternoon to know when you'd be back,—and he said he'd come again to-day. But the Brewery wasn't burnt then—perhaps he won't come now."

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Well, Nursie says there are some cottages just by the brewery that caught fire too, and Father Douay helped to get all the furniture out. They were awful poor people that had the furniture. They weren't hurted themselves, but they'd have lost all their beds and chairs and tables if it

hadn't been for Father Douay. So I expect he's still pretty busy, for the fire isn't all out yet, and the engines are pumping away, and the gardener says everything is 'all of a smoke.' Mr. Minchin's there, but Mrs. Minchin's runned away."

"Not *runned* away, boy!" expostulated his father, mildly; "It should be 'run away.'"

"Run away," repeated Laurence, obediently, — "I know how it should be, but old Peter always says runned."

'Old Peter' was the gardener, with whom Laurence was on terms of the friendliest confidence.

Everton smiled.

"And," the boy added as an after-thought,—"Mr. Mortar Pike in the village says the same. Is Mr. Pike a hundred years old, Dad?"

"He's going on that way," answered Everton, laughing a little;—"He will be, if he holds on a bit longer."

"And what will he do then?"

"Why, what *can* he do?" queried Everton, lightly, looking at Laurence's earnest eyes and changeful expression, and thinking how much he just then resembled his mother—"Except make the best of it!"

"I expect he'll have a bonfire,"—said Laurence, thoughtfully,—"It's the only thing for a man of that age!"

"You think so?" said Everton, amused.

"Why yes! Birthday presents are no use,—he wouldn't know what to do with them. And it's no good saying: 'Many happy returns of the day!' A bonfire would be just right."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, the fire would be like the burning up of everything, — all his life, and whatever he had done in it. Then there would be a heap of ashes—like his poor old body when the soul had gone away. And the soul would be the flame of the fire, rising into heaven. Oh yes, a bonfire is the only thing for an old man's birthday!"

Just then a bell rang, summoning the small philosopher to his tea, and he ran off, promising to return directly the meal

was over. His father smiled, watching him scamper into the house, and anon sighed,—wondering for the thousandth time what this child would be when a public school had, as a well-known tutor of the day remarked—'knocked the nonsense out of him.' The 'nonsense' was very sweet just now. The teasing memory of Jacynth came back to him,—he thought of her yesterday's shameless confession — of her heartless remark concerning the death of her child,— he recalled the lines of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 'Aurora Leigh':—

> 'I thought a child was given to sanctify
> A woman,—set her in the sight of all
> The clear-eyed Heavens, a chosen minister
> To do their business and lead spirits up
> The difficult blue heights!'

There was no such 'sanctification' for Jacynth;—she was probably one of the many who nowadays resent motherhood as an inconvenience.

"I wish,"—he said, half-aloud—"the Church could get rid of that foolish curse on Eve in Genesis—'In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee.' Moses was ill-advised when he set that down,—if he did set it down. It should have read:—'In gladness shalt thou bring forth children, and thy safety shall be thy husband and he shall cherish thee.'"

Here an approaching step interrupted his meditations, and looking up he saw Sebastien Douay crossing the gravel path from the Vicarage and coming towards him. He hastened to meet him, and at once perceived that the little priest was not so cheery as usual, despite his genial smile.

"So! You are back again from town, my good Richard!" he said,—"And such news to greet your arrival! The devil has destroyed his own in his native element!"

"It is amazing news indeed!" rejoined Everton,—"I saw the first account of it in a London newspaper this morning. I could hardly believe it!"

"Nor I at first," and Douay sat down rather wearily in a

garden chair beside his friend—"Excuse me if I am lazy! I have been up all night. No, not even when I saw the flames, could I believe it! It seemed too good to be true! The fire broke out at half-past seven. It was half-past eight before the first engine arrived—and then—too late! The whole place was in a blaze! Roofs fell in, chimneys toppled and crashed! —mon Dieu!—it was a wonderful sight! No lives lost—and you know what is said?"

"That Minchin himself kindled the flames?"

"Exactly. And,"—here Douay rubbed his nose very hard as was his habit in perplexity—"I am not so sure the story isn't true. Now I,—par exemple—if the insurance company should seek evidence, could be a most awkward witness. For I saw,—shall I tell you what I saw? Or shall I involve you—my friend—by hazard in legal trouble? Will they come to you and say:—'Were you told by the Reverend Father Douay so-and-so?' Or 'What was your impression when the Reverend Father Douay said so-and-so?'"

"It won't matter if they do,"—laughed Everton. "I wasn't on the scene of action."

"Ah, you can prove an *alibi*!—that is true!" And Douay's eyes twinkled whimsically—"Well then, I will risk all danger! And what I can say is this. That the men, most of them casual hands, all left the brewery at six o'clock as is usual. There is a fair, with merry-go-rounds for the children put up about a mile from the village—and many of them went there after work to spend the evening. Everything was quite quiet in the place. I sit by myself in my cottage reading. I look out of the window. I see Mistaire Minchin stroll by. You know the large gateway of the brewery is very nearly opposite to me—and the vans and carts come in and go out there every morning. Mistaire Minchin is not a van or a cart—he is a sly fox, and though he walks on two legs he does it in a way that reminds you of something secret, creeping on all fours. So he, with that creeping step, goes in at the big gate. I stand by my window and wait for him to come out again. But he does not come. And as I watch, I see his face for one

moment at an opening up in one of the store-houses. Then it vanish! I see it no more. All is very still and at peace. I take up my book and read again. All at once I hear a step walking fast, very fast, along the road outside my cottage. I look out—Mistaire Minchin! His creep has become a run. He goes straight for his own house, and he disappears. Ten minutes after that I see a red flash on my wall! Another—yet another! I go to my window and open it. People open more windows—for there are more red flashes. Suddenly some one calls 'Fire! Fire!' and then every one is in the street all at once. A boy rushes off crying: 'Fire! Fire! The brewery is on fire!' Other persons shout 'Minchin! Fetch Mistaire Minchin!' and then —please consider this, my friend!—then it turns out that Mistaire Minchin is not at home! He has been away motoring all the afternoon and has not yet returned! Now is not that a strange thing?" And Douay leaned forward in an argumentative manner—"I am not mad—I do not drink—how was it then, that I saw him go into the brewery?—and afterwards return to his own house ten minutes before the fire broke out? Yet—he was not at home! He had not returned! No one had seen him—no one but this poor little priest, myself! But there is one thing—I shall not offer to give evidence. If he has burnt down his brewery, it's the best thing he has ever done in his life! He shall not get into trouble about it through *me*!"

"But if he claims the insurance?" said Everton.

"That is the insurance company's affair, not mine,"—answered Douay, with a little shrug of his shoulders—"Let their solicitors make enquiry of his solicitors, and let both sides run up long bills for asking questions and answering them! It is the way for the obtaining of justice! And it will be a long time before Mistaire Minchin gets his 'claim' attended to, and still longer before he gets any money paid, if at all. As for me—I shall be far away!"

Everton was startled by these last words, and more so by the sorrowful look which accompanied them.

"Far away?" he echoed—"You are not going——"

"Alas, yes, my dear friend! I am going—and you and I must part for a time—perhaps a long time!—I do not know! I have had a letter from one who is my ecclesiastical Superior,—a letter that is not pleasant. He tells me I have failed in my mission. I have been four years and a little longer in this neighbourhood, and I have not made sufficient converts to fill a church. Well! That is true! I confess it. It is your fault, my Richard! For it is not poss-eeble to make converts anywhere in the sphere of your influence!"

Everton was silent. His eyes were grave and wistful.

"You understand!" went on Douay, gently—"It is to your praise—not to your blame—that I have failed. I, the failure, rejoice in your strength! That I am called elsewhere is perhaps best. I shall be sent where there are the weak, and not the strong. For see! It is this way—if every minister of what you call your Church Protestant were like you, there would be no other sect poss-eeble—no Methodist, Baptist, Wesleyan, or any other!—no!—because where all is simple and true there is no need for differences. Why are there quarrels in religion? Because one half of the ministers are not sure of Christ! The illness of unbelief is catching. If the shepherds do not know into which fields to lead their flocks, the flocks copy the wandering habit. Now, you desire to follow Christ like a child—and your sincerity is so great that you are bound to suffer for it. But you will keep many souls safe for Heaven!"

Everton stretched out a hand and laid it affectionately on his shoulder.

"Must you really go? Could nothing persuade you?"

"To disobey my Church?" queried Douay, smiling a little, "Nothing! Once a priest, always a priest, mon ami! I shall miss you——" A slight tremor interrupted his voice and he paused a moment. Then he resumed—"Yes, I shall miss you, Richard!—more than any man I ever knew! I shall miss the boy—it will be taking myself away from a home like the one I left in France—where I had learned to love many

things! But what would you? Life is but change!—I must move like a leaf with the wind! And perhaps I shall not be sent out of England—we may meet often. But here it is true I can do nothing—I bow to my Superior's decision! You are master of the situation!"

"I cannot bear you to put it in that way,"—said Everton, warmly—"It is almost as if I were the cause of banishing my best friend."

"Ah bah!" exclaimed Douay, good-humouredly—"Think not at all of it so! It is true you are an opponent of the Church Catholique—and speaking between ourselves, it is right you should be so, if you are a patriot and desire to keep your country free,—but you are no bigot,—you are an honest opponent, and if there were many Church of England ministers like you it would be bad for the Holy Father's British revenues! But there is no fear!—you are only one in ten or twenty thousand! And with all your troubles—your great bereavement—your broken heart—see how the road is cleared for your future labours! No more brewery!—the power of the Drink is lessened,—the village is given into your hands. And it is such a stupid village! What will you do with it?"

Everton thought for a moment. Then he answered, slowly:—

"I will do my best with it. My best is not much—but it will be all my life!"

"All your life!" and Douay sighed—"My friend, it is a martyrdom!"

Everton smiled,—a very tender and hopeful smile.

"No!" he answered, quietly—"My martyrdom is over."

And the kindling light of a deep feeling illumined his face, as he went on:—

"You call it a stupid village. It is. There are thousands of villages like it in dullness and stupidity all over the British Isles! And why? The people are only given just enough 'education,' as it is called, to make them restless and discontented. And in outlying country places this education is

imparted to them by teachers who are only a shade less ignorant than themselves. Teachers in rural schools are frequently selected for their posts through 'local' influence and private wire-working, despite assertions to the contrary; and very often these inadequate persons are so ill-fitted for their responsibilities that they have to learn all they will ever know, out of the very school-books from which they are required to teach the children. Of practical training, such as shall serve to fit the youths and maidens for life—such as shall show them how to manage farms, till the soil, and appreciate the bounteous prodigality of nature who so openly invites her offspring to draw from her resources all that they need—of this they get nothing. Nor are they taught any home 'craft' or 'hobby' by which they might feed their minds in vacant hours and find entertainment for themselves in the long winter evenings. The waste of brain and eye and hand,—the waste of power and intellectual capacity of the noble working-classes of Great Britain is enormous, cruel, and lamentable! For it is not their fault. It is the fault of our governing methods, which leave them without the right encouragement for their labours, or the right entertainment for their minds. Now here—in Shadbrook—I am quietly working along on both those lines——"

"Hélas! I fear you will not succeed!" said Douay, shaking his head vigorously.

"I think I shall,"—rejoined Everton—"The great obstacle to all sane, healthy and happy living is the Drink, of course. And this was my trouble with my parishioners—but it has been growing less and less—and now—with the sudden destruction of Minchin's brewery, it may die out altogether. Is it not strange that in the first sermon I preached here after my darling's death I should have said these words:—'I shall pray God daily and nightly that He may see fit, in His wonder-working wisdom, to remove the temptations to sin that abound in this neighbourhood'? And I also said:—'For you only I will ask—that God may give you to me! That God may show me how to make you happy in your

labours and your lives—that He may help me to teach your children the sweet unspeakable content that is found in clean, simple and temperate ways; and that the tears I have shed and the despair I have known may be acceptable to Him as a poor sacrifice of love on my part.' A poor sacrifice of love! That is—that will be my life in Shadbrook!"

Douay's eyes grew dim.

"You are a good man, my Richard!" he said, softly—"I think the angels love you!"

"I hope *one* angel does!" Richard answered, with a musing tenderness—"One that is always near!" He paused a moment—then continued—"Yes!—it is as you say a stupid village. Nevertheless, my dear Douay, there is *heart* in it! I never thought there was so much, till my wife was taken from me. They—the villagers—misunderstood her, poor little soul!—she was too pretty and merry and thoughtless—but they are sorry now. And they show me how sorry they are. They try to please me in all the ways they can—they fight against the drink—and in this they are greatly helped by their love for my boy. Douay, it is an odd thing, perhaps,—but do you know I don't believe there's a man in or near Shadbrook who would be seen drunk by my little lad!"

"He is your oriflamme,"—said Douay, tenderly—"The sign of your Holy Orders!"

"Such a little fellow!" went on Everton—"And yet his influence is extraordinary! He makes it a habit to run down into the village every day and talk to everybody—he has no fixed time for this, and the consequence is every cottage is kept clean and tidy at all hours 'in case Master Laurence looks in.' He told the women they should keep flowers in the windows,—well!—all the boys went to work and knocked up window boxes, and flowers were planted in them, so that the village looks florally decorated now——"

"I have noticed that," said Douay—"I thought it was your persuasion——"

"Oh no! 'Master Laurence likes it so.' He suggested to the grocer that the donkey that drew the wood-cart was getting

too old to work and 'Neddy ought to have a good time now like Mr. Mortar Pike'—that was the way he put it. Neddy is therefore turned out to grass 'to please Master Laurence.'" And Everton laughed. "The child is more active in doing good than a curate!"

Douay looked at him thoughtfully.

"Your way of work is a wise way, Richard,"—he said—"You reach your people through the heart—through the sentiment. It is the right way—the only way! You give yourself to them—yourself, with your home, your child, your hopes, your plans, your strength, your weakness——"

"Ah!—do not forget my weakness!" interrupted Everton—"For that is great! But it helps me to be one with my weakest parishioners—and to sympathise with the 'stupid village' as I could never sympathise with stupider London!"

"Stupider London!" exclaimed Douay—"My friend, think! Stupid! The world's metropolis!"

"That is just it—the world's metropolis!"—and moved by a sudden thrill of passionate indignation, Everton sprang up from his chair and confronted his friend with the eager air of an orator aroused to denounce some national wrong—"The core of civilisation, in which there breeds 'the worm that dieth not'! The world's metropolis, where the bulk of the inhabitants find nothing better, higher or nobler to do than scramble for money at the risk of everything else,—honour, principle, feeling, love, duty, faith! The world's metropolis!—whose wealthier classes spend all their time in feeding and frivolity;—when they are not eating, they are sleeping—and when they are neither sleeping nor eating, they are busy with intrigues against the peace and prosperity of their neighbours;—or else they are breeding the same silk-worm type of human beings as themselves, drone-men and drone-women, who expect to live on the fruit and foliage of luxury provided by the drudging toil of the despised Working Million! Babylon over again!—one can read the writing of doom upon the wall! That is why I say 'stupid' London,—for a city that will not take warning from past history—a city

that has all the advantages of progress, the graces of culture, the accomplishments of art, the discoveries of science, and yet that cannot 'lead' in anything but immorality and indecency, is 'stupid' beyond the utmost bounds of stupidity! It knows, or it *should* know, that if it allows itself to be swarmed over by Jews and undesirable aliens, like the body of a shot bird swarmed over by vermin, it has nothing to expect but corruption! It knows, or it should know, that if it condones immorality in the family life, indecency on the stage and in literature, and laxity of principle in the authorities of the State, it is making of itself nothing but a gunpowder magazine which is bound to explode for the disaster of the nation, at the first spark of Revolution! Stupid London? Yes, I say stupid, densely stupid London, which allows itself to be led astray and fooled, by a corrupt society and a corruptible press!"

He spoke with heat and fervour—and Douay stared at him astonished. After a minute's pause, he threw back his head with a careless gesture and laughed.

"There! The fit is over!" he said—"Don't look so surprised! I heard things in town that sickened me—I saw —what I wish to forget! Even in the Church—but I will not speak of *that*! When I worked as a curate in the East End of London I met with plenty of sin and misery—often patiently struggled with, heroically endured, and sometimes overcome,—but I did not quite realise that it was to the well-fed, well-cared-for West End I should turn for the true haunt of irreclaimable criminals! Come—let us go in! I don't want to talk about London any more."

"Will you never preach there again?" asked Douay, with some curiosity, as he rose and walked by his friend's side through the garden into the house.

"I think not. Not unless,"——he paused——"unless my Orders make it necessary."

"Your Orders?"

Everton smiled gravely.

"Yes. *You* take your orders from an ecclesiastical superior, do you not? He writes that you have failed in your mission

here, and that you must go elsewhere to succeed. I take my orders from One who sends me no message but that which is breathed by a voice within me, saying: 'Do this in remembrance of Me!' If I feel *thus* commanded to speak to 'the world's metropolis' I shall speak. Not otherwise."

They entered the house then, and remained for some time together, deep in conversation. Everton did not relate the story of his meeting with Jacynth, for he had resolved never to mention her again to any one. And he was too much concerned for the honour of the Church, to speak a word of the infamy attaching to the particular ruling member of it whose moral defects had created so much alarm and anxiety among his episcopal brethren—so that the talk for the most part turned on Douay's own affairs, and certain immediate necessities required by some poor Catholics of the district he was leaving—poor, who would be for a time in temporary difficulties owing to the burning down of Minchin's brewery, and for whose care Everton undertook all responsibility.

It was quite late when they at last parted. Little Laurence had gone to bed and Everton was left alone. A small pile of correspondence had accumulated on his table during his absence, and he prepared to attend to this,—but before doing so he took up by haphazard the evening paper which had arrived some two hours previously. Glancing casually through the various columns of news, his eye was suddenly caught and his attention riveted by a bold headline:

MISSING AERONAUTS

GRAVE ANXIETY

Slowly, and as if he were spelling each word by itself, he read the indicated paragraph which ran as follows:

"The famous dirigible balloon 'Shooting Star,' belonging to Mr. Claude Ferrers, which started from Hurlingham for a short trip yesterday evening, having in the car its owner, accompanied by Mrs. Israel Nordstein, who, it will be

remembered, has made several successful ascents, has not yet returned, nor has it been anywhere heard of. When last sighted the 'Shooting Star' was sailing steadily in a fair wind in a westerly direction towards the Welsh coast. Considerable anxiety is felt for the safety of the passengers."

The paper dropped from his hands. A coldness chilled his blood as though the breath of a bitter wind were blowing over him. With a kind of nervous trembling in his limbs, he went to the open window and looked out. It was a night of stars,—a calm night in which the densely-blue sky seemed powdered with worlds as though they were gold-dust:

"How wonderfully has the day gone by!
If only when the stars come we could die
And morning find us gathered to our dreams——"

His lips murmured the lines unconsciously—he lifted his eyes up—up—up to the vast dark fathomless dome of space—was it possible that Jacynth was there? Jacynth with her scorn of God—her mockery of good—her overweening vanity and egotism—was she lost up there?—lost in that illimitable immensity, where her beautiful person was of no more account than a midge's wing in a flame of fire? A sense of tears was in his throat. Almost he seemed to see her face gleaming out of the misty blue,—a face exquisite, provocative, alluring, which blossomed into form and colour through the darkness like a flower,—and involuntarily he stretched out his hands as though to invoke it from the deepening shadows into the light.

"Oh, Jacynth!" he half-whispered—"God forgive you!"

And he thought he heard a voice ring through the silence—a voice that to his startled fancy had a sob of terror in its sweetness as it called:

"Parson Everton,—good-bye!"

CHAPTER XXIII

INTO the silent depths of the air the 'Shooting Star' had soared swiftly to the height of some two thousand feet immediately on leaving Hurlingham. Floating among the glorious hues of rose and violet and amber, flung against the fleecy clouds by the rays of the then descending sun, its easy speed seemed to part the atmosphere as the arms of a strong swimmer part the waves of the sea,—and little by little the noise of London's traffic died away from a restless lion-like roar to a far-off buzzing like the humming of a hive of bees. This sound in its turn subsided as the balloon rose higher, till it was no more than a faint moan, like that of a creature in constant pain. Jacynth, seated tranquilly in the wicker car, looked down as she had looked down many times before, on the patterned scene below, which resembled small squares of grey and brown and green, brightly illumined here and there by gleams of the sunset, and smiled dreamily at the littleness of the world she was apparently leaving. Such a dwarfish world!—such a poor piece of patchwork! What did it matter whether one was bad or good in it, wise or foolish? And what a folly it seemed that there should actually be religious creeds in it, and men like Richard Everton who believed in God! So she thought, laughing softly to herself, as she saw the earth gradually recede from her view like a painted scene withdrawn from a stage.

"The slugs and snails in a market garden might just as well build churches and worship a god as men!" she said, inwardly, with contempt. Once or twice she glanced towards Claude

Ferrers, but as he was busy with his steering apparatus, she did not speak. And she continued to watch, with a fascinated interest peculiar to her own temperament, the swiftly diminishing patches of terrestrial colour, till in a little less than an hour, with the on-coming of the dusk, they could no more be distinctly discerned, and the lights of London's hundred-and-fifty square miles alone defined, as with innumerable chains of tiny glistening jewels, the extent and plan of the great Centre of civilisation, where men and women, like ants in an ant-hill, run and crawl, each in his or her separate little line of toil, and struggle persistently with one another for the right to live and eat and breed and die. No more than this!—no more, if 'New Theologies' were all! But thank God that we know these for what they are and for what they have been foretold: 'Many false prophets shall arise and shall deceive many!' The fires of the sunset slowly paled, and the skies grew pearly grey with flashes of the after-glow casting sudden luminance here and there like frosted silver and topaz and gold against glimpses of turquoise-blue, and still Jacynth peered over the edge of the car, looking at the wondrous sea of cloudy colour and untroubled by any sense of vertigo, till all at once, with a sudden velocity of motion, the balloon, which had till then travelled but slowly, careered away to the westward and the little illuminated bird's-eye view of London vanished completely from her sight. Then she turned her head and addressed her companion:

"Where are you going, Claude?"

He came and sat beside her, taking her hand in his own and kissing it.

"Where am I going?"—he said, in slow, caressing accents—"How should I know! *Why* should I know! Uncertainty is ineffably delightful!—I would not destroy its charm! I go where Love leads me!—perhaps to a fabled paradise in an unexplored star!—to a land flowing with milk and honey—that bilious Biblical mixture! To the regions of the sun! To the Islands of the Blest! To the Anywhere and the Everywhere!—so long as I am with *you*!"

She gave him a quick glance. His face was livid, and his eyes were more than usually protuberant and glassy, but he smiled with a self-conscious expansiveness. She was accustomed to his extravagant language, which he considered poetical and which she did not half understand,—it was always more stilted and high-flown when he had been drinking, and that he had lately used 'whisky as a perfume' was evident. She did not, however, consider him drunk, and she had no fear of him, for she knew by experience that he was one of those men whose wits, like the wits of certain actors, are more sharpened than dulled by strong liquor. She left her hand in his, and waited for a minute. Then she said:

"You must take me back to-night."

"Why?" he demanded, drawlingly—"To what would you return? To a Jew's embrace! To the kisses of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego in one goat-bearded Israel! Ah no, enchantress of my soul! Think of it! A Jew!"

"A Jew who is my husband,"—said Jacynth, with a demure smile—"And from whom you have borrowed a good deal of money!"

Ferrers stroked his fat chin complacently.

"Do I not know it? Is it not the purpose for which Jews are born?—London Jews, at any rate—to lend money at high interest, and sell wives? 'Search the Scriptures' and therein you will find both professions most eloquently described, set forth and approved by Jehovah! As for ourselves, let us go to Paris!"

She shook her head decisively.

"No—Paris is too far. I will not cross the sea. Besides, I must return home to-night—I have many engagements to-morrow."

He was silent. The balloon was travelling quickly through skies that were rapidly growing darker and darker. Clouds were forming at a lower level than the car, and they thickened at times and again dispersed, showing glimpses of land between their floating grey.

"Who was that man to whom you called good-bye just now?" he presently asked—"That parson—

She looked at him amusedly.

"A lover of mine!"—she answered.

"Another! How many more, O fair Faustina! The cry is 'Still they come!' But methinks this mendicant of the Gospel loves you but little to let you venture forth into the clouds with *me*!"

She laughed.

"He does not know he loves me,"—she said—"*I* know it! And one day I shall tell him!—I shall show him the secret of himself. Poor devil! If it were not for his Christian Creed he would worship me—even more than you do!"

"Christian Creed!" echoed Ferrers, derisively—"He works at that for his pay, of course! He doesn't believe in it!"

She broke into a little peal of laughter.

"Oh, but he *does* believe in it!" she exclaimed—"That's the odd part of it! He's quite sincere about it. He is really convinced that it's good and right to deprive himself of enjoyment and make himself miserable!" And she laughed again. "He does believe in the Christian Creed. And in God!"

"Alas, benighted brain!" murmured Ferrers, drowsily—"Benighted, empty, idiot brain! Sad, sad to think that there should be any such fools left in these days of ours when Man, glorious Man, is the supreme conqueror of the earth and the heavens!—when Man, triumphant Man, is his own maker, his own redeemer, his own instructor, his own spherical splendour!"—here his voice grew rather indistinct—"There is no room for the God of the childish beliefs any more!—M-man! Noble, stupendous M-man!—he is the only ruler of the universe——"

"Not when he has been drinking,"—said Jacynth, suddenly and sharply—"as you have!"

He turned his glassy eyes upon her with an air of blandly reproachful astonishment.

"Drinking? I? My dear lady! No more than the gifted Persian who so sweetly sings:

'When I am drunk the sky of life is clear,
And I gaze into it without a fear;
As I grow sober, horribly I dread
The shadows of my vultures drawing near.'

"'The shadows of my vultures!' There they are! See!" He pointed to a wreath of fluffy grey clouds which, flitting lightly below the balloon, drifted now and again into weird shapes like cloven wings that rose upright and caught fugitive gleams of colour on their plumy points, and anon, swooping downwards looked like huge birds of prey.

"My vultures—my vultures!" he hummed as though the words were a tune—"My 'shafts of love or arrows of death, Or the little snakes that eat my heart!' And so, dear lady, you would fain return to your useful Jew! You will not soar with a poet to Paradise! Ah, women, women! Give them wings and they straightway desire to crawl! Let us see where we are!"

He rose to make his observations with the aid of the various scientific instruments with which the balloon was provided, and she watched him closely, relieved to think that he was about to prepare for their descent.

"We are at an altitude of four thousand feet,"—he presently announced—"And if almanacs be correct we ought to see a wonderful moonrise. But you prefer your Jew to the moon!"

"I prefer to return home just now, certainly,"—she said; "Do be sensible, Claude! Steer for London."

He did not answer her at once. The clouds that he had called his vultures suddenly cleared away, and the balloon soared steadily through a dark expanse of dense blue, passing swiftly over tracts of open country, invisible except where a town or a village, with its lighted streets and houses, glittered briefly like a tiny speck of flame on the smooth haze of distance. Jacynth grew restless. She was not nervous,—her exceptional vanity saved her from that, for she could not imagine anything disastrous occurring to so beautiful and desirable a person as herself,—but she wished she knew

how to steer the balloon with her own hands in case of emergency. Moved by this idea she turned towards her companion, who was fumbling with the ropes and cords and appliances of which he boasted that he alone knew the secret action, and said:

"What are you doing? Can I help you?"

He lifted his head and smiled at her. In the deepening darkness his white flabby face looked like a clay mask moulded into the expression of a fabulous demon.

"Shall the lily support the oak?" he queried, grandiloquently—"Or the dove lend her wings to the eagle? Which simple metaphors mean, my dear lady, that you cannot help me! Nor for the moment can I help myself! We have drifted into a strong stream of air—a cross current difficult to navigate—and I fear me that my lovely enchantress will perhaps have to pass the night, not with her gentle Jew, but at some inadequate hotel in Holyhead or Dublin!"

Jacynth moved from her seat, her fair brows clouding with vexation.

"What do you mean? I thought you could steer anywhere, even in the strongest wind!"

His smile became more fixedly bland.

"So I can — on most occasions,"—he replied—"But there are exceptions to every rule—and to-night—is one of those exceptions! But be not discouraged, dear lady! All is well! We are, or have been, travelling across the Cotswolds——"

She uttered a little involuntary cry.

"The Cotswolds!"

"I think so! I imagine so! Take care!"

For she suddenly leaned her head over the edge of the car and peered down into the dark dome of space.

"I can see nothing!" she said, petulantly, drawing back her head quickly,—"It is all whirling darkness!"

"Even so! Mere Chaos!" replied Ferrers, placidly—"The land is there—but to us it might as well not be there, for we see nothing of it! Even so is the earth to higher

worlds! A speck—a blur! We make too much of it! What of the Cotswolds? Did my Magic Crystal ever shine upon them?"

"I was there—once!"—she answered, slowly—"and the man who came with me to Hurlingham to-day—he is vicar of a parish there."

Ferrers gave an airy gesture of contempt.

"Vicar of a parish! Oh, narrow boundary for the brain of man! A country parish! A community of yokels and ugly rustic wenches!"

She laughed—a little low laugh of amusement.

"True! There is no danger for his peace of mind! He would never see a face among those 'rustic wenches' that might possibly haunt his memory!"

She was silent then for a little. Presently she asked:

"What time is it?"

He was a minute or two before replying. Then he said:

"Nine o'clock."

"We have been up an hour and a half then. Make for London now."

He came and put an arm about her.

"Enchantress, have I not already told you I cannot make for London? Things are against me." Here he was troubled by a violent hiccough, and the whisky odours of his person immediately created a private atmosphere for his own special environment. She turned her head from him in disgust and pushed his arm away. "You are a-angry with me,"—he went on—"A-angry with your p-poor poet! I c-cannot help it! We will d-descend now if you like—w-wherever you please!"

She stood up in the car. Her heart was beating a little quickly, but she was not afraid.

"Where are we?" she demanded.

"Dear lady, I cannot tell you the exact locality! I know not whether below us lies a town or a village, or the parish where your friend the parson preaches to his bumpkin congregation! We may be soaring over mountains or over

lowlands—in this glorious immensity it matters little! But in any case, if compasses are accurate, we are travelling towards the coast."

"Towards the coast!" she exclaimed, in accents of annoyance rather than alarm—"What coast?"

"Naturally, the Welsh coast, my angel! Did I not mention a possible hotel at Holyhead? Or—if we cross the sea—in Dublin? One moment!—I will kindle a flare."

He was so long about this business and did it at last with such uncertain hands, that she grew cold with a sudden access of 'nerves.' A horrid dread came over her lest by some careless movement he should set fire to the balloon. Apparently, however, he had lost nothing of his physical self-control, and the flare was successfully lowered, creating such a marvellous effect as it burned away in the dark dome of night, that though she had seen the same thing often before, she was more than usually thrilled by the magnificence of the spectacle. The great globe of the balloon appeared to shine with an unearthly splendour and to cover nearly half the heavens, while all around it the violet-black of the sky was strewn with glimmering stars. The shadow of the car, and the ropes by which it was suspended were drawn, as with an inky pencil, against the panels of the balloon, and Jacynth gazed upwards, fascinated by the weird brilliancy of the scene till the flare had burnt out and the darkness seemed to grow darker by contrast.

"That was beautiful!" she said—"And now, do you know where you are going to descend?"

He held up his hand.

"Listen!"

A faint murmuring sound floated through the air like a choir of small voices singing very softly. It rose and fell—then seemed to cease altogether, and anon to begin again.

"Is it a town?" she asked.

He smiled strangely.

"No. It is the sea!"

"The sea!"

He drew her arm within his own and pointed ahead. There was not a cloud in the sky, and the stars seemed to be growing up in clusters all through the infinite space, like summer blossoms in a field. But below the car a long dark stretch of apparent haze could be discerned, marked by parallel dots of light running divergently till they were lost in distance, while other infinitesimal sparks of luminance were scattered about like the droppings of a spent firework.

"The lights of ships!" murmured Ferrers, sleepily—"The signs of Man's mastery of the ocean! 'Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!' Dear lady, you should read Byron! He would amuse you! A sadly ignorant versifier, yet with flashes—occasional flashes of intelligence! But his errors are obvious. 'Man marks the earth with ruin; his control stops with the shore.' That is wrong, of course. Man's control does not stop with the shore,—on the contrary, it extends indefinitely. The lights of ships,—the lights of floating buoys!—and, if I mistake not, the lights of the Admiralty pier at Holyhead. Shall we descend?"

She gave an eager gesture of assent. He held her arm more closely, and stooping over her looked amorously into her eyes.

"Or shall we cross to the Emerald Isle?" he murmured. "The land of romance and poverty and Celtic Leagues!—the land of the Dark Rosaleen!

'I could scale the blue air,
I could plough the high hills,
Oh, I could kneel all night in prayer
To heal your many ills!
And one beamy smile from you
Would float like light between
My toil and me, my own, my true,
My Dark Rosaleen!
My fond Rosaleen!
Would give me life and soul anew,
A second life, a soul anew,
My Dark Rosaleen!'

"Ah!"—and he drew a long breath—"That is poetry! And you, you beautiful enchantress, are the Dark Rosaleen incarnate!"

He kissed her. A tremor ran through her blood, half of pleasure, half of fear. There was something enthralling in this strange love-making in the air, and for the moment she yielded to the animal power which Claude Ferrers possessed over women,—a magnetic force which he boasted of having practised as an art. The distant singing sound of the sea had changed within the last few minutes to a loud sighing moan,—and presently there was a curious noise as of creaking and straining cordage. This was repeated several times; it did not come from the balloon, which was careering onward with remarkable swiftness and steadiness, but from some contending force in the currents of the air. Ferrers heard it, and an expression of something like alarm flitted over his flabby features. Releasing Jacynth from his hold, he went to the other side of the car.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

He laughed, somewhat forcedly.

"The best I can, dear lady!" he answered—"A strong wind is rising, and we are nearing the coast. Sit quite still where you are. There is no danger. I am going to light a couple of flares that will show us to the people below."

Two or three moments passed, and then the glare of coloured fires, blue and crimson, blazed in the sky, and once again, like a mysterious floating world of light, the 'Shooting Star' glowed with translucent brilliancy in the thickening air. No answering signal came from earth;—three or four times Ferrers leaned over the edge of the car and shouted, but there was no response. Profound silence reigned, except for the gradually deepening murmur of waters in perpetual commotion and the increasing rush of the wind. The balloon was travelling at great speed, and Jacynth almost held her breath, waiting for the next word Ferrers should utter. She hoped and she believed that he was steering their aerial car in a landward

direction and that a descent would soon be made. She knew that he was an experienced aeronaut, acquainted with all the possibilities of his own 'dirigible' apparatus, and he had taught her to consider that there was no more danger in a balloon than in a motor-car, probably not so much. She had made dozens of successful voyages in the 'Shooting Star'; she called it her sky-yacht, and was wont to believe it as safe as any yacht that ever sailed the seas,—yet to-night there was a cold sense of dread upon her,—she wished she had never come. She could not control the restlessness of her thoughts; they jumped from one thing to another with provoking rapidity, and yet somehow they all centred round Shadbrook, — Shadbrook continually. What where the people doing in that stupid village? Most of them went to bed at ten. It was not ten yet; it soon would be. Then the lights would be put out in every little cottage, and the only bright spots in the small dull street would be the two public-houses. *They* would not close till eleven. The wives and children would be all in bed, while the husbands, with women who were not their wives, would be tossing down glass after glass of raw spirit, and singing and dancing and shouting—yes!—that was the way Dan and she had begun! Dan! To think of him now seemed strange,—now, when she was a rich woman of fashion with no end of lovers to pick and choose from——

Here she shook herself out of her meditations impatiently. What was Claude Ferrers about? She watched him with ill-concealed impatience. He had turned on the switch of his electric lamp and appeared to be studying a chart. Presently she saw him take a large silver flask from his pocket and put it to his mouth. A sudden sick terror seized her.

"Claude!" she exclaimed,—"Claude!"

He was too busy with the flask to answer her at once. It seemed glued to his lips, and he drank and drank till he had drained it.

"Claude!" she cried again.

He peered round at her with a fatuous smile.

"'How silver sweet sound lovers' tongues by night!'" he

said—"'Like softest music to attending ears!' Well, my Magic Crystal! What would you have with me?"

Tears of vexation started to her eyes. She saw that it would now be difficult to either argue with, or persuade him. She caught up her cloak of sables and gathered it about her shiveringly. Then she moved round to him.

"Are you descending?" she asked.

"Into the sea?" he rejoined—"No, dear lady! I am not so unwise! We are too close to the coast for a safe descent."

"What are you going to do then?"

Her voice quivered as she spoke, and his glassy blue eyes turned round upon her in questioning wonder.

"You are crying?" he said—"You are crying like a child! What for?"

"I am cold,"—she answered, with a little sob—"And tired. And you worry me."

"I? I worry you? My angel!"

He made an amorous grab at her cloak—she drew it away from him.

"You know I only meant to come up with you for two or three hours," she said—"I wanted to be at home by eleven at the latest. You have taken me much further than you ought. And I don't believe you know where you are."

"I do—I do know where I am!" he declared, with some excitement—"Why should you think I do not?"

She flashed a contemptuous glance at him.

"You have been drinking again!"

He laughed foolishly.

"Drinking? No! I have simply fortified myself for emergencies! The merest drop!—and I needed it, dear lady! I want all my nerve!"

The angry tears still glittered in her eyes.

"Your nerve!" she echoed, scornfully.

"Yes! My nerve!" he repeated, and he rose from the seat where he had been studying the chart, and stood up unsteadily. "My nerve must carry us across the sea!"

She uttered a sharp cry.

"No, no! Not across the sea!"

At that moment a white mystical glory flooded the heavens. In all directions,—at about the same level as that in which the balloon was floating,—there arose masses of fleecy clouds like Alpine snow-peaks, and out of these sprang the moon, round and bright as a silver shield. The sudden effect was weird, startling and unspeakably magnificent, but Jacynth had no eyes for it. Her gaze was turned below, where now, plainly discernible, was the sea, troubled by some threat of storm, for the opaline gleams of the moon could be seen sparkling on the crests of rising and falling waves. For a moment she was dumb with terror,—the next she quickly controlled herself and turned to Ferrers.

"What now?" she asked, low and breathlessly.

He did not answer. He was throwing out ballast in reckless haste. In obedience to his action the balloon soared rapidly higher and higher till it seemed to wander like a will-o'-the-wisp among the shining masses of moonlit clouds which now rose in the sky like mountains from a plain, with summits of dazzling whiteness, shadowing into vast ravines and valleys, among which the 'Shooting Star' appeared to glide swiftly, till rising far above them, it floated over what seemed like a double sea. Jacynth, faint and giddy with fear, sat down crouchingly, covering her eyes. She dared not move nor speak. Ferrers had also seated himself, and his hand was on the mechanical contrivance he had designed for steering, and on the faith of which he had proudly announced himself to the world as a 'conqueror of the air.' Presently he looked up and said, in quiet tones:

"Darling! There is no danger!"

She was silent. She was too angry with him to reply. She felt herself outraged by the extent of this voyage in the air, and its threatening peril—peril which surely, if he had kept all his senses about him, he could have averted.

"When we get back to town to-morrow," she thought,—"I will tell him just what I think of him! That he is a drunkard—unfit to be trusted——"

On this her mind appeared to pause. 'A drunkard—unfit to be trusted.' That was the character of Dan Kiernan, her first lover. Then was Claude Ferrers, the poet, the voluptuary, the 'soul' of a decadent society, the 'gentleman' of education and position, on the same level of weak incapability as the rustic boor? Shuddering, she drew herself more closely into the soft folds of her sables. She still kept her eyes covered. For it frightened her to look at the gigantic moving scenery of the clouds—at the moon that seemed so near and large and terrible. All she longed for now was the safe descent of the balloon in some accessible spot; and the only way to this desirable end was, she felt, to leave Ferrers to himself and his own independent action. For, after all, he was no more anxious to lose his life than she was; and he had said there was no danger.

So she sat still and waited. The minutes passed slowly till nearly another hour had ebbed away. Throbbing pains in her head began to trouble her, and every now and then she felt as if she could scarcely breathe. Her heart beat violently; its pulsations were distinctly audible.

"We must be travelling at an immense height!"—she thought, suddenly—"There is no sound now—not even the murmur of the sea!"

She uncovered her eyes and looked at Ferrers. He was sitting quite motionless—his hand on his steering appliance as before. The electric lamp was burning, and shone brightly above the open chart, while all around the balloon the clouds were grouping in massive and wonderful forms. Some of them were like huge trees growing up from a flat swamp of white mist, their tops inky black against the starry sky. The force of the wind constantly blew these asunder and changed them into the semblance of deep dark lakes surrounded by frosted hills, so that the effect was as though great forests should be at one moment standing upright and at another bent down and broken into chaotic masses. This cloud confusion was inexpressibly frightful in its grandeur,—appalling for human eyes to contemplate,—and Jacynth's brain whirled with the

whirling lights and shadows till she began to feel uncertain of her own existence, and such a sense of suffocation overcame her that she almost fainted.

"Claude! Claude!" she cried, gaspingly—"I cannot stand this! Claude!"

He made no answer. Sitting rigidly under the electric lamp, with the open chart before him, his hand was on his steering apparatus in precisely its former position. She leaned towards him—surely he looked strange! A sudden horror gripped her nerves.

"Claude!" she cried again.

Then she sprang up trembling violently—she felt sick and giddy—her throat and lips went suddenly dry. Slowly, and with shaking limbs, she crept inch by inch from her own place in the car to where Ferrers sat—and stretching out her hand she touched him. He gave no response. Dragging herself still closer she peered with an awful enquiry into his face on which the moon shed a cold white glare. Then she screamed—a loud wild scream of delirious frenzy.

"Claude! Claude! Don't play tricks with me!—don't frighten me! You are not dead! No—no! Wake!—wake! —wake! It's the drink that makes you sleep like this!—the drink!—you should never have touched it!—Claude—rouse yourself!—wake!"

And in the extremity of her terror she clutched at his coat and shook his inert figure;—whereat it slowly toppled over and lurched heavily to one side as she sprang back from it, the upper part of the body falling into a reclining posture against the edge of the car and remaining so with its head partially upturned to the sky.

And then she realised the horrible truth. That he was dead! Quite dead. She stared at that ghastly face, with its wide sensual mouth half open, and its glassy eyes frozen on vacancy, and recoiling, leaned against the ropes of the car, trying to steady the wild throbbing of her pulses. How had he died so suddenly and without sound? She could not tell. Heart-failure might have been the cause,—heart-failure, due perhaps

to the high altitude of the balloon and the drink he had taken to ensure his 'nerve.' Anyway, he was dead. Quite dead!

All at once she found herself laughing hysterically at this. Claude Ferrers—the 'conqueror of the air'—the writer of many books ingeniously composed with the object of proving the supremacy of Man and the nothingness of God—was dead! From the way in which he had talked to his society friends, it seemed as if he thought he would never die. And yet even he,—the darling of literary cliques,—the voluptuary of idle women's boudoirs,—was there before her, a helpless lump, deprived of sense and motion and of no further use in the world,—only fit to be burnt or buried out of sight and out of mind! Her breath came in short quick gasps—she pressed her hands against her heart in a futile effort to still its rapid beatings,—and then, like a lightning flash tearing open the heavens, another frightful realisation broke in upon her brain —the hideous maddening realisation that now Ferrers was dead, she was alone! Alone, all alone with the elements!—alone in a mere toy-vessel of the sky, without any knowledge of how to guide it or control it,—alone—alone!—adrift in the immense heavens, and beneath her the sea! A despairing cry broke from her lips,—a cry which, among the vast spaces where she floated, was no more than the cry of a weak wild bird in a storm,—her limbs sank under her, and she crouched down on the floor of the car, hiding her face in her hands. She could not look any more on the waxen-livid features of the corpse that was now her sole companion—or on the thickening procession of monster clouds which, gathering closely round the balloon, moved above and below it in a sort of solemn moonlit pageantry, like Titanesque shapes of warriors arrayed in order for battle,—and shivering with the deathly cold of utmost fear, she shrouded herself in the folds of her sable cloak and tried to collect her scattered forces—to think—to reason out her awful position. Her breathing had gradually become easier—there was a sense of dampness in the air, and she suddenly remembered how she had been told that if a balloon passed through any wet fog, the moisture would help

to bring it to a lower level. This was what indeed had happened; but she had not just then the strength or the courage to get up and read the aneroid, which would have shown her that the balloon, from having been at a height of nearly twelve thousand feet, had gradually dropped to about six thousand and was still slowly but slightly sinking. The clouds were thick below the car—yet now and then they drifted asunder, showing glimpses of the sea between, dark grey in the moonbeams and covered with almost microscopic waves, which had the appearance of being frozen like the ridges of a glacier. But she saw nothing and almost felt nothing; the paralysing terror of her situation had deprived her of all sense save the bare consciousness of life and the dread of death.

Huddling under her cloak she began dreamily to wonder what death was like. Dan Kiernan was dead. She had crushed the life out of him under the wheels of her motor-car. It was an accident,—and as she had told Parson Everton a few hours ago—'motor-cars run over and kill so many people that one ceases to think about it. It's part of the fun.' Part of the fun! Yes,—and Dan Kiernan's death was part of her usual 'luck.' She had looked at him as he lay mangled in the dust, without one throb of pity for his end. He had a horrible dead face!—horrible dead eyes!—she could see them still. And now Claude Ferrers was dead—and death had made him almost as hideous as Dan Kiernan. Would she, when she was dead, look hideous? Would her beauty — that ravishing, exquisite beauty which drew all men to worship it—be disfigured and destroyed? At the very thought she began to weep,—and a storm of hysterical sobbing shook her frame. This, and this alone, was what death meant to her,—the loss of beauty. She sobbed and sobbed till she was absolutely exhausted,—a weak numbness stole over her limbs, and at last, like a querulous child worn out by peevish crying, she sank into a deep sleep.

For the next two consecutive hours the balloon wandered on its unguided way, bearing its strange freight of the dead and the living together through the clouds. By midnight the moon

had disappeared behind a mountainous mass of thick black vapours, and the heavens were rather darkening than lightening towards the first hour of the day. Creeping mists arose from a low-lying coast washed by the sea, and the 'Shooting Star' falling somewhat rapidly downwards, hovered above the little hills and plains of a land which was scarcely discernible in the gathering gloom. A stormy wind began to blow, and the balloon travelled with incredible swiftness, always at a lower and lower level, till all at once, with a violent crashing and cracking sound, the trail rope caught in the tops of some tall trees, and the car jerked against the boughs.

The shock woke Jacynth from her stupor and sleep of misery; she sprang up hardly knowing where she was, and only hearing the noise of the collision. All was dark around her; she was unable to help herself in any way,—and scarcely had she realised the position of the balloon, when with another terrific jolt it tore away from the trees, swaying the car on one side in such a manner that the body of Claude Ferrers slipped over the edge and fell like a leaden weight to earth. Released of this heavy load, the balloon rose with sudden and frightful rapidity, and tore away at a mad speed, racing with wind and cloud in the darkness, and Jacynth stood alone in the car, with hair blown back and wild eyes staring into the gloom of nothing,—the nothing of life,—the nothing of death—and—dared she say—the nothing of God? She had slept,—and the sleep had steadied her brain; she knew now exactly what had happened and that there was no hope. She knew that she had, as it were, almost touched earth—the blessed earth so unvalued by the majority of those that tread upon it—and that if any aeronaut had been with her, it was possible she might have been saved. But it was now too late. Too late! She also knew, albeit vaguely, that the loss of weight occasioned by the fall of Claude Ferrers' dead body from the car must increase her danger a thousand-fold, and that any strong or continued disturbance of the air would make short work of the balloon's now risky equilibrium. Yet, knowing all, she could not actually believe it likely that she would meet with her own end. That was too

impossible for her imagining. 'Luck' had always favoured her; she had said of herself:—"My badness, if it *is* badness, has brought me nothing but luck." Nothing but luck! Luck would be on her side again,—of that, even lost as she was in the immensities of space, she felt sure!

When once this idea impressed itself on her mind, a rush of strength and courage came to her. She was faint and hungry, and by the light of the electric lamp, which, despite all shocks and difficulties, was still steadily burning, she sought among the various things with which the car was provided and came upon a leather pouch, containing some biscuits and a flask of brandy. She ate and drank greedily—the raw fiery liquor which she swallowed as though it were water, sent a thrill of pleasure through her veins, and it was only the thought of Claude Ferrers and his sudden silent death that made her all at once stop drinking and put the flask away with a shudder. But the nourishment, false and only temporary as it was, gave her a brief access of boldness amounting to bravado;—she took a firm stand in the middle of the car, and with her right hand resting lightly on one of the suspension ropes to steady herself, she faced the night like a steersman at the wheel of a ship ploughing through dark unknown seas. If only her many lovers could have seen her then, she would have scored a triumph for her beauty greater than any she had yet experienced. With her glorious hair half loosened about her, and her exquisite face, pale as death, illumined by the glimmering glare of the electric lamp which also gave a cold unnatural brilliancy to her dark eyes, and her figure wrapped in the shrouding sables that were like a part of the mists of midnight and morning—she was wonderful to behold,—nothing more wonderful or beautiful in human shape had ever floated solitary between earth and heaven!

And she was conscious of this,—for she began to think how the account of her terrific adventure would read in the newspapers.

"I shall be the most famous woman in the world!" she thought, with a sudden smile—"London, Paris and New York

will be at my feet! One does not need to be good or clever in order to win renown,—clever people are generally dull and good ones always so. But to have such an experience as this!—this night by myself in a balloon, trusting to chance for a rescue, is enough to make one's name celebrated for ever!" And her smile deepened. "I wonder what Parson Everton will say!"

Thus she talked to herself for a while, with an almost perfect equanimity. She felt confident that since the balloon had come in contact with trees, she was travelling over inhabited country where, with the daylight, she would be seen by those who would immediately use all possible effort for her rescue. How such a rescue could take place, seeing that she was totally ignorant of the management of the balloon, she did not stop to think. But presently her heart began to trouble her with the quick violence of its pulsations, and she again experienced difficulty in breathing. This rather took away her nerve, and she began to look around her with renewed qualms of terror. The balloon, though she knew it not, was at an altitude of nearly fourteen thousand feet. Owing to the terrific speed with which it had ascended after the loss of such 'ballast' as the corpse of Claude Ferrers had provided for it, it had escaped a threatening storm area, and was now floating at a tolerably even pace above what seemed to be a continent, but was merely a mass of black clouds. Below the clouds lay Ireland asleep—all its childish frets and jars and tears hushed in slumber, like an ailing babe rocked to rest on the bosom of Mother Nature. Moments deepened into hours and still the 'Shooting Star' glided on, moving slowly with the slow movement of the upper reaches of the air,—there was not a star visible, and Jacynth, as she watched the profound and stirless darkness into which she was plunged, felt her brief courage fast ebbing away. It was horrible!—this thick gloom!—this tense silence! Her head swam,—her pulses beat like quick hammers, and her heart seemed to rise in her bosom with a sense of threatening suffocation. She gave a sobbing cry.

"If only the light would come!" she wailed—"O God, send the day!"

Scarcely had the words left her lips when a rush of thought, like a burning flood, filled every nook and cranny of her brain. God! Why had she appealed to what she considered non-existent? 'O God, send the day!' What should either the Day or the Night have to do with God? In this deep and awful obscurity,—this shadow of the grave,—was it of any avail to call or to pray to the vast Unknown Creative Force which by the human part of its creation is daily blasphemed?

She wrung her hands, drawing little tearful breaths of agony. And all at once she heard, or fancied she heard, as though it were speaking from a long distance, a sad and gentle voice saying:—'Jacynth, is it possible you have no faith? Is there nothing in your better self which tells you that death is not all? That there is a Life Beyond?' And again—'As surely as we two stand here, the moment will come when there will be nothing in life or death for you but this—Yourself and God! No friend or lover will then be near to counsel or command,—you will be alone, Jacynth!—alone with the Almighty Power whom your very thoughts blaspheme!'

Clearly and with grave emphasis these words rang in her ears,—with such insistence that all at once she lost her self-control and cried wildly to the darkness—

"Parson Everton! Parson Everton! Don't look at me like that! Don't be hard upon me!"

And she dropped feebly on her knees, sobbing, laughing, screaming and moaning:

"Listen, listen! Parson Everton, listen! Look at me! You know how beautiful I am—yes, you know,—you see! There was never a lovelier face than mine—everybody says so—and Dan—Dan—he went mad for me! Ah yes!—he went mad for me, and you would have gone mad for me too—yes, for you're only a man—if it had not been for your God! And what has your God done for you? Nothing—nothing! And yet you believe in Him! You talked about Him in Sunday

school as if He were Everything! You believe in Him! God! Where is He?"

Here her hysterical passion checked itself abruptly as though spent—and with a shuddering sigh she raised herself half-way up from her knees, staring ahead—surely the darkness was breaking? Surely that was a gleam of light? Had the day dawned? There was a coppery red tinge in the cloud-blackness towards the north-east—here and there it broke into dull green, and to the south a soft fine pearly grey began to spread itself in veil-like films across the sky. She looked and looked—and smiled.

"A doom is coming!" she whispered—"A doom!" Another moment, and her voice shrilled out to a shriek—she sprang up and leaned over the edge of the car—"Do you hear what Parson Everton says? A doom is coming! For me, poor Jacynth, with only a face for a fortune! A doom is coming! Do you hear it, you clouds? Parson Everton's God is angry with a girl for her sins!" and she laughed deliriously—"Angry! If there were a God who knew and saw everything, He could never be angry! He could only be sorry!"

By this time the clouds were rapidly dispersing—and the most miraculously brilliant colours began to burn on all sides of the heavens. The dawn was declaring its approach—and an exquisite pale flush of pink glowed in the east, uncurling like the petal of a rose. It was about four in the morning. As the light grew stronger, Jacynth became calmer, and steadying herself against one of the suspension ropes of the balloon as before, waited expectantly to see what land would appear when the clouds were gone, and whether she was near enough to the earth to attract attention. Breathlessly she watched, as layer after layer of fleecy grey unrolled itself in lengths of soft vapour tinged with the rainbow hues of coming morning—and presently, after what seemed an interminable time of suspense, the first beam of the sun shot upwards like an arrow of gold. Above the balloon the sky showed glimpses of blue,—below, all was yet mysteriously veiled. Conscious

now of no other feeling than the longing to know where she was, and already busy in her mind with plans and possibilities of attracting some means of attention and rescue, Jacynth dried the tears from her eyes, bound up her hair and arranged her apparel almost as if she expected to alight in a few moments among a crowd of applauding and congratulatory friends,—as for Claude Ferrers, she had almost forgotten that he ever lived. Her interest in herself was so unbounded and absorbing that she could see nothing outside the potency of her own beauty, nor did she care to remember anything that seemed to associate that beauty with an unpleasant incident. Her perilous journey was nearly over, she thought—she must keep her head and not lose her nerve. So between fear and hope she hovered in mid-air—keeping her eyes fixed intently on the moving panorama of clouds below,—when all suddenly, as though at a word of command, they rolled away in great masses, disclosing what seemed to be a vast white mist, stretching out endlessly from north to south, from east to west. The balloon was now travelling so slowly as to be almost stationary, and Jacynth gazed as from a balcony in heaven upon that great mysterious whiteness which spread itself out underneath her aerial car like a carpet of woven pearl. Slowly, very slowly, it rose in thin, straight lines that shredded themselves away into webs as fine and shimmering as floss silk,—webs and loose threads that twisted and twined and interlaced themselves one with another till, finally lifting and disappearing altogether, they left bare the treasure they had guarded,—the heaving wonder of the ocean! The broad Atlantic!—the illimitable expanse of mighty waters—and not a glimpse of land in sight! Only a few miles away was the coast of Connemara, but it was wrapped in a thick curtain of fog, and the balloon was drifting steadily out to sea. Moreover, it was travelling at a less rate of speed and at a gradually lower level.

One glance around her and Jacynth understood. This was the thing called death, which fashionable folk made so light of when it came to other people than themselves. This was the

great Silence into which Dan Kiernan had passed, with his victim, the poor little 'dolly wife' of Parson Everton—this was the black chasm of cold Nothingness into which she, too, with all her youth and beauty, was about to fall!

"I can't believe it!" she muttered, feebly—"I am not going to die! No—no! I cannot die yet! I haven't lived my life!"

She looked around her on all sides. Everywhere the waves rolled and leaped and murmured—there was a solemn and perpetual rush and roar among them like the sound of a great organ. The vast expanse of rough water stretching to the horizon seemed nearer,—was the balloon sinking! Suddenly she looked up. There was a vacant stare in her eyes—a wild smile on her mouth. She stretched out her hands.

"Parson Everton!" she called, as if he were in hearing—"Parson Everton, where shall I find your God?"

At that moment, like a fire springing from the sea, the sun rose. Its beams, till now pale, and piercing in golden shafts through rising veils of vapour, flared aloft in a splendid coronal of triumph above the last vanishing cloud left from the night, and in a rosy depth of sky so warm and intense in colour as to crimson the waves below with the clearness of cut rubies, it shed forth the glory of the day upon the world. Between it and surrounding space the sinking balloon with its one frail voyager to the Unknown, hovered tremblingly,—and, leaning from its car, Jacynth still smiled and waved her hands as though in farewell to a friend. Bending down, she listened attentively to the increasing noise of the tumultuous waters as she sank lower and lower, and talked to herself with all the happy unconsciousness of a distraught brain.

"There go the bells of Shadbrook Church!" she murmured—"Make haste, Dan! I want you to see me there in my best frock. Don't be late. We must pretend to be good, you know! It's so easy to deceive Parson Everton! Come, come! It's Communion Sunday!"

Here suddenly drawing herself up to her full height, she flashed her brilliant jewel eyes in the golden face of the sun.

"Yes, Parson Everton,"—she said, in gentle accents—"I know my lesson! 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth!'"

With that she folded her hands together, and resting them on the edge of the car looked placidly on at the growing splendour of the day.

And when noon came both sun and sky were clear of anything more strange than the sea-birds flying across the roughening waves, and diving like winged sunbeams among the rising and falling crests of foam.

CHAPTER XXIV

YEARS passed swiftly away,—and once again Richard Everton stood in a London pulpit, looking down upon one of the largest congregations that had ever filled the great spaces of St. Paul's Cathedral. That vast interior was packed with human beings, and every head was upturned, every eye fixed upon one who had attained the reputation of being not only the finest but also the most daring preacher of the day, —so daring, indeed, that he was constantly being offered 'preferment' in an attempt to remove him from his own immediate sphere of influence and thus minimise the peril into which his bold and fearless utterances brought less honest men of his calling. All such offers, however, he steadily refused, electing still to remain Vicar of Shadbrook. As Vicar of Shadbrook, he had become a power in the land; and as Vicar of Shadbrook he stood now under the dome of St. Paul's, waiting while the last verses of the hymn before the sermon were being sung, to address a congregation drawn from all quarters of the metropolis—a congregation profoundly interested in the character and personality of the man they were about to hear,—a character and personality which his work in Shadbrook alone had made famous. Shadbrook, limited as it was, had proved sufficient for him; and Shadbrook had steadily risen to the call his patient love and care had made upon it. It had grown and prospered exceedingly; the number of its houses and thatched cottages had increased, and art and careful architecture alike had combined, not to destroy but to enhance the beauty of its natural surroundings; even its running stream was now kept so bright and clear that

it had become a rippling joy under the old stone bridge, instead of a source of trouble and infection. Its people were gradually becoming renowned throughout the country as skilful workers in many branches of trade and agriculture, for where Minchin's brewery once stood was now a nobly built and finely proportioned School of Trades, endowed and supported by the munificence of an American millionaire and philanthropist, no other than Everton's chance acquaintance, Clarence Howard. The School of Trades was an entirely novel enterprise. Much money had to be sunk in it before it showed any signs of success,—but it had now 'caught on' as the saying is, and had attracted so many students and workers from all parts of Britain that it promised to be of real national service as a pioneer of practical education in the needful knowledge of life and business. Erected on the beautiful architectural lines of a grand old Tudor manor, with gabled roof and wide latticed windows, it was surrounded by a glorious garden,—it had its reading and recreation rooms, its dining-hall, its library, its theatre which served for lectures and concerts, and its workshops where every trade was taught and practically mastered, each student receiving diplomas and awards as in other educational systems. Everton was the life and soul of this great organisation, which though not actually situated in his own parish, was still near enough to exert a beneficial influence upon his parishioners, drawing them away from idle lounging and gossiping, teaching them the happiness of intelligent craftsmanship, and arousing in them that creative spirit of unhasting but unresting ambition, which impels a man or woman to do whatever has to be done so truly well that his or her labour shall be honestly worth its price. There was never a case of drunkenness to be reported anywhere in the neighbourhood, and yet drink of a pure and wholesome kind was not withheld. When the men and women workers at the School of Trades met together, as they all did, Sundays included, in their lofty dining-hall, for their mid-day meal, they could have anything they liked to drink in moderation, except raw spirit. Beer, brewed on the premises by some of the workers them-

selves, according to plain old-fashioned methods and wholly unadulterated, could be had on demand,—the theory of this procedure being the same which was formerly practised by many English landowners, who, while firmly refusing to allow any brewery, distillery or public-house on their ground, yet permitted their tenants to brew such beer as they required for themselves in their own houses, just in the same way of freedom as they made their own ginger or elder wines. The result of this plan was that while there was no intemperance, there were equally no complaints of 'teetotal tyranny,' and every one was sober and satisfied. It is a plan that might be followed with safety and advantage in many a rural community if those persons who possess manorial rights would enforce such a simple method of persuasion to temperance. The School of Trades prospered so greatly, and its members were all so happy and healthy and diligently occupied with well-remunerated labour, that young Laurence Everton, now a brilliant scholar, and the pride of his college in Cambridge, used oftentimes to declare that the training there was quite as good as any to be obtained at either of the universities—"and"—he would add, with a toss of his handsome head, and a mischievous flash of his bright eyes, "ever so much more useful! The Classics are all very well in their way—splendid literature and all that,—but they can't help a fellow much to earn an honest living." And when at home for his holidays he always worked in the School himself, "learning a bit of all the trades in turn!" he would say, laughingly, and the Shadbrook people, who adored the very sight of him, were wont to remark proudly: "There was nothing Mr. Laurence couldn't do, bless him! He could shoe a horse, or build a house—either was as easy to him as t'other!"

And the Vicar had his hands full. His life, which he had thought no more than a broken reed, had been raised up by divine ordainment to a stem of prolific blossom. He was not only the spiritual but the material guardian of the whole growing community about him,—he was their friend, their adviser, their helper,—beloved beyond all words, and honoured to the

utmost point of reverence. With the onward flow of time he had altered little,—his hair had grown grey, but his face had retained its firm intellectual outline, and the dark blue eyes so deeply set under the shelving brows had a great tenderness in their quiet depths,—the reflection of a heart's constant sympathy with all sorrow. Since Jacynth's tragic end he had never visited London. In many other parts of the kingdom he had preached; never there. But now, certain phases in the social aspect of the world had moved him to strong protest;—he heard, or thought he heard, the mystic 'Orders' he had waited for—"This do in remembrance of Me"—and with his well-earned fame, won by no fictitious 'boom,' but by his own sincerity, power and eloquence, he had easily secured an opportunity of addressing himself to a congregation which he had resolved should be aroused, if he could possibly arouse it, to a sense of the peril which, according to his mind, threatened the nation.

The sweet music of the choristers' voices rising above the solemn chords of the great organ which sustained the melody of the hymn they were singing, floated soothingly around him as he looked down from the pulpit on the close array of upturned faces, some intelligent, some foolish, some gentle, some proud, and the tide of memory swept him back to the day, long years ago, when Jacynth had vanished from his sight for evermore with her last call—"Good-bye, Parson Everton!" Neither he nor any one else had seen her upon earth again. The body of her companion, Claude Ferrers, had been found, horribly mangled and disfigured, on the edge of a wild moor in Ireland, but the famous balloon with its one remaining passenger had totally disappeared, and its ultimate fate was unknown. The disaster had caused a nine days' society 'sensation'—but it was now forgotten, even by Israel Nordstein, who had married another 'variety' girl. The 'cult' of Claude Ferrers, however, was still kept up by a certain circle of decadents, simply because it was a 'cult' of shameless vice; his poems, of the sensual-amatory order, were constantly thrust before the public in advertisements of extra

large type, and one or two of his most revolting plays were produced by managers anxious for a 'draw,' because of their brazen indecency which the 'censor' obligingly condoned,—but so far as the million were concerned, Ferrers was no more known or thought of than Jacynth. They had been mere useless units in the great mass of humanity, unwanted and therefore unmissed. Even in Shadbrook Jacynth was almost forgotten. Those who remembered her at all had never really known what became of her, and the only association with her that remained in their minds, was her connection with Dan Kiernan, which had been the indirect cause of the murder of their Vicar's wife. They had heard a rumour that she was married; but they did not know she was dead. Nor did the Vicar tell them. Not even to the wretched old crone, the 'Auntie' whose habitual drunkenness had made her such an incapable guardian of Jacynth's childhood, and who, when dying, clung to him and screamed out that 'the devils were taking her and that one of them was Jacynth'—did he reveal the story of the girl's later history and end. That was a secret he kept to himself. Seldom indeed did he permit his thoughts to dwell upon the past except that portion of it which was endeared to him by his married life and his love for Azalea,—and it was only now—now when after a long lapse of time he found himself again in the great city which when last he had visited it had been the scene of an episode he was never likely to forget, that bitter memories rose again and swept over him like a burning wave, making his heart thrill with an old restless yearning. Two faces hovered like visions in the light before him,—one of a little fair angel with blue eyes and clustering gold curls, and sweet lips that murmured:—"You are my husband—my darling and my best in the whole world!"—the other that of a bewitchingly beautiful temptress with dark wild passionate eyes and a rose-red mouth that said:—"It is only your God that stands between us—the God of the Churches, not the God of Nature! It is your religion that makes you narrow and miserable—a religion that was not strong enough to save Dan or me. Think of that! Think

that we both heard you preach of Christ every Sunday and that neither of us was a bit the better for it. Think of that when I am gone! For it wants thinking about!"

Yes; it wanted thinking about. And he had thought about it all these years. All these years! He had thought about it and worked at the problem it presented. "A religion that was not strong enough to save Dan or me." That was a hard saying, and he had pondered upon it deeply. "A religion not strong enough." That was not true. It is not religion that is weak, but the human exponents of it. It is they who lack courage and conviction,—they who for the sake of a petty conventionalism are content to be cowards. He, Richard Everton, had determined to take his own way and prove his own power,—and he had succeeded. This enormous crowd gathered under the dome of St. Paul's to hear him preach, was an eloquent testimony to that success. And as the singing of the hymn came to an end with its long-drawn gravely-melodious 'Amen!' he looked over the great mass of human beings stretching away in dense ranks everywhere below the pulpit, and thought of the starved souls of them all, waiting to be fed with the bread of life,—life which is life indeed,—vigorous, healthy, hopeful, sane and sober life,—life such as God intended should be enjoyed by all His creatures, if they would but follow His laws. Looking upon them thus, he, like his Master, Christ, 'had compassion on the multitude'; the tears and fire of a passionate pity made smouldering heat in his brain,—he, 'the most fearless preacher of his day,' as he was commonly called, felt that a moment had come when those who were hungering for any crumb of truth should not be sent away unsatisfied. Politicians might shuffle and play tricks with the honour of the nation,—but he, with Christ's holy orders binding upon his conscience, would speak without fear or favour.

With the cessation of the Cathedral choir there came a great silence, and after the usual brief prefatory prayer he stood for a moment absorbed in thought. Just below him was seated his son Laurence, the pride of his heart,—the handsome

young face was the stronger image of Azalea's—the clear dark blue eyes the very copies of his own. The lad was looking up at him in awed admiration, and almost he smiled. Then, with a magnetic thrill in his voice which expressed the greater thrill at his heart, he gave out the text of what the current press next day called 'A Startling Sermon,' and which afterwards brought down upon him the withering condemnation of that singular section of the community which, by dint of doing nothing but waste time and money, calls itself 'smart society.'

"Hear, O earth; behold I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts."

After pronouncing these words slowly and with emphasis he waited a moment. The stillness of the congregation was remarkable,—not a man or woman moved, and all eyes were directed towards him.

"You will find this passage,"—he said, "in the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah,—in the sixth chapter, at the nineteenth verse. I will repeat it again, for I want you all to remember it. 'Hear, O earth; behold I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts.'"

Once more he paused. He had no written notes before him to refer to,—nothing but the open Bible from which he had just read out the quoted verse. And on the pages of the Holy Book he rested one hand as he turned full upon his audience.

"What is the fruit of a thought?" he began, and his voice rang clear through the great Cathedral like a silver clarion—"Have we ever rightly understood that a thought can bear fruit at all? We, whose brains in this present generation more resemble empty gourds in which dried peas are put to rattle for the amusement of children, than that complex, beautiful and wonderful God's design of fine cells for the storage of the honey of wisdom,—do we, can we realise the mechanism and evolvement of thought? The fruit of a thought! It is a notable expression, and proves that the prophet who made use of it had a clear conception of what we call our 'latest' science.

For psychology teaches us that thoughts are things; and that the delicate movements of the brain-cells emit invisible fine exhalations containing the seed from which, as from the pollen of a flower, actual forms take shape and grow into substance. The thoughts of a man are the man himself; and according to the way he thinks, so is the life he leads. His thought is the seed,—his life is the 'fruit of his thoughts.' Moreover, he has still a greater and graver responsibility set upon him than that which pertains to his own existence, for his thoughts are not allowed to belong to himself exclusively. He is unconsciously compelled to transmit them to others, — to his children, his friends and his neighbours. In his children the 'fruit' of his thoughts yields oftentimes strange harvests for their future good or evil,—in his friends and neighbours it results in a crop of pleasant or unpleasant associations, which spreading from himself as a centre of radiation, make the happiness or unhappiness of a whole community. In the same way a nation, like an individual, is expressed by the 'fruit of its thoughts.' The lines on which its people are taught to think are the lines on which its honour is uplifted or its shame disclosed. Its responsibility, too, is the same, for the thoughts on which it dwells now will be the 'fruit' on which the next generation will have to feed,—or starve!"

He paused for a moment; then, with a slight change of attitude which brought his eyes more keenly upon the greater bulk of the congregation, he resumed:—

"It would trouble you too much, and by many of you be considered a waste of your time, if I were to ask you to go back with me in history and try to realise the splendours of past civilisation in those great empires and kingdoms of ancient days when Britain was unknown, and which are now mere dust-heaps in the world for occasional antiquarians to explore. Our learned men tell us about them; our literature teems with speculative matter concerning them, — but the chief point about them to my mind, seems that neither their former-time magnificence, nor their present degradation teaches us in our generation any lesson. Yet, were we to probe to the

very core of the causes involved in the ruin of communities once progressive and prosperous, we should find it to be the 'fruit of their thoughts.' No more and no less! No extraordinary or unjust visitation of Divine wrath swept the corrupt 'cities of the plain' out of existence as in the smoke of a furnace and covered their ruins with the salt and bitter flood of the Dead Sea,—their destruction was the working of the inviolable Law,—that unalterable Law which is the foundation of all mathematics—'the fruit of their thoughts.' Thoughts beginning inwardly in imperceptible brain-throbbings, and from their inward working manifesting themselves outwardly in word and deed, ripened into the poison-fruit of sin; and this fruit becoming the favourite food of the dwellers in those cities, destroyed them according to the natural action of poison. Tyre and Sidon, Carthage and Babylon, all show the same cause and effect. When Jeremiah foretold the doom of Jerusalem, he spoke of thoughts that had ripened into their fruit of deed, thus:—'I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing; they commit adultery and walk in lies: they strengthen also the hands of evil doers that none doth return from his wickedness; they are all of them unto me as Sodom and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah. Therefore, thus saith the Lord of Hosts—Behold I will feed them with wormwood and make them drink the water of gall, for from the prophets of Jerusalem is profaneness gone forth into all the land.' In these words, uttered in ancient times of growing evil, do we see no application to ourselves? No fitness as concerns our Church, our Government, our country, our society? Are our eyes too blinded by egotism to likewise see 'an horrible thing' among our own 'prophets'—that is to say among many of our preachers and teachers, who 'commit adultery and walk in lies and strengthen the hands of evil doers that none doth return from his wickedness'? Are not the unnameable sins of the 'cities of the plain' familiar following among our devotees of 'court and society' to-day?—sins, which like foul cancers spread quickly and steadily till they

infect the whole body social and politic? Are we not ripe for another rain of fire from heaven, and the desolate pall of another Dead Sea? We are!—and it is with an unspeakable love for my country and fear for its future destinies, that I seek to remind you to-day of the long-ago pronounced Divine warning:—'Hear, O earth: behold I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts.'"

Again he paused. A faint movement stirred the congregation like an expectant sigh. His eyes flashed over the crowd,—his voice grew fuller and more resonant.

"The fruit of *our* thoughts!" he exclaimed—"The fruit of the thoughts of our nation to-day! Friends, what will it be? Poison or sweet food to those who come after us? Whichever it is, it will be our growing, our giving, our responsibility. We alone must decide its nature and quality. Of what are we, as a nation, thinking? What occupies us most from morning to night? To what do we give our best of care and toil? Is it not Self? The pampering of selfish lusts, the humouring of selfish whims, the delight of selfish ends? We play a blasphemous farce when we assume for mere appearance' sake to consider God greater than Self, if all our plans of action in this world are conceived and carried out for the advantage of Self only. Self must be to our true minds greater than God if we give it most of our time and service. And if our thoughts dwell upon this Self, which is perishable, the 'fruit' of our thoughts is perishable likewise, and leaves nothing for future generations to live upon. Of what, I ask, is the nation thinking? Question any man we casually meet concerning his thoughts, and we shall find they chiefly turn on money-getting, while with a woman they are bent on money-spending. Little 'fruit' can be expected from thoughts such as these, the casual surface thoughts of casual surface men and women,—but let us go deeper and try to read thoughts of a different nature,—terrible thoughts that have lately been carelessly and wickedly sown among our once God-fearing people by a terrible press and a terrible literature—a press that makes light of the sanctity of marriage, and publicly condones the 'social' sway

of women of easy virtue,—a literature that teems with indecency and open blasphemy. These are 'thoughts' whose 'fruit' is national corruption. The thinkers of such thoughts—the writers of such thoughts are the worst of criminals,—they are the murderers of innocence and the thieves of honour. The 'fruit' of the brain-seed they scatter will be seen in the degeneration of our country's manhood, and the degradation of its womanhood—it is seen even now, and the evil increases daily and hourly. Amid it all stands the Church of Christ, which should be a Pharos shedding clear radiance over the dark and troubled waters,—but the light is obscured, for the men who should be on the watch to avert danger to the Ship of State are absent from their posts and asleep—wrapped in a blanket of comfortable conventionalities and too lazy to stir!"

He flung the words out with passion,—and a thrill of something like excitement ran through his crowded audience.

"If you saw," he went on, leaning from the pulpit with one hand outstretched, "if you saw the Mother of Christ represented as a semi-nude dancer on a 'variety' stage, would you resent it? Would you be shocked and outraged? I suppose you would. But would you show your indignation publicly by leaving the music-hall where such an exhibition was tolerated, and never entering it again? Almost I doubt it! Some of you would watch the dance to a close,—others would say it was 'the reverent poetry of motion'! I doubt if one of you would have the courage to rise up and say: 'In the name of the Christian Religion, on which the nation professes to base its law and morality, I protest against this hideous blasphemy.' You might perhaps hold that it was a matter for the censure of the Church. Well! Our Archbishops and Bishops would 'consider' the position before pronouncing the urgently needed condemnation. And their consideration would probably end, as usual, in inaction. They have remained dumb and inert in these latter days when crowds have gathered to see a scene of Gospel history turned into an indecent 'variety' show. King, Queen, Premier and Court have

all tolerated the representation of the daughter of Herodias's dance with the head of John the Baptist,—he who was the herald and forerunner of Christ,—forgetful, apparently, that the episode thus vulgarised is from positive Holy Writ, and is not the diseased emanation of the brain of an unspeakable criminal. Greater honour could scarcely have been paid to a world's noblest thinker, a world's greatest benefactor, a world's highest teacher than the representatives and defenders of England and England's Christian faith have shown to a public exponent of shameless indecency and blasphemy. Such an act on the part of those who should be leaders of principle and supporters of honour, marks our 'Christian' epoch with a brand of disgrace. But no rebuke is launched from the Church whose Gospel is thus outraged,—and I, a minister of that Church, shall probably be told that I am taking too much upon myself to condemn what the silence of a Primate condones. But for that I do not care. Consider, if you please, that I have no 'tact'—no skill to seem what I am not,—that I have none of the 'diplomacy' practised by such members of my calling as find it convenient to preach Christ to others while they themselves serve Satan. I hold myself responsible for all I say and do to a Master who is above Archbishops and Bishops,—whose commands are clear, and beyond all worldly conventions—and to whom I must render an account of my service in the honour of His Name when I die. And I say straightly and fearlessly that if His words are true, and if Christian England still holds and believes them to be true, then the 'fruit' of the thoughts that can tolerate such a public mockery of the Gospel as that which our 'social' leaders have lately approved and applauded, can be but bitter and poisonous,—an evil suggestion to the nation, sinking into the very marrow of life and rotting it to the bone!"

The great crowd stirred uneasily. Glances full of fear and amazement were turned upon him, but his own eyes seemed to absorb all the questioning, all the wonder, and shine back with the brave light of a truth that would not be gainsaid.

"You shrink at my words,"—he said—"because I am bold

enough to speak my mind on what I consider the wicked and pernicious example shown to the people of this land by those who should be their guides to the noblest heights of conduct. Cramped by conventions as most of you are, you think it is not the business of men in the Church to rebuke persons of rank and position. It is unwise—it is unsafe! My friends, who is it that an ordained minister is bound to serve? 'Persons of rank and position'? Is it not rather the Man of Nazareth who on earth had *no* rank or position, and never, so far as we may know, associated with any class save the poor and the suffering? There is no rank or position before God. No section of a nation is set apart for special honour by the powers of Heaven. But whereas in our class distinctions we make a High and a Low, the social crimes of the higher ranks are tenfold more mischievous than those of the lower, and deserve more scathing rebuke. For these higher ranks have every advantage and opportunity given them to live in clean and upright ways and to show an example to their less fortunate brethren—and when they voluntarily sink into the slime of demoralisation, they bring upon themselves and their country the 'fruit of their thoughts'—that 'evil' which breeds anarchy and revolution, ending oftentimes in the complete downfall and destruction of a once great and powerful empire. For the old warning rings down the ages with conviction to this day—'I will bring evil upon this people,—even the fruit of their thoughts!'

But I freely admit that the Church, as a rule, says little or nothing to 'persons of rank and distinction.' It occupies itself much with reproaches to the already over-reproved poor for their sins and follies and mistakes, which are chiefly the result of the ignorance in which they have for centuries been allowed to live by their 'betters.' The drunkenness, the immoralities of the poor are themes on which the full-pursed man is never tired of expatiating. On the drunkenness and the immoralities of the rich he preserves a discreet silence. And it may be that some of the money which makes his purse bulge with so much comfortable excess, is drawn from this very

drunkenness and immorality which he so unctuously deplores. I find, for example, at this present time a dozen Bishops of the Church of England most strenuously supporting the vested interests of brewers and distillers, and opposing the Government efforts to lessen the material curse of Drink. These gentlemen apparently are not considering the ruin, ill-health and moral degradation of thousands of living men and women and unborn children which *must* occur if these vested interests in the liquor traffic are to continue unabated,—their sole thought is 'property'! Can any of these shepherds of Christian flocks tell me that this great anxiety about 'property' is a permitted canon of the Christian creed? Was it not Christ who said: 'One thing yet thou lackest; sell all thou hast and give to the poor, and follow Me'? The lives of men and women in this generation,—the health and sanity and strength of the generation to come, depend on the crushing of the tyrannous devil of Drink that holds Great Britain in its grip, and yet certain prelates, professing Christ, do not hesitate to array themselves on the side of 'interest in property,' as if money or land could be matched against the value of one human soul! And what sort of rights are these in 'property' that has been wrested out of national vice and degradation? It is property that should be flung away in horror and fear, with tears of shame that it was ever held under such conditions,—for the 'evil' brought upon this people by Drink,—the 'fruit of the thoughts' engendered by Drink, is an evil so vast and terrible that the brain recoils from it, and the heart grows sick. In the streets of this great London, this core of modern civilisation, we are shamed day and night by the crowds of unhappy degraded creatures, the miserable victims of the liquor traffic, who crawl and reel and shuffle their way from one public-house to another, living for the delirium of drink alone,—in Edinburgh, in its very centre thoroughfare of Princes Street, we may meet on any evening groups of young girls barely fifteen, staggering along in companionship with youths as drunken as themselves,—in Glasgow it is still worse, and

yet with all this misery visibly increasing around us,—with the knowledge that the money spent by the nation on Drink alone averages one hundred and sixty-six millions of money a year, making nearly four pounds a head for every man, woman and child,—we can still talk of protection for a Trade that fills our lunatic asylums and hospitals, and crams our workhouses with the wastrels and waifs of humanity! Let such a Trade be ruined a thousand times over than that the nation should be robbed of its moral force and physical well-being! No Trade can be called honest that makes its profit from the degradation of a people!"

He paused, and a great sadness clouded his features.

"In my life," he said, "I have seen the full meaning of the 'evil' which is the fruit of perverted thoughts,—thoughts that were poisoned by drink,—thoughts that were generated, not by the healthful processes of nature, but by the working of the pernicious drugs used in the manufacture of pernicious liquor,—adulterous thoughts, murderous thoughts—thoughts that finally fruited into misery and death. I have seen lives ruined by drink,—I have seen woman's beauty dragged into the mire of swinish sensuality,—all through drink. Drink is the blot on our national scutcheon—may God remove it! For I fear Man will not! He lacks courage for the fight; and many principalities and powers are in league against his struggling efforts to free himself from the chains of the degrading vice that robs him of his self-respect. He is too content to remain the foolish tool of a Trade. With his hard earnings which he wastes in drink, he builds the fortunes of brewers and distillers, who, by some curious shortsightedness of state authority, are presently landed in the House of Lords to assist in governing the country which they have helped to debase. And our workhouses continue to be crammed with paupers, half of whom might and would have been respectable self-supporting citizens if the Drink had not fallen upon them like a blight and a curse. The late Dean Farrar once put forward an example of a pauper in the workhouse who stated that he was eighty years of age.

Asked if he had ever been a drunkard, he replied No, he had only been accustomed to take three pints of beer a day. Calculating on this basis you will find that he, having continued that habit since he was twenty for sixty years, if he had laid the money by at four per cent., would have had two thousand one hundred and seventy-two pounds, or nearly one hundred pounds a-year of his own for the rest of his life, instead of going into the workhouse. But there is little use in stating these facts, or pointing the moral to adorn the tale. The nation to-day is in the hands of a craven Church and a purchased press. A craven Church!—yes, I dare to say this in the pulpit of St. Paul's where I am preaching for the first time to-day, and where, for the very frankness of my utterance, I know I shall never preach again. A craven Church!—I, who am a minister of that Church, blush for its cowardice and for the pusillanimity of many of its clergy! For, in the midst of perhaps the most perilous time of trouble that has threatened us for centuries, the Church, as a power, does little or nothing. Itself is full of vacillations and uncertainties. It listens to this theory and that theory. It puts on garments borrowed from Rome, and seeks to make up for its lack of faith by an abundance of ritual. It tolerates 'new' theologies. It revises its old beliefs—puts forward this dogma —suppresses that. And with all its wordy discussions, its contradictions and arguments, it seems to forget that it is wronging its one Divine Foundation,—Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day and for ever, whom we must follow, whom we must obey, if we would find the road to everlasting love and life. It is almost as if we crucified Our Lord for the second time, and watched His Agony with indifference, crying out 'If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross!'"

He stood silent for a brief space,—then he slowly closed the Bible which till now had remained open before him.

"The thoughts that are spreading in our nation to-day," he said, with stern and sorrowful emphasis—"are not the thoughts that build up national welfare. They are thoughts of

personal greed, personal amusement, personal advantage, sensuality and sin. The old faith, the old honour, the old patriotism—these saving graces no longer adorn the men and women who by fortune and accident of birth are for a time set above the working million to control their destinies. The influence of Judaism sways the throne and the market-place alike,—the alien sits within our gates and robs our native men of their rightful work,—their rightful bread. I have spoken of a craven Church and a purchased press. These exist; and between them the minds of the people oscillate,—but they trust neither one nor the other. They look everywhere for truth, stability, courage,—but they only see Purse and Party. The craven Church has no aspirations as from God to offer them,—only the dry husks of old and conflicting theories containing no support in weakness, no consolation in sorrow. The purchased press chiefly lives to recommend the several aims of its several purchasers; to urge the particular views of its particular syndicate of Jews and others upon the British 'fool public' as, by them, it is called,—the fool public which is so piteously trapped into spending its money to make the prosperity of knaves. For the rest its columns are made up of 'thoughts'—thoughts of which the evil fruit can be already seen ripening on the bough. Thoughts that are morbid and unwholesome—thoughts that 'strengthen the hands of evil doers that none doth return from his wickedness'—thoughts from which 'profaneness is gone forth into all the land.' Thoughts that infect the brains of the multitude, breeding swarms of foolish and injurious imaginations,—thoughts which so far from ennobling and dignifying national ideals, tend to degrade and debase them. The power of the press is a power for which those who wield it will be answerable to God. That they do not themselves believe in God matters little—His existence is not destroyed by their incredulity. The men who for money's sake spread false, contaminating, mean or scurrilous thoughts through the masses of the people are traitors to the country and should meet with traitors' punishment. For there is no end to the 'fruit' of a thought. Its seed plants itself; it grows and

flourishes continually. A great thought sows other great thoughts,—an evil thought sows a spreading crop of evil. If the brains of a people are sound and sane, the thoughts of a people will be sound and sane likewise. How earnestly then should we fight against the curse of Drink, which not only deteriorates the brain but finally destroys it! There are certain unnameable sins practised among the upper classes of society to-day"—he paused, and looked down with unflinchingly full gaze upon the moveless mass of men and women crowded below the pulpit—"I say there are unnameable sins among some of you that should bring the wrath of God down upon you in destroying fire! Sins of drunkenness, degeneration and vice,—sins which are the 'fruit' of drunken, vicious and degenerate thought. Beware! For God is not mocked! You may mock *me*, the preacher of God's Word, to your heart's content,—the poor sweated underpaid journalist of Fleet Street, writing for his 'trust' press companies, under command, may dismiss my appeal to you in a contemptuous paragraph on what he will easily term a 'jeremiad'—but I say to you again—Beware! Rouse yourselves from apathy before it is too late,—do something of yourselves—you, the People of this noble land,—do something to show you are not the fools your Press takes you for!—that you are in the main brave and honest,—that you would rather be sober than drunken—strong than weak—that you will have your women pure—your homes clean—your children innocent! Do something, I say, to protest against the growing scorn of the marriage-tie,—the indifference to motherhood—the demoralisation of girlhood—the self-degradation of woman who in screaming for a political vote is losing her highest right—the honour and respect of man! It is for you to think out the problems that are presented to you to-day—you—the great People of Great Britain. Think well and deeply!—think of your Church, your press, your Government, your commerce, and fight out corruption in each and all!—think of the spirit in which your country's work is being done and resolve yourselves as to whether you approve of that spirit or not. And when you have resolved, speak and act fearlessly, letting both speech

and action be for the betterment of your nation! For, if you think only for yourselves, only for your own convenience and temporary pleasure, only for your own advantage and the humouring of your own desires, the vengeance of God must fall upon you,—that vengeance which is simply the outcome of natural law. No man is permitted to live for himself alone. I have proved that in my own experience. He must give freely of all he hath, else it shall all be taken from him!"

He was silent a moment,—then continued:

"I have spoken to you, my friends, as perhaps few preachers in this pulpit are allowed to speak,—indeed I think I may say that if the tenor of my discourse had been suspected before I came here, I should have been politely 'suppressed.' For the 'higher' clergy, as some of them are called, are anxious to demonstrate to the world the peculiar 'broadness' of their views on religion and morality,—which 'broadness' simply means free licence to make of religion and morality what they please. But I am not one of these exalted Church diplomats. I only see the wronged and loving Christ—and the straying million that would serve Him faithfully if they only knew how! And what I have said to you, I have said from my heart—from my soul,—and with complete indifference to consequences. Attacks will not hurt me, nor reproaches dismay. For it is time to speak,—time to take up a firm stand against the gross selfishness and sensuality of the age. And it is time for you, the People, to think for Yourselves—not to accept the thoughts proffered to you by conflicting creeds,—not to obey the morbid suggestions propounded and discussed by a 'sensational' press,—but to think for your country's good, with thoughts that are high and proud and pure! Otherwise, —if you remain content to let things drift as they are drifting,—if you allow the brains of this and future generations to become obscured by drink and devilment,—if you give way to the inroads of vice, and join with the latter-day degenerate in his or her coarse derision of virtue, you invite terrific disaster upon yourselves, and upon this great empire —disaster more wide and far-reaching than you can dream

of or imagine! For it is by God's unalterable Law that the sword must fall!—and that sword is suspended over us all in this our day by less than a single hair! Remember the Divine warning:—'Hear, O earth: I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts!'"

Out from the Cathedral the huge congregation poured, scattering its sections all over London, talking with heated animation as they went, some angrily, some scornfully, some jeeringly and a few admiringly, but all more or less violently moved from their usual comfortable calm. And avoiding the press of people as much as possible, young Laurence Everton walked through the City streets with a small, grey-haired dapper little man in the garb of a Catholic priest, no other than Sebastien Douay.

"Ah, my Laurence!" he exclaimed—"We shall never hear your father preach again in London! Such a sermon has offended everybody!"

Laurence smiled dreamily.

"Does it matter?"

"To him, no!—but the world——"

"What does he care for the world, except when it calls his love and pity?" said Laurence—"The world cannot him. But he can help the world."

"He can and he does,"—agreed Douay—"But at cost to himself. His Church is afraid of him."

"Because he speaks truth—I know!" said "Again—does it matter?"

Douay looked up at the handsome young ma and thought of a fair little face and blue eyes lo in the dusty darkness of the grave.

"No—perhaps not!" he answered—"An will you also one day be a famous preacher?"

Laurence shook his head decisively.

"Never! I shall never enter the Church!"

"Why?"

Laurence stopped in his walk. There was a brightness on his features as of some inward illumination.

"Because I want too big a pulpit!" he said—"Too large an audience! There's no cathedral vast enough to hold the congregation I seek to draw! My strength is limited,—but my ambition is boundless. I shall be a writer, not a preacher. For when the people will not go to church they will read—and when a sermon is forgotten and perishes—sometimes,—only sometimes!—a Book lives."

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