

# **eritance of Evil, Or, the Consequence of Marrying a Deceased W**

Felicia Skene

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# The Inheritance of Evil, Or, the Consequence of Marrying a Deceased Wife's Sister

Felicia Skene

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## CHAPTER I.

**THROUGH** the mist and gloom of a dull November morning, a pompous funeral procession went its way along the busy streets of London.

It was a common sight so common that it attracted no attention from the multitude who crowded on its path, as with eager care—worn faces they hurried on in their several avocations; and yet it was a strange sight too for them if they would but have thought upon it the passing amongst them of that quiet traveller to the realms unseen! For so surely as he was even now moving on to the portals of the land which is very far off, they themselves, with their swift impatient feet, were speeding unconsciously on the same journey.

We say unconsciously, for each one had set before himself some desirable object of attainment for which he toiled that day wealth, fame, ambition, love some bright vision, to realize which he gave up unreservedly the redeemless hours of his existence, whilst, with every breath he drew in labouring for it, he shortened the life for which it was to be attained. Yet even as **he** had done, who was now carried past so helplessly, that his dust might duly be returned to its kindred dust that living mass of human beings would toil and yearn for their fancied good, till, with strength and energy all spent and gone, they saw the fair phantom of their hopes dissolve in air, disclosing to their view the grave alone that actual reality for which they had been working! It had been so with him whose rigid corpse now went so still and silently through the noise and turmoil of the world he had loved.

Mr. Maynard had been a wealthy city merchant; in early youth he had been thrown on his own resources, penniless, and well nigh friendless. He was a man resolute of will, and of good abilities; but his mind, having never been directed to the Unseen Truths, had fixed itself entirely on the fleeting realities of this life. He looked

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keenly into his own position, and he perceived that, in this world, wealth is the one thing needful. He therefore determined to attain it.

From that time his life was given up to this object only. He toiled, he slaved, he speculated; he rose up early, and late took rest; he ate the bread of carefulness; he wasted lavishly his health and strength and intellect; he devoured widows' houses, and made the orphan desolate: for as his desire strengthened till he grew to be its very slave, he cared little for the injury done to others in its accomplishment and he succeeded. Man has a mighty power in working out a resolute purpose, be it for good or evil, if his whole soul is concentrated upon it. Mr. Maynard became rich, beyond what he had ever hoped for when he set out on his pilgrimage to the shrine of his god, Mammon; but still he laboured on, plunging into speculation, for to make money was the aim and end of his existence, and he could not stop now. Some dim vision may have been before him of a luxurious retirement hereafter, where he should dwell, surrounded by all the splendour and comfort wealth could procure him; but his health failed him meantime, sacrificed to his laborious and unremitting industry. Death came and took him when his soul was so wrapped up in the cares of life, that this tremendous reality was to him but a far-off haunting shadow, too distant and uncertain to be heeded. Death came and took him, and then it was found that he had gained but one thing with the toil and labour and sacrifice of his whole life; he had earned for himself the gorgeous monument whose ponderous bulk was henceforth to weigh down upon his mouldering remains. To the last hour of his existence he worked like a slave, and this was the sole fruit he reaped from his labours the costly tomb, wherein his worn and wasted body would fall perhaps a little less quickly to decay than in some green churchyard of holier and humbler aspect.

Mr. Maynard left two daughters. He had married somewhat late in life, for the sole purpose of connecting himself with the father of his bride, the head of a great mercantile house. It was his desire to succeed to this man's position at his death, and this wish was fulfilled.

A very few years had passed away, and his wife died. Neglected, though uncomplaining, she perished for want of sympathy and affection, as flowers fade when deprived of air and sunshine. Her little daughters were given up to the care of nurses and governesses, and Mr. Maynard required, not unfrequently, to be reminded of their existence.

If he remembered them at all in his dying hour, so appalling in its suddenness, it must have been with a pang of remorse, for he had made no provision for them not from wilful neglect, but simply because he never thought of death at all; it was a contingency which did not enter into his speculations.

He left no will, and the management of his affairs naturally devolved on his partner, Mr. Hardman. By some process of calculation peculiar to himself, this gentleman discovered that all which remained of Mr. Maynard's capital must now become merged in that of the house. His speculations had in fact ruined him, and the rich man's orphan children did not inherit from him so much as the cost of that same stately tombstone which Mr. Hardman deemed it his duty to erect over his grave.

Some little property Elizabeth and Agnes Maynard had received at their mother's death, and this circumstance had induced Mr. Hardman voluntarily to constitute himself their guardian. To do him justice, he was certainly in some degree influenced in his decision by the glimmerings of better feeling, which shone through this worldly man's profound and inherent selfishness when he thought of the desolate condition of his partner's daughters.

They sat together now in the darkened room from which their father's coffin had been carried an hour before, and both were in bitter sorrow. It is a blessed thing, that atmosphere of love which pervades this whole wide restless world, emanating, no doubt, from the unseen presence of Him who is Love, and penetrating, in some one shape or other, into the life of the most forlorn amongst us. Not a flower perishes from the green earth, but the dews of heaven weep over it; not a human being is laid down in the unresisting helplessness of death, but tears are found from human eyes to fall upon him.

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Mr. Maynard had certainly done as little to awaken affection or inspire regret as most men, and yet the sobs of his orphan children came thick and fast, as they heard the tramp of the horses which bare him away.

But there are two kinds of sorrow with which the dead are mourned, and Mr. Maynard could lay claim to one of them only; there is the natural instinct, the mysterious claim of the ties of blood, which sends a bitter pang through the heart when they are rent asunder, added to that strange pity which we never fail to experience for the powerless corpse stretched out so pale and cold before us, although we know well that ourselves shall soon be laid as cold and pale, and haply the thought is sweet to us, as that of the evening rest to the wearied labourer toiling in the heat of noon. But there is another far deeper misery which rises up from the grave of the departed to overwhelm us, when it is, so to speak, the soul of him who is gone forth that we have loved; the soul whose superior holiness has been perhaps like the brightness of an angel to our less elevated gaze, whose goodness has won our reverence, whose gentleness has gained our deepest love.

No such lofty and holy affection as this had bound the soul of the stern worldly-minded man to his young daughters; and perhaps we might rightly enough estimate the nature of the welcome which the departed shall receive from the brotherhood of saints above, by the character of the sorrow with which they are lamented here.

Had Elizabeth and Agnes Maynard analyzed their feelings in this the saddest hour of their lives, they would have found that they mourned far less for their father, to whom they were almost strangers, than for that bitter sense of desolation against which the warm, loving heart of youth rebels so strongly.

They nestled close together; Agnes, who was scarce sixteen, and five years younger than her sister, clung to her with a sort of innocent helplessness, which resulted more from her peculiar disposition than from her early youth.

She was singularly sweet-tempered and guileless, but altogether deficient in moral courage and strength of mind; as she advanced out of childhood, she seemed only to lean the more hopelessly on the guidance of others, instead of exerting the powers of her own mind; and the prevailing feature of her character was a clinging and passionate tenderness of disposition, over which she neither had, nor attempted to have, any control whatever. Elizabeth had far more depth of character, with an intensity and sensitiveness of feeling which would scarce have been looked for under her outward reserve of manner. Her affection for those she loved was of a nature so profound and exacting, that it had engendered that jealousy of disposition which makes such havoc of the soul that harbours it. As yet this fatal propensity had been little called forth, for her whole thoughts were centred on Agnes, and the sisters had now no other home but in their mutual love.

There was one circumstance in the life of Elizabeth Maynard which was destined to influence her whole existence, and the recollection of it was busy at her heart even now, as she sat with her fair young sister sobbing in her arms. She remembered when she was but nine years old how she had been one night aroused out of the sweet slumber of childhood, to go and witness the closing of her mother's eyes in a sleep yet deeper.

There is something very awful in the death-bed of one who dies of a broken heart. Death by the judgment of Heaven is a holy, though terrible thing; but the heart revolts from the sight, when His inscrutable decree permits a human hand to sap the springs of a fellow-creature's life by wanton or careless cruelty.

Elizabeth still shuddered when she thought of that white drawn face, so young, but rowed with unavailing tears, and the pale lips from which no murmur ever passed, now wreathing themselves into a strange smile of joy at her release. Close to her breast, whence the breath came faint and gasping, the mother had drawn her youngest born, as though she thought the warmth of that little healthy frame could have driven back the chill that was curdling round her heart.

Mr. Maynard was not there, for the dying woman, true and tender even yet to the husband she had loved so vainly, would not let his slumbers be disturbed, though her heart yearned to tell him how she forgave him all, and

loved him to the last.

When she saw Elizabeth by her side, she raised herself up and looked at her with eyes gleaming, even through the shades of death, with an expression of intense entreaty. One care one thought of earth still chained back that fluttering spirit yearning to depart it was for the little child who lay in her bosom. With the quick instinct of a mother, she had perceived that the little Agnes would possess to the uttermost that warm and loving disposition which had made of herself so wretched a wife. Another might have cared little for the cold neglect which had destroyed her; and when she thought of all the storms and dangers on that wide sea of life where she had made so sad a shipwreck, she trembled with an agonizing fear for the rosy happy child who slept upon her bed of death.

She had no hope but in her eldest daughter; for she knew that she left her children friendless not even their father could be called their friend! For Elizabeth herself she feared nothing; the child was strangely reserved even then, and her mother never dreamt of the strong tide of feeling which lurked under that calm exterior, though she could duly appreciate the superiority of intellect and force of character, which were already so manifest.

Addressing herself far less to the child then present with her, than to the woman she was hereafter to be, the dying mother solemnly implored of Elizabeth to look upon her infant sister henceforward as a sacred charge so long as they both should live she besought her to watch over her, even as she would herself have done, but for the implacable death, which alone could have torn that child from her arms. She required from her especially a positive pledge that no other tie or affection hereafter springing up in her life should interfere with this her earliest and most binding duty.

Elizabeth had, as we have said, a mind beyond her years; and she knew well that it was no light promise which she gave in that hour, and sealed in the farewell kiss, with which she drained her mother's last breath upon her lips. She thought of it now in the time of their common desolation, as she looked on poor Agnes in her helpless sorrow, and lifted up the veil of sunny hair that she might gaze into her sweet innocent face. Deeply she resolved that, whatever might be their fate, her work and office must ever be to guard that little one close by her side, and shield her from all sorrow and danger.

To both these sisters, earth and the things of it were as yet all in all. Their governess had given them what she termed a "religious education," that is, she had carefully instilled into them her own peculiar and most bounded views, on various points of completely minor importance, dwelling chiefly on the great danger of trusting to forms whilst she furnished them with nothing else, either more or less tangible, wherein to trust; thus, while the outward semblance of piety might now be fairly ranked amongst the accomplishments she had taught them, they knew far less of the faith, hope, and love, with which if a soul be girt it can battle with life and face eternity, than the infant who smiles in his slumbers to the unseen angelic guardians round him.

The sisters were still seated together in silence, when the door opened, and Mr. Hardman entered with the slow solemn step suitable to this mournful occasion.

He had come to acquaint his wards with his intentions respecting them, immediately on returning from the funeral of their father, this being the proper and legitimate moment for such a communication.

Mr. Hardman was systematic in everything: systematic in selfishness, in covetousness, and in the virtues which he deemed necessary to his respectability. He had as keen a relish for money-making as his partner, Mr. Maynard, but his toil and labour were to a certain end. He was a man who could judge of cause and effect, and the desire of wealth was not with him a passion absorbing in itself; he sought to make a fortune because it was his will and pleasure to enjoy the good things of life; he knew that there are none of this world's gifts which riches cannot purchase not even the most shadowy and unsubstantial, such as the outward respect and consideration of his fellow-men.

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Slowly and surely he advanced in a solid prosperity; gradually he surrounded himself with all that his soul coveted luxury, comfort, ostentatious splendour for himself, his wife, and his family; and then he set himself systematically to enjoy them according to his previous calculations.

He was now a man of weight and influence in the city, but he continued to pursue, with rigid firmness, the system to which he owed so much of his advancement, namely, the inflexible determination with which, even in the most unimportant matters, he carried out his own plans and ideas in spite of all obstacles or opposition.

Mr. Hardman proceeded to inform his wards of the arrangement which he and his wife had adopted for them after mature consideration.

Elizabeth was to take up her residence in his house, and become, for some time at least, a member of his family. Agnes was to accompany one of his own daughters to a fashionable school in Paris, there to complete her education. With a cry almost of despair, both sisters vehemently deprecated the idea of their separation; there were but two of them all alone in the wide world, surely he would not part them?

Mr. Hardman was immovable, and they were too helpless to resist. He had already two daughters older than Elizabeth, and his wife was resolutely determined not to have the charge of more than three.

Mr. Hardman continued to acquaint them with the details of his plan as firmly and composedly as though they had gladly acquiesced in it. His carriage was to come for them that evening, to conduct them both to his house the following week Agnes was to go to Paris. He mentioned the sums he would deduct yearly from their little fortunes as payment to himself for their expenses; recommended them to prepare for the removal of their effects from the house they were to enter no more, and so took his leave.

The door had no sooner closed upon him than Agnes gave way to a burst of the most passionate sorrow, whilst Elizabeth, whose feelings were at all times painfully intense and strong, dwelt without scruple on the profound dislike to her guardian, which struck deep root in her heart from that hour.

After a little time, however, she tenderly raised her sister's drooping head, and said, with an effort at calmness

"It is of no use to struggle, dear Agnes; we must submit we have no home!"

"No home?" echoed Agnes. "Oh, shall we never have a home again? shall we never find a spot where we may dwell together again, and no one shall have power to divide us?"

"We know not what may be in reserve for us," said Elizabeth, sadly; "but most certainly they shall not separate us long: the time must come when we shall be free from Mr. Hardman's tutelage, and then I will defy the whole world to rob me of the charge which I received from our mother on her death-bed."

"Ah! but that will not be for a long time," said Agnes, sighing heavily. Then suddenly, with all the buoyancy of youth, her expression changed from one of deep despondency to a hopeful joy. "I will tell you how it must be," she exclaimed; "you must marry very soon, and then we shall have a home together once again: you would take me to live with you always in your own house, would you not, dear sister?"

"I would, indeed," replied Elizabeth, with a faint smile at the rapidity with which Agnes's ideas rose. "If ever I have a home, it shall in truth be yours also; and you may rest assured that I will never accept of any unless you are to share it with me."

## CHAPTER II.

**WITHIN** a week from the funeral of Mr. Maynard, Mr. Hardman's plans with respect to his orphan daughters had been put into full effect. Agnes was established at a school in Paris, there to have the natural tenderness of her disposition fostered into a weak and pernicious sensibility, and the romance with which her character was already too much tinctured converted into a false sentimentality, in which she learned to believe it was meritorious to indulge. She was taught to imagine that self-command showed a want of feeling that self-discipline and self-denial were possible only to those who were cold of heart and stern in character. Life was presented before her in an unreal colouring, which a bitter experience was alone to disperse hereafter; and her young unformed mind soon became imbued with that dangerous sophistry which so much pervades the tone of society in France.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth was profoundly un-happy at Mr. Hardman's. His wife was what is called a strong-minded woman, fiercely intolerant of every sentiment or feeling which she did not herself possess, and which for this reason she assumed to be a weakness. Well versed in all the proprieties of life, she was rigidly implacable in her adherence to them.

One great duty she had placed before herself, the duty of respectability and prosperity, and this she performed with unremitting and unflinching exactitude. Of the gentle charities of home, she knew nothing; the loving sympathy the tender care the anxious watchfulness over the comforts and interests of others still less of that true and beautiful wisdom which remembers always that the sum of domestic happiness is made up of seeming trifles, the little acts of self-sacrifice, the light words and looks of every hour, and takes care to shed round them all, the sunshine of unselfish love and kindness.

Mrs. Hardman received Elizabeth Maynard into her house because it seemed to her that her husband had given very sufficient reasons why she should do so; but it was no part of her business to love her, or to supply her with that measure of affection which is as necessary to human life as refreshing water to the traveller in the desert. Elizabeth was consigned to a fate which a mind far more elevated than hers would have found hard to bear desolation without solitude; she was not even allowed the freedom which might have rendered her position somewhat more tolerable.

Mrs. Hardman took the most careful and annoying cognizance of her every word and action, and there were few which she did not find it necessary to reprehend, in the arrogance of her own fancied perfection. Elizabeth's sorrow for the absence of her sister she considered a most childish and ridiculous weakness. Her grief for her father's loss, after the period of her mourning had expired, was positively improper, as being contrary to all laws of etiquette.

Mrs. Hardman could not compassionate the follies which circumstances had given her no temptation to commit, and she would have spurned a penitent from her feet with as little pity as though she was never to stand one day in fearful need of mercy herself. Let no one think that the evil of his own soul is to injure himself alone. These peculiarities of Mrs. Hardman's character had a terrible effect on the fate of the orphans committed to her care.

The first gleam of sunshine which penetrated into Elizabeth's most cheerless existence was an event which took place about a year after her father's death. One of Mr. Hardman's children became so seriously unwell, that change of air was pronounced necessary, and the family went to spend the summer in the country. Elizabeth had passed her whole existence in London, where the natural and moral atmosphere are both alike so foul and clouded. The fresh pure air, the bright green fields, the quiet woods, were all therefore so many sources of delight to her.

Man has a strange sympathy with nature. In the solitude which is filled with earth's loveliness alone, he seems to lose the sentiment of individuality, and the sting is taken from all personal sorrows; he finds himself suddenly in



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blessed companionship with the glorious stars, and the fragrant flowers, and the waving trees; and these all seem to call out to him, saying, "Be not dismayed, though thou art sad at heart and lonely; behold, we are the creatures of thy God, and thou mayest read in our beauty of His goodness and loving-kindness."

To Elizabeth Maynard it seemed new life when she first learned how deep is the eloquence of the living nature, in telling, by the things seen and temporal, of those which are unseen and eternal.

There is not in all England a more charming spot than the village of B, near which her new residence was placed. It is situated in the heart of one of the midland counties, and the scenery all around it has that fair peaceful aspect which, for the time, blots out from the memory of him who looks on it, all thoughts of the ghastly sin and woe with which this world is haunted.

There are rich pasture lands, soft and undulating as the green hunting-fields of the Indian's Paradise; thick shadowy woods, where the sunshine glances like hope on the soul, and the singing-birds make merry with the long summer day; and a quiet murmuring river, that glides along serene and bright as a good man's life.

The village itself, although a portion of it is disfigured by the public house, dissenting chapel, and one or two houses of unseemly pretension, is singularly picturesque; little thatched dwellings nestling among the ivy, inhabited, as the prettiest cottages always are, by withered old women most quaint and simple; huge old trees filling up three quarters of the diminutive gardens, and a broad road turning and winding amongst them, every here and there displaying by an abrupt descent a bright glimpse of the far-spreading landscape beyond. But the fairest object of all is the beautiful church, with its old grey tower, and the more modern portion lately restored, so striking from its chaste and simple elegance of architecture.

The light within it is dimmed by the thick branches of the great trees that hang over its green and still churchyard, where the long grass waves on the humble graves of the lowly dead. At night, when the moon is high, there is one broad flat tombstone all wet with the evening dew, on which its pure rays gleam with extraordinary brightness while the rest are left in shadow, as though it would prove how even the grave can be made radiant by a light from heaven.

But the moment when this fair English church is seen to most advantage is at the setting of the sun, when a gush of golden light flows through it from the west, like a path for the angels desiring to enter there; and brightens with a warm glow the stained glass of the rich east window, whilst through the low arch of the open doorway, the evening star may be seen going up into heaven, there to shine with its pure pale light, like a silver lamp burning before the shrine of the Eternal.

Mr. Hardman fixed his residence at "The Mount," a fine old place close to the village, which was destined to become the scene of the events here recorded.

Mr. Clayton, the vicar of the parish, was well worthy of the pleasant spot in which his lot had been cast.

He was a noble-hearted old man; a Christian like unto those who of old were wont to manifest their sincerity in martyrdom, and show forth the brightness of their hopes in torture. He had sought from his youth upward to make his life as it were a sacrament, of which the inward and spiritual grace was faith, the outward and visible sign good works.

Pure in doctrine, uncompromising in practice, his standard of holiness seemed to many whom he taught almost hopelessly exalted; all things were with him resolved into the simple question of right or wrong; he never allowed his feelings and affections, or even his compassion, to interfere with his rigid discharge of duty. From this course, so essentially **right**, he unwittingly let an error spring up which bore much bitter fruit to himself; he learned to condemn the short-comings of his weaker brethren too severely, trying them by the inflexible law wherewith he

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judged himself.

Mr. Clayton had one only child, a son whose birth he had hailed as the crowning joy in his cup of happiness, and at whose hand it was decreed he should receive the full measure of his trial and tribulation in this world.

Richard Clayton had already grown to man's estate, and for him, even now, his father wept those tears of exceeding bitterness which we shed for the unfaithfulness, or unworthiness, of those we love. Many might have thought that he was rather one for whom a parent would have given thanks with joy, for he was kind-hearted, prepossessing in appearance, winning in manner, and generous in temper. But his father saw deeper; he knew that they who are not with **Him** are against Him, and he saw that other gods had dominion over his son besides the God of all purity, who requires of his children that awful obedience, that they shall be holy even as **He** is holy.

There is chaos on the human mind till the Spirit of God moves over it and dwells in it; and, despite these bright flashes of goodness, like meteor lights in the gloom, there was darkness yet on the soul of Richard Clayton, even as once on the face of the deep.

Within the shrine of his own spirit, where the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, and yet dwelleth with the contrite and humble, should have reigned supreme, he had set up the idol Self, before whom he bowed down and worshipped. It might have seemed strange that, with his father's bright example before him, Richard Clayton should so have loved this present world; but he was rather scared by the severe, unqualified holiness of the service rendered by that father to his Master; he had no energy of desire, no thirsting of the soul after the living God, which constrains us to claim, without measure, the promise of the Spirit. Weak and vacillating, he would not remember that nothing is commanded which cannot be performed that there is no limit set to the strength given wherewith to do His will. Outwardly, he had not cast off the faith of Christ; but he lacked the fortitude and courage to take up his cross and follow Him.

It had been Mr. Clayton's fondest wish, that his son should follow his own high calling; but as Richard's character developed itself, he not only abandoned the idea, but he would himself have refused his consent. His child was very dear to him, but dearer still the glory of his God. Not to such an one as Richard could he ever have allowed the inestimable privilege of ministering in the sanctuary; but his son did not desire it, nor was it at all necessary for him to adopt any profession, as Mr. Clayton had succeeded to a considerable property shortly after he had obtained the living of B , which would ultimately revert of course to his son.

Richard remained therefore without any occupation for his time, which he devoted chiefly to field sports and similar amusements.

Mr. and Mrs. Hardman very soon manifested a strong desire to cultivate the acquaintance of the vicar and his family, and it was not long before Richard became a constant visitor at the Mount.

Mr. Clayton saw them occasionally, for he considered them as his parishioners for the time being; but they were singularly uncongenial to himself on all points, and it was some time before he understood the motive of his son's frequent visits to their house.

Richard had found a powerful attraction in the society of Elizabeth Maynard. The first feeling with which she inspired him was one of profound compassion for the position in which she was placed. He saw that her young life was wasting away cheerless and dark, unbrightened by one ray of the sweet human love which is the sunshine of this world, and whose gentle influence is mighty in power to still the tempests and the cutting blasts of sorrow which every mortal man shall meet with on his path of life. For her, whose gaze was yet too dim to discern the glory of **that** Love, to gain one hour of which an eternity of earthly care and tenderness might well be battered, it was in truth a bitter thing to dwell in so chilling an atmosphere.

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Her vivid imagination and warm feelings, having no holier aliment whereon to feed, were centred altogether in the joys of earth, and she felt keenly that desolation of affection which is perhaps the saddest trial this life can offer us.

Richard had, as we have said, much kindness of disposition, though weak and unstable in principle. He endeavoured, by his anxious friendship and tender sympathy, to dispel her bitter sense of loneliness; and he perceived that in consequence her whole heart turned irresistibly to him, with all the concentrated strength of that tenderness which had been allowed to flow in no other channel.

Richard knew that the true and devoted affection of such a person as Elizabeth was by no means a gift to be despised; he could not bear to cast it from him by indifference or contempt, as some might have done; and before the summer was over, their marriage was announced as a settled affair.

Richard acted on impulse, that instinctive law so attractive to our human nature, by which no man ought to be guided; at the same time he was too essentially selfish to have taken this step had he not been really attached to Elizabeth. His attachment, however, was very different in its nature from hers, whose love was too much akin to idolatry. She little knew how frail and uncertain was that good on which she had staked the whole hopes of her existence, that should have rested rather on that sure Foundation, whereon if a man do build, his work shall abide.

Their marriage gave great satisfaction. Mr. Clayton would indeed have preferred that the life-long companion of his son should have been a more decided servant of the cross; but Elizabeth seemed humble-minded and docile, well disposed to profit by the instructions he would now have an opportunity of giving her; and he trusted that she was one whose soul could not long remain in exile from the only source of life and joy which can satisfy our immortality. He trusted much to her influence with Richard, should she indeed become what he hoped; and he gladly afforded them the means of living in comfort, by making an ample allowance to his son.

Mr. and Mrs. Hardman were highly pleased at finding themselves thus suddenly relieved of the care of both their wards; for Elizabeth had made it the sole condition of her marriage that Agnes should reside with them entirely, and that she should never be separated from her sister so long as she remained unmarried.

To this Richard willingly agreed, and it was further decided that they should take up their residence at "The Mount," where Agnes was to join them after having spent some time in London with the Hardman family.

The delight of Agnes at these arrangements was unbounded, and her letters to her sister were full of such vivid anticipations of happiness for the whole party, that Elizabeth trembled as she read them, with that vague terror which arrests us when we look with too much hope into the future.

Agnes did not leave Paris for London until the week before the wedding took place. On the day when she was expected, Richard came to Mr. Hardman's at Elizabeth's own request, in order that he might be present at her sister's arrival.

They were sitting alone together in the drawing-room, when the carriage drove to the door, and Elizabeth started to her feet that she might hurry to welcome her. Before, however, they could even reach the door, it burst open, and Agnes flew into the room breathless with an overwhelming joy, and flung herself half-sobbing half-laughing into her sister's arms. For a moment neither spoke; the orphans, who had so long been all in all to each other, were together once more, and their happiness was too great for utterance. When at length Agnes disengaged herself from her sister's embrace, Elizabeth almost started in astonishment at the change which an interval of nearly two years had made upon her. Agnes was now nearly eighteen, and the childlike loveliness which had always characterised her had ripened into a most winning beauty. She looked so radiant and joyous, that her entrance was like the passing of a sunbeam into the room; her countenance had retained the soft trusting expression which formed its greatest charm, and her eyes had still their candid and innocent gaze.

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Elizabeth turned with a proud delight to present her to Richard, but she stopped short suddenly when she saw his face, whilst an indescribable pang shot through her heart; her future husband was standing with his eyes fixed on Agnes, gazing at her with a look of the most warm and unqualified admiration, a look such as had never been bestowed on herself! At a moment like this, one of a temper less jealous and suspicious than Elizabeth Maynard would never have dreamt of bestowing a thought on this trifling circumstance; but she was, as we have said, peculiarly sensitive in disposition; her affection for Richard Clayton was so absorbing that her whole heart and mind were bound up in it, and she had not a thought unconnected with him; she felt indeed that it had most utterly superseded all other sentiments and feelings, for at that moment she could have wished that the fairer and younger sister (her own dear Agnes!) had not been standing by her side, thus to rob her of a single look from one so passionately loved.

But in another instant she repelled this unworthy feeling almost with horror, for she remembered how, in a very few days, Richard Clayton would hold for Agnes Maynard the sacred name of **brother**. They twain were about to be made by a most holy ordinance **ONE FLESH**, and from that hour **her** sister must be **his** sister also, in the sight of God and man. Her cheek burned with a flush of shame, to think that she should have harboured for one moment what was in truth an unholy thought; and taking Richard by the hand, she drew him towards Agnes, and prayed him to love their sister dearly for her sake.

Richard welcomed her frankly and warmly by that title, telling her, with the utmost kindness in his look and tone, that she must teach him the duties of a brother, as he had never known that gentle tie, which is the source of so much true and enduring happiness on earth. He was in fact greatly interested in the orphan sister of his future wife, for Elizabeth had not failed to tell him of the solemn charge she had received from her dying mother; and the impression made upon his mind by the description of that scene was so great that he was now equally determined with herself that Agnes should find a happy home in his house. Meanwhile Agnes, who was always won in a moment by kindness, put her hand into his with a bright gay smile, and inwardly resolved that she would do all in her power to please the husband of her dear Elizabeth.

### CHAPTER III.

**SOME** time had elapsed since the marriage of Elizabeth and Richard Clayton; already the spring was brightening into summer for the second time since they had resided at "the Mount;" and the interval had, to all appearance, been a season of unmixed prosperity for them all.

Mr. and Mrs. Clayton enjoyed the utmost esteem and consideration among the inhabitants of B and the vicinity, whilst their sister, Agnes Maynard, was a universal favourite. Her peculiarly attractive appearance, sweet disposition, and joyousness of spirit, had won the affection of all to whom she was known. **She** was at least beyond a doubt most truly happy: happy in the society of her sister, and in the warm friendship of her brother-in-law, whom she had sought to propitiate by every means in her power, in order that the harmony of their domestic life might be completed.

The birth of a daughter had been no small addition to the happiness of Elizabeth and Richard; more especially to the latter, who felt for this little infant all that passionate tenderness which a young father so often feels for his first-born child. He was also at this time highly gratified to find that his popularity was increasing considerably; he had acquired greater weight and influence as a married man. His wife and her beautiful sister were much sought after and respected by the leading families of the county, and he soon found that he might take a high position in the neighbourhood.

And yet, surrounded with all these outward blessings, Elizabeth Clayton was very wretched. Her father-in-law had in vain endeavoured to draw the wandering gaze of her dimmed eyes upward to that glorious Star, on which if a man look steadily, he shall learn to take no heed of the mortal tempests roaring round his head, or the fading of

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all mortal joys; he had found an insurmountable barrier to all his efforts in the overwhelming and almost idolatrous love which she bore to her husband. The love of Him, who first loved us, alone should reign supreme in the immortal soul, and all other feelings be the rather called fourth by it, as flowers give out fragrance when the sun shines on them; but if an earthly affection, however lawful in itself, be permitted to supersede it, thereby becoming a sinful indulgence, then does the holier love fade and perish away before that engrossing influence, like the pure sunlight when the night sets in.

Day and night, waking and sleeping, Elizabeth had no thought but for her husband; watching his every word and look, thinking she never could do enough to please him, and harassing both herself and him by exacting an amount of attention and tenderness which she was by no means justified in expecting. The one overpowering idea which was always present in her mind, was the conviction that his attachment for her fell far short of her own in depth and fervour.

She was, in fact, very right in her opinion, but this was no excuse for the unreasonable manner in which she wearied him with her repining at his coldness. She should have remembered that there is but one affection that can be of any real value to those who inspire it, it is that love, noble and disinterested, which is pure from the slightest taint of selfishness; which has for its sole object and desire the happiness of those on whom it is bestowed. She should never have allowed her own feelings and desires to interfere in the most minute particular with his comfort. If she discovered that her presence wearied him, she should have left him with a smile, and with a smile been ready to return to him if he wished it. If he seemed happier while neglecting her, cheerfully she should have submitted to his neglect, and striven only to prevent his home from being ever darkened by a look of sorrow on her face, or its quiet disturbed by a word of discontent. But Elizabeth had sought no other happiness for herself than that which she derived from this affection, and therefore it was profoundly selfish. She was jealous of every thing and every one on whom her husband bestowed a look; and jealous even of the necessary business which took him from her side.

It was not unnatural that Richard, annoyed and often irritated at her unceasing watchfulness, should gladly turn from her to seek the society of Agnes, whose gaiety and light-heartedness rendered her so pleasing a contrast to the anxious care-worn wife. He never acted under the guidance of principle, but he habitually obeyed a law scarce less exacting, for he invariably followed the bent of his own inclination, without pausing to scrutinize his motives, or to examine into the possible result of his actions. It therefore never occurred to him, that it must have cost poor Elizabeth many a bitter pang to see him so openly preferring the society of her sister; while Agnes, with that careless egotism to which the young and the happy so often yield themselves unconsciously, was ever ready to enjoy with him the long walks and rides which Elizabeth's enfeebled health prevented her from attempting.

Thus, while to a casual observer all was bright and prosperous in the lives of the Clayton family, there was ripening in the heart of her who should have been the happiest, one of those dark tragedies which often run their course in the narrow compass of an individual mind alone.

Soon, however, the anxieties and fears of Elizabeth took a new shape. Her health began to fail her altogether. She had reduced herself to a very weak and nervous state, solely by distress of mind and harassing annoyances; and now the conviction had settled with a dull dead weight upon her heart, that she should not survive the birth of her second child.

This idea was in reality but an imagination springing from her morbid state of mind, for which there was not the slightest foundation; but the conviction, deeply rooted, ate like a canker into her soul. It was not death which she dreaded, not the coffin and the shroud; nor yet, chained to the dust as she was by the ties of earth, the awful judgment to come; but it was the horror of the dread which filled her heart night and day, that when she lay cold and helpless in her grave, Richard would find some unknown stranger, fairer and dearer, to take her place in his love and in his home. To a mind like Elizabeth's this thought was torture; it haunted her like a spectral phantom: she had loved him too exclusively when living, to give him up even when she was dead; and she longed, had it

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been possible, to have held him still within the stiff cold arms from which the warmth of life was fled. She had ever before her eyes the terrible image of one more loved perhaps, who should dwell in his house as she had dwelt, and walk by his side as she had walked, honoured, cherished as his wife, the mother of his children. This vision of her brain took a thousand agonizing forms. Sometimes she fancied that through the mould, and the dust, and the coffin-lid, his voice would reach her if he spoke in accents of endearment to another; that, she should even hear the tramping of their feet round her dark abode as they walked through the beautiful church-yard, too happy in their mutual affection to think of her who mouldered there so lonely! And her child, too her little fragile, gentle Mary, was she to be delivered to the cold unloving care of a stepmother!

Over these ideas the jealous heart of Elizabeth brooded with all the strength of her diseased fancy; but suddenly, whilst she speculated on the probable results of her death, a thought occurred to her which brought with it at once the most complete consolation.

The sincere attachment of Richard to their sister Agnes became the source of her utmost joy and thankfulness; he would never consent to part with her sister, now become in affection, as well as in actual fact, his own also; he would never send her away to a miserable and cheerless existence with the Hardmans: no, Agnes would remain with him to take care of her little niece, of whom she was devotedly fond; and so long as she continued unmarried, she would prevent; the possibility of another wife entering into the house of which she would be the beloved inmate. This idea gave a totally new current to Elizabeth's thoughts; it was like balm to her wounded spirit; she could look forward with perfect calm to her death, when she felt convinced that, so far from her place being filled by a rival, Richard and Agnes would remain alone together to remember her, and talk of her often with unchanging love, whilst her little Mary would find in the young aunt the same tender and watchful friend which she had herself been to Agnes.

Elizabeth had never concealed from either Richard or Agnes how near a close she believed her life to be, although her natural delicacy of feeling had restrained her from telling them of the dread which rendered this conviction one of such agony to her.

Now, however, she repeatedly implored of them both to promise her that Agnes should always remain with her brother-in-law; urging as her reason for wishing it, that to her alone would she commit the care of her little daughter, and the new-born babe if it survived.

Both were very willing to promise their poor Elizabeth all she desired, but neither of them had the slightest apprehension for her life. Their medical adviser was too skilful a physician not to know that her fears were perfectly groundless, and he had completely reassured Agnes on the subject; they therefore contented themselves with soothing her in the mean time, and looked forward anxiously to the period when all anxiety should cease.

Such was the state of matters at "The Mount," when Elizabeth took her seat one fine evening in the early summer at the drawing-room window, which was thrown wide open that she might enjoy the soft mild air; directly below it was a smooth piece of turf, on which Richard was slowly walking to and fro in conversation with his father's Curate.

Mr. Lambert was one of those characters which are, too unfortunately, rare in this world, but of which alone shall doubtless be composed the population of that Holy City, where nothing that defileth shall in any wise enter in: with a powerful mind, and many a noble intellectual quality, he had sought and attained to the innocence of life and humility of heart of a little child, who once was set as an example to the gifted of this earth.

From the hour when he had received the awful commission for the work and office of a priest in the Church of God, he had, with determinate resolution, set the seal of "Holiness to the Lord" on every action of his future life. Severe and unflinching towards himself in following out this difficult course, he was ever most gentle and merciful to others; winning back to the old paths with sweet persuasive accents those who had erred and strayed,

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and dealing with penitents in the spirit of that unutterably blessed and touching declaration which has been as the words of life to many a sinking soul " Neither do I condemn thee."

Notwithstanding his youth, there was a peculiar calm and dignity in his manner which won the respect of all whom he approached; though few would have suspected, from his habitual silence and reserve, that there was in his character an under current of profound and intense feeling, which he seldom if ever displayed. Careless and indifferent as Richard Clayton was, he could not but admire the pure and exalted views which raised this man so far above himself; and he was always more ready to listen to Mr. Lambert's remonstrances than to the sterner warnings of his father, whose faith and obedience shone forth rather in the severity of holiness than in its beauty.

Their conversation was distinctly audible to Elizabeth as she sat at the window, and she soon became so deeply and painfully interested in it that she forgot to ascertain whether they were aware of her vicinity. Richard had asked Mr. Lambert what was the cause of a tumult which he had witnessed that morning at the church door, as he passed through the village.

Mr. Lambert answered that it had originated in one of those distressing cases which were often a source of so much annoyance to the clergy. Two persons had come before him to be married; they did not belong to this parish of B , and the banns had been published elsewhere; consequently, it was not until they were actually within the church that he discovered the relationship in which they already stood to one another. The woman was sister to the former wife of the man.

"Of course I refused to marry them," he added quietly.

"Then you share my father's opinion," said Richard. "I think him quite absurdly rigid on this point. I cannot coincide in the strong objection which is raised against it by so many. Such a marriage might often be a very convenient arrangement."

"And a most unhallowed alliance," said Mr. Lambert, warmly.

"You will find few to look upon it in that light," replied Richard; "think how frequently the connexion is made without the slightest scruple."

"There is nothing so common in this world as evil," said Mr. Lambert, with quiet emphasis; "you may give men authority to commit the greatest crimes with impunity, if they are to find their license for it in the practice of others." He paused, for Richard's peculiar position rendered this a subject scarce fit for discussion.

Richard, however, would not let the matter drop till he had very clearly made known his own opinion; he spoke much of the advantage which might result from such an arrangement, in procuring for the children of the deceased wife so kind and natural a protectress as their aunt.

Mr. Lambert replied, that, were the matter viewed as it ought to be, there could be no more reason why the sister of the mother should not remain to take care of the children than the sister of the father himself. Even on the score of expediency alone, he could show the incalculable evil of such connexions, bringing distrust and misery and confusion into the nearest and dearest relations of life; but it was on a far higher ground that he would denounce them, that of being altogether repugnant to the will of God; a fact which might be proved from Scripture, and which had been set forth by the authority of the Church in all ages. It was, in fact, a putting asunder of those whom God had joined in the holy tie, whereby he declared that man and wife were to be one flesh: if there were any meaning in those words at all, the relations of the one must become the relations of the other also, and the sister-in-law be in the sight of heaven counted as the sister in blood.

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Richard could not answer this argument, though he still held to his own opinion; and after a few more remarks from both, the conversation changed. But Elizabeth Clayton had heard enough, and too much.

Richard little knew what deadly power there had been in his words so carelessly spoken. He did not see, as his voice died away, how a figure rushed from that darkened room with hurried steps and suffocated breath; he did not hear how the bolt was drawn across the door of the apartment above, by a hand that trembled till it was well nigh palsied; nor the dull heavy fall upon the ground, of a form convulsed by its fierce mental agony.

One thought alone was present in the mind of Elizabeth Clayton a thought so torturing and unsupportable that she strove to escape from it with that impotent frenzy which in its full development drives men to the awful crime of self-destruction. She had a **RIVAL** in her **SISTER!** The wife whom she had dreaded would supplant her after her death, would be **her**, who for two years past had called her husband brother! It was an idea too horrible even to have entered into her mind, had it not been literally forced upon her by the words of Richard himself.

Elizabeth had not the strong religious principles which induced Mr. Lambert to view it with such warm indignation, but she had that which in this instance supplied their place the instinctive delicacy of feeling with which a pure mind must revolt from a transaction so opposed to all that is just and holy. **What a horrible shade was now cast over the past intercourse of her husband and sister**, and the happy familiarity she had herself loved to promote between them! It maddened her even to think of the result which would probably follow on her own death. Instead of living to watch over her children and remember her with unchanged affection, they would remain together in a union condemned of God, and reprobated even by the world itself.

Had she then, when she gave her orphan sister a home, been but preparing for herself a rival, who would hereafter blot out her very memory from the heart of the husband she loved so well? Oh! surely she had in truth been nourishing a viper in her bosom: but at least it should be so no longer; she would not sit idly by and see another preparing, under such false pretences, to rob her of the love which she would have had her own even in the grave. She started up Elizabeth was ever violent in her resolutions as well as in her feelings she went to the door, scarce knowing what she did, strong in one determination only that Agnes should not stay another day in the house, to rise up between her and the husband whose affection was her lawful right.

Suddenly, as she was about to draw the bolt, she started and staggered back; a vision passed before her of a scene never forgotten. She saw the pale, death-stricken face; the uplifted hands of the expiring mother, clasped in passionate entreaty to her the daughter! She heard again that voice, coming so faint and thrilling over the cold lips

"Elizabeth, Elizabeth! I trust to you alone! promise swear that you will never desert my child; swear that no dearer tie shall ever induce you to forsake your charge!" And she heard, as it were, the echo of her own voice when she answered, child as she was, with such a solemn firmness

"Mother, fear not; I promise I **swear!**"

And was it thus she was about to redeem that pledge given to the dead to fulfil that oath administered on a death-bed? by driving forth Agnes, that mother's youngest darling, from her house and home; casting her out into that dangerous and chilling world, where she would be so friendless and alone!

There was a sudden revulsion of feeling in the breast of Elizabeth; a new horror rose out of the idea of this unhallowed marriage. Was Agnes, the gentle Agnes, so fair and joyous, thereby to become a being unworthy of the favour of heaven, and an outcast even from society? Was the sister for whom she had indulged in so many a bright ambitious dream, reserved for such a fate as this? a wife disowned both by the laws of God and man!



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Elizabeth flung herself down once more with a sort of powerless despair. Which of these two was she to hate the most, whom, until now, she had so dearly loved the husband, who, by his selfish act, might blight and blacken the whole existence of her only sister; or the sister, who, under that sacred name, had stolen into the husband's heart, to dwell happy in his love when **she** was mouldering forgotten in the dust? Her thoughts became confused her senses seemed abandoning her the shock had been so sudden. She had never before contemplated the possibility of such a marriage. She had believed it forbidden by all laws, Divine or human; and now, not only was it brought suddenly before her as a matter of frequent occurrence, but there had been an energy and an anxiety in Richard's manner of expressing himself, which proved that, however unconsciously, it was yet for his own sake that he sought so earnestly to prove the truth of his assertions.

There is a peculiar faculty in the human mind, which sometimes causes it, when a new and absorbing idea is first presented to it, at once to grasp it in its full extent, in all its bearings past, present, and future. Elizabeth's vivid imagination would not allow her to find consolation in the great uncertainty of the evil she dreaded; it carried her on at once to anticipate the marriage of her husband and sister as the infallible result of her own death, now, as she believed, so near at hand. With her face buried in her hands, she lay on the ground, wrestling with the great agony of all the contending feelings which this terrible conviction had aroused within her.

Meanwhile Richard and Agnes sat together in the drawing-room below. "Where is Elizabeth?" said Agnes, at last; "I have not seen her at all this evening."

"I really do not know," said Richard, indifferently; "perhaps she has gone to lie down. She fancies herself fatigued now, whenever she has made the slightest exertion. Do go and sing to me, Agnes," he continued, flinging aside his book; "this is just the hour when I can best enjoy music."

Agnes complied, and in a few minutes Elizabeth could distinguish, through the choking sobs that were bursting from her own lips, the sweet tones of her sister's voice, as she sang, one after another, the favourite songs which her husband most preferred.

"It is strange that Elizabeth does not come," said Agnes, after a time; "she never goes to spend the evening in her room without telling us at least. I must go and see where she is."

"Some fancy!" said Richard, in a tone of irritation. "You had better leave her to herself. I wish she had your sweet temper, Agnes."

Agnes made no answer: it had often seemed strange to her that Elizabeth was not in truth more uniformly happy, with so many blessings round her. She left the room in search of her sister; but in an instant she returned, with an agitated step, and a look of terror on her face, usually so bright and sunny.

"Dear Richard, come quickly!" she exclaimed; "I quite fear that Elizabeth is very ill: her door is locked, and she made no answer when I called, but I can hear her groaning in so strange a manner!"

Richard started from his seat, and bounded up stairs; Agnes followed. They knocked at the door, and called in vain; but they could hear moan succeeding moan. Alarmed to the last degree, Richard exerted all his strength, and burst open the door. The violent shock, and the stunning noise it occasioned, put the finishing stroke to the agitation of Elizabeth's nerves and the confusion of her mind. Her husband rushed in: all that he saw was her form stretched on the ground, trembling and convulsed. He flung himself on his knees beside her, and lifted up her head; whilst Agnes, kneeling close to him, drew back the long tangled hair that hung over her sister's livid face. Elizabeth opened her eyes: they were full of the most wild and ghastly expression. A terrible fear shot through the mind of Richard that she had suddenly become insane. There was, in truth, a sort of chaos in her thoughts; but one idea remained too fearfully distinct.

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Her gaze fell upon Agnes, and her heart revolted with unnatural horror against her dear and only sister. Half frantic, she started up: with the strength almost of a maniac, she seized Agnes by the arm, which she had rested on the shoulder of Richard, and flung her back with such force, that she fell headlong against the wall. Richard uttered a cry of terror; he really thought she had killed her. He flew to Agnes, and raised her in his arms. She was only stunned, not hurt. She looked up in his face, and smiled, to reassure him. Elizabeth gazed upon them for a moment, as though her quivering frame were turning into stone. Then, stretching out her hands towards her husband, she exclaimed, in words which he then attributed to the ravings of delirium, but which years after haunted him with a fearful meaning, "Oh, Richard, Richard! she is your sister your sister your sister!"

There was something so horrible in the tone in which she reiterated these words, that Agnes flew towards her, and strove to pass her arms round her, calling her by every endearing name. But Elizabeth disengaged herself from her embrace, and, sinking on the sofa, she began to utter shriek on shriek, evidently in great bodily agony.

In another hour she was alarmingly ill, and before morning a little feeble child had been brought prematurely into the world, in which it seemed too fragile to exist; and the life of the mother was despaired of.

### CHAPTER IV.

**THESE** events had taken place so rapidly and unexpectedly, that Richard and Agnes had scarce time to speculate on the cause of Elizabeth's illness, before they became altogether absorbed in their overpowering anxiety for her life. Her state became appalling in the extreme; it seemed as though she could neither live nor die; for she lingered many days after the physicians thought it impossible she could survive. Some thought for this world, some earthly passion or feeling, seemed to hold her back when already in the grasp of death; and whatever that thought might be, it filled her immortal soul, thus standing on the threshold of eternity, so exclusively, that it swallowed up all anxiety or fear for the tremendous judgment close at hand. They could not tell what was the one idea which had power thus to absorb a spirit already summoned into the awful Presence, for Elizabeth was reduced to a state of weakness which deprived her altogether of speech. She could not raise herself or move without assistance, and she would scarce have seemed alive at all but for the wild restless gaze of her sleepless eyes. There was in them a terrible expression of anxiety and misery, which told but too eloquently of the fierce human anguish with which that silent sufferer was wrestling.

It was a horrible thing to see one about to enter into those habitations which are everlasting, whether for good or ill, thus concentrating all her expiring faculties, not on earnest repentance, but on the perishing remnant of the mortal life that now might be reckoned by days and hours. She seemed ever struggling madly to express some one last wish, as though her soul could not go forth till it had uttered certain words; but they could comprehend nothing from her inarticulate efforts; it was to Agnes that she strove to address herself principally, though also to Richard, and they very naturally concluded that, her whole anxiety was for her children only that all her endeavours were to make her sister understand that she committed them to her care. Impressed with this idea, Agnes tried to soothe and comfort her, by repeating again and again to her that she understood her wishes, and that she would never leave her children, but that she would make it the business of her life to watch over them and devote herself entirely to them.

Richard also, in the same belief, assured her repeatedly that she might be at peace with regard to the poor little infants whom she must leave behind in this chill world. He would never allow Agnes to leave him she should stay with him to tend and care for them they should be consigned completely to her charge.

Those promises which, but for the one horrible idea that now possessed the mind of Elizabeth, would have been to her so inexpressibly soothing and consolatory, served only to madden and torture her as she lay there in her helpless weakness, unable to tell them that they offered for her comfort the very assurance she most dreaded.

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Though not without hope, it was yet a death-bed most unquiet and unblest. Could the dying woman have been altogether disengaged from the engrossing thoughts of this world, it would doubtless have been a season of inestimable profit to her departing soul, for Mr. Lambert attended her assiduously, labouring with unwearied efforts to draw the poor straying sheep in safety to the heavenly fold. But he saw almost with terror that she let the redeemless hours pass recklessly away, with scarce a feeling but for the inward conflict of the heart, whose beating was so soon to cease for ever.

Her father-in-law, Mr. Clayton, had been so painfully affected by the state in which he found her, that he had been obliged to relinquish the task of ministering to her in her last hours to his curate; and Mr. Lambert, well accustomed as he was to scenes of a similar nature, found it a most difficult duty. There was something in her mind which he could not fathom, whether anxiety for her children, or, as he was inclined to believe, some deeper and more envenomed cause. But he saw that it rendered nearly powerless all his efforts to awaken her to a more earnest consideration of the awful realities to which she was hurrying so swiftly. His voice, even when hallowed by the **Name** in which alone is Life Eternal, fell unheeded on the ears that were ever straining to catch the import of the words that passed between Richard and Agnes. It was well nigh in vain that he held up the Majesty of Justice as developed in the Mercy of the Cross, before the soul that vibrated between those feelings ever contending fearfully the bitter jealousy against the once loved sister, for the sake of the yet dearer husband; or, when some kind act of the childhood's companion recalled the old affection, the horror akin to hate of the husband, who might destroy the bright prospects of that tender friend's young life.

But the first feeling predominated; and often when Mr. Lambert would have joined her feeble hands in the attitude of supplication, she strove rather to use their failing strength in driving from her bed of death the sister whom she had caressed so often; or, when he endeavoured to pray with her, if he saw that she was really moved by the awful truths he brought before her, a spasm of horror would pass over her face at sight of these **two**, who were kneeling there side by side. Ultimately Mr. Lambert thought he had reason to hope that this poor sufferer, so bitterly tried in her dying hours, had yet been mercifully dealt with. There was often a look of most earnest pleading and of deepest penitence in her upraised eyes, which led him to trust that this tempest-driven soul had in truth flown to the One True Refuge, although its earthly anguish and anxiety had so sadly interfered with its last solemn duties.

It was a lovely June morning, the sky was bright, as though it never had a cloud, and the earth radiant, as though it knew no sin. It was just such a day, when it would have been a glorious thing to have seen a ransomed spirit burst the bonds of its clay, and fly from this land of perishing beauty and fading sunbeams up to the fields of light above, where the Sun of Righteousness for ever shines.

All those who had any claim on the affection of Elizabeth Clayton were gathered round her, for her last hour was come. They had placed her little children in her arms, and a few bitter tears, the first she had shed, wet her cold cheek when she felt the little caressing hands passed round her neck. Yet she looked on them with a strange unnatural longing, as though she desired to convey them with her to the grave. Soon the one thought, which had obscured for her the glory of eternity, deadened the mother's heart within her. She signed to them to take away the smiling infants, for they intercepted her gaze upon those **two** standing as chief mourners side by side, whom to the last she must watch in her impotent jealousy. Her eyes were glazing fast the chill of death was creeping through her stiffening members to her pallid breast; but she only felt that the struggle was at its climax that in a few minutes more she would be powerless to say the words with which she sought to separate them, to interdict their unhallowed union, that now came choking to the lips too palsied to articulate.

She struggled fearfully for utterance; it was so terrible to see her efforts that Agnes sank upon her knees beside her, and clasping her cold hands, exclaimed "Dear, dear Elizabeth, I know what you would say, it is for your children; fear nothing, they shall be safe and happy in my keeping; I will be as a mother to them."

"Yes," said Richard, bending over her; "my poor wife, be at rest; do not doubt our love and care; together we will live only to watch over those dear children."

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Some dreadful emotion seemed to shake the whole frame of Elizabeth; with a convulsive effort she half raised herself from her pillow; her eyes glanced with the wildest eagerness from the one to the other; her pale lips moved, and they could distinguish the faltering words, "Agnes not marry;" it was all they could hear, but Richard anxiously exclaimed, imagining he had understood at last the meaning of her efforts: "Agnes, she fears you will marry and leave the poor children, but you will not you will stay with them."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Agnes, sobbing; "I will, indeed; I will never leave this house; I promise it to you, my dearest sister." The gleam faded from the despairing eyes of the dying woman an expression of utter hopelessness settled on her features they had misunderstood her to the last! It was all over now: it was too late she could do no more; life was ebbing; all things had grown indistinct around her; she must resign herself to the grave, and them to their unblest union. She sank back; the thought was not in her soul, that He would remember her when He came to His kingdom; or, that He would be merciful to her a sinner; but only the horror of the compact which it seemed to her **they** had sealed at her very bed of death. She made one feeble effort to turn away her face from both when they stooped to kiss her, and so expired.

### CHAPTER V.

**AGNES MAYNARD** was within a few months of her majority when Mrs. Clayton died; and the funeral was scarcely over when Mr. Hardman, with systematic propriety, wrote both to herself and Richard for the purpose of arranging her future residence. His letters were first answered by Mr. Clayton, who informed him that it was his own express desire, as well as that of both Agnes and her brother-in-law, that she should remain to take charge of her sister's infant children.

Mr. Clayton's views respecting such alliances as that, the very thought of which had terrified Elizabeth into her grave, were so strong and decisive, that it never occurred to him to suppose that Agnes could ever be considered in any other light than as the sister of his son. He, therefore, felt it to be most desirable, both for the children and Richard, that she should be placed at the head of his establishment under that title; an arrangement which would, in truth, be highly advantageous in almost all similar cases, had no idea of an unlawful union between persons so connected ever been admitted into the minds of men.

None of the parties concerned in this affair had, however, in appearance at least, the most distant idea of any such alliance; and, consequently, no obstacle seemed to exist against a plan in all other respects so very suitable.

Mr. Hardman was quite satisfied that an arrangement which met with the sanction of the vicar of B , must be perfectly right, and he imagined that he had gathered from Mr. Clayton's letter that Agnes and his son were to reside with himself. In this Mr. Hardman was altogether mistaken, as Richard had no intention of quitting The Mount. But this erroneous idea satisfied the demands of Mrs. Hardman's implacable propriety, and she thankfully consented that Agnes should remain at a comfortable distance from her own less attractive daughter.

Richard Clayton was, during some time, completely absorbed in grief for the loss of his wife. There are few who can bear unmoved, that the heart which has loved them best on earth is cold for ever, however little they may have valued the affection while it lasted. And his sorrow was by no means unmingled with remorse. He could not endure the society of any one excepting Agnes, with whom he could talk of his Elizabeth, and who in voice and manner so often reminded him of her. Agnes, deeply moved at his distress, and feeling that there was a bond between them in the love they had borne to the departed, devoted herself to the task of soothing and consoling him. Her efforts were not without success; she soon removed the first bitterness of his regrets, and, after a time, Richard could not but feel that his home was still a most happy one. He found himself carefully surrounded with all the comforts and elegance which a woman alone can give to the details of domestic life. His children were cared for, his household well arranged; and when he returned in the evening, wearied with his day's sport, he never failed to be received with a bright smile of welcome, and to find many little preparations for his

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coming: the chair drawn towards the fire, the new book placed beside it, and other marks of attention to his wishes, which, trifling in themselves, yet tend wonderfully to promote the happiness of each day as it passes.

Agnes herself, though she never ceased to regret her sister, gradually recovered her natural cheerfulness and gaiety of heart. Occupation is the sovereign remedy for despondency, and she had but little time now to brood over the past. Full of the sad enthusiasm with which we seek to fulfil our duties to the dead, she gave herself up almost entirely to the care of her sister's children, both of whom required much of her time and attention. The little Mary was a sweet engaging child, timid and sensitive, and displaying, even at that early age, all her mother's acuteness of feeling; she and her brother were the only relations Agnes now had in the world, and she loved her little niece with the most passionate affection. Mary continued to regret her mother with a tenacity of recollection very uncommon in so young a child, so that Agnes spent many hours of the day in endeavouring to amuse her.

The infant, for whom this world's miseries had commenced almost with his first breath, was a still greater anxiety to his young aunt. During his mother's illness he had been little attended to, and now he was struggling for the life that seemed to have so slight a hold on his little feeble frame. Richard's physician told him very plainly that the most constant watchfulness and attention alone could preserve an existence so precarious; and he implored of Agnes, almost with tears, to devote herself to this arduous task; for he had long desired most earnestly to have a son, and he could not bear to think that the gift had only been given to be resumed.

Thus she had much to occupy her thoughts; and Mr. Clayton not unfrequently employed her in attending on the poor of his parish. He was anxious, by making her acquainted with the sober realities of life, to induce her to take a more serious and practical view of our condition in this world, and of the duties incumbent on us all. There was a certain taint of false poetical sentiment and overstrained romance in the character of Agnes Maynard, which she owed no doubt to the influence of her Parisian teachers, and which Mr. Clayton felt to be sadly at variance with the rigid self-denial and invincible holiness that ought to control the actions of a Christian in all the circumstances of life.

She seemed to think that the unbounded indulgence of her feelings at all times was almost a matter of duty; and her best actions were performed, not because they were **right**, but because they were generally agreeable to her naturally sweet disposition.

She visited the poor, not from that blessed motive once given for the performance of this duty, which makes it the highest privilege on earth, but simply because it really gave her pleasure to relieve their sufferings; and even her attention to the little children was the mere natural result of her fond regrets for their dead mother, and was never viewed by her as a means given to her whereby she might serve her Master. The manner in which she devoted herself to them however, won for her the esteem and admiration of her acquaintances in the neighbourhood of B ; and it became the fashion to seek her friendship. This was extremely agreeable both to Richard and herself, for they were alike fond of society and amusement, having but few resources in themselves. They failed not to place the highest value on the favour and consideration of those whom wealth or rank seemed to render desirable friends; and Richard especially, who fervently loved this world, was most ambitious of its honours. Their happiness was, therefore, increased in no small degree by the position they had now attained in society, and for considerably more than a year they lived in the enjoyment of the greatest ease and comfort. This state might have continued long, and their contentment would doubtless but have increased as they saw the children improving in health, and Richard acquiring great influence in the county; but they were doomed to suffer by that fatal laxity of principle, which has caused it to be considered as a **possibility** in Christian England that a man should become the husband of one who is virtually his sister!

No one had ever dreamt of questioning the propriety of Agnes's residence with her brother-in-law. Mr. Clayton would as soon have thought of objecting to the presence of his own daughter in the house of his son. But there are to be found in every neighbourhood persons whose business it seems to be to attend to the affairs of their neighbours who occupy themselves in arranging the plans of others, and prosecute their unjustifiable interference

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with the ostensible motive of offering well meant advice and judicious kindness. B was infested by a lady of this description. Mrs. Sharp was the wife of a lawyer, who resided in the village because it placed him at a convenient distance from an estate which he managed in the absence of the proprietor. She was a person of a busy, active disposition, and a perfectly vacant mind. She took a singularly microscopic view of those things which are alone of any importance in this world, whilst it was her delight to magnify trifles, especially if they were sources of annoyance, into matters of weight and consequence. She loved to dig out all those little evils of life which men wisely seek to bury in oblivion, and make their sting be thoroughly felt and understood; and she had a sort of spasmodic irritability of temper, which made it impossible for her to endure quietly the resignation or cheerfulness of her friends. Being excessively ambitious and very vain, she soon found that her standing in society was not by any means what she could have wished, and she therefore betook herself to that peculiar species of self-aggrandizement, which consisted in the depreciation and abuse of others, so as to produce a comparison favourable to herself; clearly believing, that while enlarging on the faults and follies of her friends, her own virtues grew brighter in proportion. Mr. Sharp systematically encouraged her to take an active and engrossing interest in the affairs of her neighbours, as he thereby diverted her energy of mind and warmth of eloquence from himself and his proceedings.

Thus Mrs. Sharp, with her inquisitive eyes, her busy tongue, and her spiteful disposition, was an object of terror to the whole neighbourhood from the vicar, who generally saw her enter the cottages of his parishioners as soon as he quitted them, in order to learn what he had been saying, and counteract its effects, down to the little village girl, who as required to enter into minute details respecting the quality of her Sunday dinner, and other such interesting particulars. This lady Agnes Maynard had the misfortune to offend. Mrs. Sharp had been extremely anxious to cultivate her acquaintance when she found how intimate she had become with the leading families of the country; and Agnes, who was at all times accustomed to think far more of her own pleasure than of the courtesies of life, had not scrupled, as she thought her a particularly disagreeable person, to repel her advances in a very marked and humiliating manner. This slight was never forgiven or forgotten by Mrs. Sharp; she cherished a sense of injury with all the tenacity of a little mind; and from that day it became one of the chief objects of her existence to find some means of indulging her deep-rooted and bitter dislike of Agnes. It was so, perhaps, unconsciously to herself; for Mrs. Sharp, like most people, was well grounded in the art of self-deceit; and she persuaded herself that it was a laudable zeal for the well-being of society, which induced her to spread many evil reports respecting the residence of Agnes Maynard with her brother-in-law, instead of a mean and ungenerous desire of revenge.

It so chanced, that in the course of the second year after the death of Elizabeth Clayton, Mrs. Sharp went for a few days to London. One of her first proceedings on arriving there was to call on Mrs. Hardman, as she had long looked forward with a keen relish to some favourable opportunity of stirring up that respectable lady to a virtuous indignation against her ward, for whose conduct Mr. Hardman was to a certain degree responsible.

Mrs. Sharp had been acquainted with the family during their six months' residence at the Mount; and the first polite speeches were scarcely over, when she proceeded gradually to insinuate what was in fact the real object of her visit. She began by looking fixedly and with an air of profound compassion on Mrs. Hardman, and having given vent to several heavy sighs, remarked that she was thankful to see her in tolerable spirits.

"I believe my spirits are generally very good," said Mrs. Hardman, who sat stiff and impassible as usual. "No one can accuse me of being variable: my temper is even and equable, as it ought to be."

"Ah, well! you are a very strong-minded person, I know," said Mrs. Sharp; "still I must say I expected to see you a little moved by such a trial."

"Mrs. Sharp, may I ask to what you allude?" inquired Mrs. Hardman. "Trials I have, no doubt, such as I believe no one but a person of my strength of character could have undergone; but I am not aware that you are acquainted with them: they are buried in my own bosom."

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"My dear Mrs. Hardman, I can assure you this one is not buried anywhere," exclaimed Mrs. Sharp; "no one talks of anything else at B . It was only the other day that I met Lady C on the road, and she stopped her carriage, and put her head out of the window, (you know I am very intimate with Lady C ) and she held up her hands just in this way, and said, "Well, Mrs. Sharp, this is a sad affair, only to think that Mrs. Hardman should have sanctioned I won't annoy you by repeating the rest; but it is the opinion of every one. Why, there was Mr. L ; he said to my husband, that his opinion of Mr. Hardman's good sense and respectability were unavoidably shaken, these were his words, 'unavoidably shaken.'"

"Mrs. Sharp, I beg you will explain yourself," exclaimed Mrs. Hardman, becoming crimson with anger and impatience; "I cannot guess what you are talking of."

"Can you not, indeed? Well, then, it must be because you do not see it in the light that I do, and that every one else does. Perhaps it is not the kind of misfortune that affects you people are so different! To be sure, it is not like a loss of money; but, for my part, I am so sensitive, there is no misfortune I would not bear sooner than disgrace. It would be to me worse than any affliction. I declare to you I would rather see Mr. Sharp expire before my eyes than be disgraced as you have been."

"Disgrace is not a word that ever applied to me or any of my family," exclaimed Mrs. Hardman; "I am sure of that, at all events!"

"Of course you are; and that is just what makes this, in my opinion, so heavy a trial to you. If it had been one of your own family, (and I am sure I hope none of them ever **will** follow her example,) you would have endured it as a domestic affliction; but to be so lowered in the eyes of the world by a person who is not even a relation!"

"How often am I to tell you that I don't know what you mean?" screamed Mrs. Hardman, fairly driven out of her usual dignity by her frantic curiosity; "if you have anything to say at all, why don't you speak out?"

At these words Mrs. Sharp turned slowly round, and fixed her staring eyes on the excited lady with a look of well-acted astonishment: "Do you really mean to say," she replied, as the words dropped from her lips with exasperating coolness, "that you have not heard "

"I have heard nothing," shouted Mrs. Hardman, "I have been telling you so for the last hour!" With that Mrs. Sharp elevated her eyes, shook her head, clasped her hands, and nodded mysteriously several times. During these evolutions, Mrs. Hardman looked at her as if she could have devoured her. Finally, losing all patience, she actually shook her by the arm and desired her to speak.

Mrs. Sharp, seeing that she had worked up her friend to a suitable state of excitement, at once complied, and hastened to enlarge on the residence of Agnes Maynard in the house of Richard Clayton, in terms which could have been imagined only by a mind not merely devoid of the slightest refinement or delicacy, but of principle also. We say devoid of principle, because, had she judged Agnes and Richard by the high and holy standard set before us all, she could not have considered them otherwise than as brother and sister.

Mrs. Hardman and her husband, who had now come in, shocked and dismayed at the manner in which she spoke, hurriedly demanded if Agnes had not been residing with the elder Mr. Clayton. They had received but few communications from the Mount since the death of Elizabeth, and were, consequently, ignorant of many details.

A triumphant negative was given to their question by Mrs. Sharp, who further proceeded to mix up with her statement the leaven of falsity and exaggeration which is always to be found in the discourse of such persons. She assured them that the conduct of Agnes was strongly reprobated by the society in the neighbourhood of B , and that it was a matter of universal astonishment that Mr. Hardman should permit her to remain in so equivocal a situation. The furious indignation of the Hardmans at this account may be imagined; that **their** sense of propriety

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should be called in question by the world of their idolatry, was an affront not to be endured, and it might prove very injurious to Mr. Hardman were it known that he had left his ward in a doubtful position. They declared to Mrs. Sharp, that they were under a deep sense of obligation to her, that they had been grossly deceived, but that they would rectify their unconscious error that very day. To which she responded with an air of virtuous modesty, that she had only done her duty that she applauded their resolution of speedily interfering in this unpleasant affair; and then took her leave, fortified by their praises for some yet more determined assault on the domestic happiness of a few more of her friends.

By that night's post a letter was despatched to Agnes, the joint composition of Mr. and Mrs. Hardman, in which her present position, as it appeared in the eyes of the world, was qualified in terms that must wound her beyond endurance; and which terminated with a peremptory order to her to place herself without delay under the escort of the person they would send to conduct her to London, where she was henceforward to reside in their house as her sister had done.

### CHAPTER VI.

**IT** was winter now. Christmas-tide was scarcely past, and the holly and mistletoe still decorated the walls of the beautiful church where Richard and Agnes had knelt that morning, happy with a strange restless happiness in one another's society, which they would scarce have ventured to analyze. They agreed that they had never spent a Christmas of such unalloyed gladness. Mr. Clayton always made it his especial care that this season should be one of true rejoicing to every individual in his parish, and they had readily and generously assisted him in this endeavour. Agnes had carried her gifts and good wishes to every house in the village, and there was warmth and light on the humblest hearth amongst them, when the chimes rung out on the clear midnight air, bearing forth the glad tidings of great joy which the angels brought from heaven at the selfsame hour.

In their own house Agnes had taken care that all should be cheerfulness and gaiety, and Richard thought with delight of the bright scene that waited him as he rode home through the darkness that evening. He had been called to some distance on business; he was chilled and wearied, and he pictured to himself the well lighted room, with the huge fire blazing on the hearth, and the little Mary springing from the arms of her young aunt to meet him.

The scene which did in fact await him at the Mount, was a melancholy contrast to this pleasing vision. He went first to the drawing-room, already surprised that no one met him at the door. There was no light there, and the room was in disorder; but most of all, he missed the sweet face of Agnes brightening so gaily at his approach. It was the first time she had ever failed to welcome him, and a sudden foreboding of evil assailed him. He went hurriedly from room to room in search of her. He called her anxiously, but no answer was returned. At last a sound of stifled sobbing met his ear. It came from the sleeping room of his children, and he opened the door at once and went in. Agnes was kneeling beside the cradle of the little Mary, who had fallen asleep, her cheeks yet wet with the tears she had shed in her innocent sympathy for the sorrow of her aunt, though she had been unable to comprehend the cause of it. Agnes had buried her face in the pillow, and was weeping as though her very heart would break. She started at the sound of Richard's voice, as he took her hands in his and besought her to tell him what had grieved her. Her distress was so violent that she could not speak for a few minutes; then she could only utter a few incoherent words. She pointed to the child, so beautiful and smiling in its quiet slumber.

"How can I ever bear to leave her!" she exclaimed; "and still more, how could I leave you, dear Richard, and this happy home all, all I love in the world! How can I go? I cannot, I cannot! I should die! I know that I should!" She spoke with that frantic impatience of suffering which we should all be disposed to feel, had we no pure and holy motive given us for a calm endurance. Richard was bewildered with astonishment.

"What can you mean, Agnes?" he said; "Where would you go? Who is it that would dare to take you from me?" She was sobbing so much that she could not answer, but she pointed to the letter which lay on the ground beside



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her. He took it up and read it through. Agnes looked up at him when he had finished it, and she was perfectly appalled by the storm of passion which convulsed his features. He actually shook with anger; he crushed the letter in his hand till not a word was legible; then, trampling it under foot, he burst into the most tremendous invectives against those who had written it. Agnes trembled with terror at his violence. She almost forgot her grief in her anxiety. She rose up, and clinging to his arm, implored of him to be more composed.

"Dear Richard," she said, "it can do no good to use these terrible words against them; let us think rather what we are to do. I cannot go, I feel that I cannot; it would kill me!"

"You shall not," said Richard, turning to her almost fiercely. "I tell you, you shall not leave me; no power on earth will induce me to part from you."

"But how? how?" said Agnes. "I cannot stay when such terms have been used towards me." She covered her face with her hands as she spoke: her movement seemed to increase the fury of Richard's indignation, but a stern resolution made him now more calm; he drew away her hands, and bid her look up boldly.

"Agnes," he said, "I must take this night to consider how the matter had best be managed, but I charge you in the mean time to remain convinced of this you shall not leave me; we shall not be separated, come what may; I will never consent to part with you." His tone of decision, and his look of settled determination, gave Agnes an involuntary faith in his words, though she could not at all perceive how they were to be verified; but her womanly feeling of helplessness compelled her to rely with unquestioning trust on his promise, that he would save her from the trial she could not and would not bear.

"I will leave it all to you, then," she said, "for I am bewildered, I cannot tell what is to be done. I only know I **cannot** leave you and those dear children: Who would care for them as I have done?"

"Who indeed? and for their sakes, Agnes, we must not scruple at any measure which shall ensure to them your tender love and watchfulness. Fear nothing, then; go and sleep in peace; to-morrow we will make some arrangement by which we can defy the world to separate us."

And Agnes did rest calmly that night with Mary nestling in her arms. She felt as though she must keep guard over this precious child, even through the darkness, lest they stole her away; but she trusted with the most perfect security to Richard's assurances, nothing doubting that he could perform what he had promised.

For Richard Clayton, however, there was no rest that night; hour after hour he paced to and fro in anxious reflection as to his future conduct. He was a shrewd and a clever man, and from the first moment when he read the Hardmans' letter, his acute mind had grasped the details of the case in their full extent, and he had perceived that there remained but one alternative for himself and his sister-in-law. It was perfectly impossible that Agnes Maynard should continue to reside in his house in a position which had called forth such remarks; he would have been the first to despise her had she done so; and yet with the same impatience of sorrow which she had manifested, and which is the characteristic of all undisciplined minds, he felt that he could not, he would not, lose her. Even for his children's sake she must remain. How could he endure to see them dying for want of the assiduous care which she alone could give them? Mary, who seemed to have no power to live, save in an atmosphere of love; and the fragile infant, his son, the pride of his heart, on whom so many hopes were built, only now beginning to exhibit symptoms of increasing strength and health, which all would vanish, as he knew full well, if a cold heart and careless hand alone were to be concerned in his welfare. Moreover Richard Clayton, although of a generous temper, was essentially selfish peculiarities of disposition which are by no means incompatible. He could not bear to think of his house in disorder, cheerless, and lonely, with all the petty cares of the "menage," which are so essentially a woman's province, devolving on himself. No; Agnes **must** remain with him; but there was one only position in which it was possible for her to do so she must become his wife!

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He would never have desired to look upon Agnes in any other light than as his sister, had the unlawfulness of a union, such as that which he now projected, been sufficiently felt and understood in this country to have enabled her to remain with impunity in charge of his establishment.

This, however, is not the case, to the destruction of much domestic happiness, and of many of the holiest and best feelings of our nature. It is certain that the unjustifiable license which has been given to these marriages by the diversity of opinion on this point (so long decided by primitive and holy authority), has driven many to form the connexion from which their better feelings would otherwise have revolted.

Richard Clayton was determined to retain the society of his sister-in-law, and by this arrangement alone could he do so. Therefore, following the inflexible law of his own inclination, he resolved to accomplish it. He had no pure and lofty principle in his own soul to restrain him, and for external obstacles he cared little, for he knew that such marriages **had** taken place. But he was not aware of the fact, that they are very generally reprobated by society.

Had Richard known that the world he loved so truly, severe in the enforcement of its own code of conventional laws, has affixed a stigma to the name of him who takes for his wife the woman who has been called his sister, he would perhaps have been prevented by his worship of public opinion from taking that step which his professed Christianity in vain prohibited. He was ignorant, however, of the general feeling which is fortunately so strong on this point, and he anticipated no opposition excepting from his father. Mr. Clayton, he was certain, would view such a deed with the sternest disapprobation.

But Richard had long ceased attempting even to follow in the straight and narrow path which his father, uncompromising in his high standard of right and wrong, had traced out before him. He could not have taken one step in such a course, unassisted by that self-denial, without which it is worse than mockery to profess the Holy Christian Faith, but which was a blessing yet unknown to him. He, therefore, constantly declared that it was quite impossible for him to please his father, and made this conviction a license to himself, recklessly to brave his displeasure at all times. One measure only must be taken with regard to Mr. Clayton, the marriage must be carefully concealed from him until it was too late to prohibit it. From Agnes herself Richard expected no opposition; the idea would be startling to her at first, for he felt certain she had never entertained a thought as to the possibility of such an arrangement; but he knew that he possessed great influence over her the influence which a man of strong will must at all times possess over a weak and timid woman, unless there be in **her** that strength which is best shown forth in weakness. But most of all he relied on the all-powerful argument of his children's welfare, and her own bitter grief at the mere thought of leaving her happy home.

Richard Clayton had plausibly reasoned himself into the full belief that he was acting for the best when he went next morning to offer Agnes Maynard the position of wife in the house where she had dwelt as sister; and yet there was a feeling of conscious guilt at his heart when she came to meet him with her frank warm greeting, and addressed him by the name of brother, which, for the first time, grated so unpleasantly on his ears. The sight of his children, however, reassured him they seemed to plead his cause already. The infant lay on Agnes' knees, now showing signs of intelligence, and smiling at the sound of her sweet well-known voice; whilst Mary clung to her hand, which she kissed repeatedly. Richard looked on the group for a moment, and then spoke in an earnest and serious tone which his anxiety rendered impressive. He told her calmly and boldly the result of his deliberations. They had mutually agreed that, happen what might, they would remain together. In one manner only was this possible she must consent to marry him. The violent start, the rush of warm blood to her very forehead, the wild bewildered glance of her eyes upon his face for all this Richard was fully prepared; but he trembled for the success of his plan, when he saw that she shrunk from his side where she had placed herself so confidently, and that her breast seemed heaving with some strong emotion. It was many minutes before she could speak; and when at last her words came, seemingly from her very heart, with a heavy sigh, they were but these: "Oh, Elizabeth, Elizabeth!" It was the voice of her conscience which spoke in that brief exclamation, too much warped and deadened by indifference and false sentiment to arouse her at once with the remembrance of the immaculate holiness of the faith to which she was pledged; it seemed, with a sudden instinct, to raise up the dead before her as

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a barrier between herself and the man who sought to make her his wife.

Yet this was but a vague and weak obstacle wherewith to oppose the concentrated strength of her affection for all those dear ones round her. Had there ever been in her soul one pure and firm determination to follow in the painful steps of Him, who for her sake had not where to lay His head, how willingly would she have abandoned home and friends, and all earth's dearest joys, rather than have deviated one hair's breadth from the line of severest holiness and rectitude! But she had never known any such solemn and blessed delivering up of self at the foot of the Cross; she had made herself at all times so much the slave of her own feelings, that it could not be expected that they should fail to obtain the mastery at this the crisis of her fate.

It is needless to repeat all the arguments by which Richard induced her to give him a favourable answer. They were such as have been mentioned already, and for a mind constituted like that of Agnes Maynard certainly most powerful. Her French education had tended sadly to falsify her sense of right and wrong; and many things seemed to her pardonable, and even justifiable, that would have shocked a mind never subjected to the poisonous influence that had not been without effect on hers. It was this that enabled her to adopt so readily the shallow sophistry of Richard, who answered her, when she attempted feebly to urge the peculiar connexion which already existed between them, by reminding her that he had known her before his engagement with her sister, she would not have scrupled to have married him then, and why should she do so now? Their connexion was but in name. Would she, for the sake of a name a shadow, sacrifice his happiness and her own the life of those dear children? He took the little hands of his innocent Mary and folded them in his own that she might plead for him, and Agnes yielded. Richard Clayton effected his purpose his sister-in-law agreed to become his wife.

### CHAPTER VII.

**WHEN** the matter was fairly decided, Agnes readily consented to the wish of her future husband, that she would leave all the minor details entirely to him, and not even question him as to his arrangements till they could be put into execution; he was to take all measures requisite with Mr. Hardman and Mr. Clayton; on her he enjoined only the most profound secrecy.

During the interval which followed, Agnes seemed desirous to drive the whole affair from her thoughts altogether. She appeared to be animated with a forced and unnatural gaiety; laughed and talked far more than usual; and would not allow the children to quit her for a moment. Richard occupied himself so incessantly with the necessary and somewhat difficult preparations, that he excluded all other thoughts; but the truth was, that neither of them was so calm inwardly as they sought to appear to one another. Without communicating their feelings to each other, they simul- taneously avoided the church, for they could not endure to pass the grave of Elizabeth.

No answer was sent to Mr. Hardman's letter, and it was speedily followed by another full of the most bitter indignation against Agnes. He concluded by saying, that if she did not appear at his house in London within a given time, he would himself come in search of her to B .

"We shall pass him on the road," said Richard scornfully, as he handed the letter to Agnes; "we must be married in London."

"Not here?" asked Agnes, in a tremulous voice. "Here!" replied Richard, angrily; "what are you thinking of? how is it possible? do you suppose my father, or Mr. Lambert, would ever consent?" Agnes felt a cold shiver pass through her frame, she scarce knew why, but she made no answer.

Richard had found that it was more easy to decide upon such a step than to put it in execution; there were several difficulties to be overcome. He had to investigate into the state of the law respecting marriages of this nature; and

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he found, although not at that period declared null and void, as they have since been by the passing of the Act to that effect in 1835, they were even then **voidable**, and capable of being set aside altogether. This could only be done, however, if an action was brought against them during the life-time of both parties, and Richard's fears were quieted at once when he discovered that it was so, as he did not conceive it possible that any one could ever find it his interest to attempt such a measure.

Another obstacle seemed to him more serious, which was the possibility that no clergyman would consent to perform the ceremony. A little reflection, however, soon overcame this difficulty. It was very easy to go to London, where the parish priest of some populous district, in which the names of Richard Clayton and Agnes Maynard were quite unknown, would never think of asking if any peculiar connexion subsisted between them.

Richard wrote to a lady, a cousin of his own, who resided in London, whose theory it was, that all duties which interfered with inclination were overmuch righteousness; and having communicated to her the state of the case, begged of her to receive Agnes into her house during the three weeks which must be given to the publishing of the banns. He received an answer complying with his request and promising secrecy. He then told his father that he was going to take Agnes to London for a few weeks to visit a friend, and the next day they left the Mount together.

It was a cold gloomy morning on which they commenced their journey. Agnes was deadly pale: she shivered violently, and averted her head as they passed the churchyard. Richard asked, with considerable irritation, what was the reason of the tears that filled her eyes? and she answered, that she grieved to leave the children it was the first time she had quitted them. "Well, now you will be with them always after this; so pray let me see you gay and happy, Agnes. You could not have seemed more dismal, if I had been taking you to Mr. Hardman's." This allusion had the effect he desired: her face brightened immediately. She began to laugh merrily at the idea that her guardian was probably leaving London that day in search of her; and Richard had no further reason to complain of her sadness, although her gaiety was somewhat forced.

During the three weeks which followed their arrival in London, Richard took care, with the willing assistance of his cousin, that Agnes should be continually occupied with some amusement, which left her no time for thought. She was thankful, indeed, to be spared all reflection; for, in spite of herself, there was a vague and painful feeling which she could not define, that haunted her at all times when Richard alluded to their marriage. Even the night before it took place, the night that surely, in all similar cases, should be devoted to most earnest prayer for grace to perform the solemn vows about to be taken, was spent by Agnes Maynard at the theatre; and when she awoke next morning, tired and depressed, she could scarce believe that this was indeed her wedding-day. Her wedding-day! How differently had she pictured it to herself in her bright visions years ago! How often had she fancied herself going forth an honoured bride, amid warm congratulations and friendly wishes, to become a happy wife in face of all the world! If ever a day in her whole life was to be bright and joyous, she had thought it should be this, when, by a most holy ordinance, she was to receive the promise of unchanging affection from one who was to be her protector and guide even to her life's end; and to herself was to be given the blessed task of smoothing for him the rugged path of life, and devoting herself to him as tender friend and faithful wife. And now the day was come; but how could she feel glad or thankful for it, when she was going forth stealthily as if about to do some evil deed to unite herself to one whom she well knew many would say ought never to have been her husband! Instead of rejoicings and festivities to celebrate her marriage, concealment and deception were necessary, before it could be effected at all. The numerous friends sympathising in her happiness were to be replaced by two witnesses whose services were remunerated; and this hour, so momentous and agitating for her, must be met alone and unsupported.

There was a heavy weight at the heart of Agnes Maynard, as she looked out and saw the one single carriage that stood at the door, to convey herself and her future husband to the church. Heaven did not smile upon her; for a dull, heavy rain was pouring from the thick black clouds; and she remembered, with the painfully-superstitious feeling which at times assails us all, the old proverb, that a weeping sky forebodes a weeping bride.

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Richard's cousin accompanied them; but, as she was a lady profoundly devoted to her own comfort, it was not without considerable difficulty that he could induce her to leave the house in such weather; and she did not scruple to manifest her discontent during the whole of their cheerless drive, shivering and complaining of the cold, without a thought for poor Agnes, who sat crouching in the corner, pale as death. When they reached the church, the lady ensconced herself in a pew, and, desiring them to call her when they were ready to return, left them to proceed alone towards the altar. Agnes trembled so violently, that she could scarcely walk; and Richard rebuked her somewhat harshly, for being, as he said, absurdly nervous. They had been on too intimate terms during their former intercourse to admit of his treating her with that peculiar homage which is generally offered to a young bride at such an hour; and the angry words that at another time would have affected her but little, seemed cruel to Agnes, as she ascended the altar-steps. They stood side by side: the clergyman hurried over a duty which the cold and comfortless aspect of all around rendered by no means pleasant. They took those solemn vows whereby two human beings are constituted guardians of one another's happiness, and each is provided with a friend whom neither time nor change, sickness nor sorrow, shall ever alienate; and at that moment, when surely no other thought should have been in their hearts, save the imploring of a blessing on one another's heads, the blessing which henceforward they would seek to embody in every action of their lives, why was it that before the eyes of Richard Clayton and Agnes Maynard there seemed to pass the form of Elizabeth, turning away from them the wan pale face, as she turned it at the last hour when they would have given her their farewell kiss?

The ceremony was over the cold, unfelt blessing was uttered by the lips of the stranger, who had never seen them before, and cared never to see them again and it was not without an involuntary shudder that they heard themselves pronounced man and wife in the very same words which when spoken for Richard and Elizabeth had constituted them brother and sister!

They took leave of their cousin at the door of the church, and proceeded to a village on the sea-shore, where they remained for some little time before they returned to the Mount to take up their residence once more in the home where they had dwelt together under the plea of a relationship of so very different a nature.

### CHAPTER VIII.

**RICHARD CLAYTON** had written to announce his marriage to his father and also to his household; and although it was with considerable trepidation that he awaited a meeting with the former, it never occurred to him to anticipate any manifestation of feeling on the part of those who formed his establishment. He never bestowed a thought on persons in that inferior station, and certainly did not imagine them to be capable of forming an opinion on such a matter as that now in question. But it is a peculiarity of the lower classes which must have been remarked by many, that they display a singular delicacy of feeling in their reverence for the dead. They seem to consider it a holy duty to be most scrupulous in all things pertaining to the honour of those helpless ones departed. And though Richard's servants could not understand how far Agnes had sinned against all conventional laws by remaining in the house, **not of her brother-in-law** (for to that no right-minded person should have objected), **but of a man whom she thought it possible to marry**, they could yet feel the instinctive revolting of conscience against a union between those two, for death had dissolved the tie between Richard and Elizabeth in one sense only **it had not dissolved the relationship which that tie had produced** Agnes was still sister to her who mouldered in the dust Richard was still one flesh with her the fraternity between them remained unbroken as between children of the same parents; the humble servants felt these things, though they could not have expressed them, and their natural indignation and repugnance at the step which their master had taken were fostered to the uttermost by the assiduous efforts of Mrs. Sharp.

This lady, under pretence of visiting the little Mary, had come to the Mount every day since the departure of Richard and Agnes, in order to glean what information she could respecting their mysterious journey, which she could not help connecting with her own visit to Mr. and Mrs. Hardman, and the letter which she knew they had written in consequence. She was herself under the full belief that Agnes had returned to her guardian's protection;

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and when she heard of their marriage, she was, to do her justice, sincerely and deeply shocked. In fact, no person, even worldly minded and unrefined as Mrs. Sharp was, could fail to be otherwise on first hearing of a union of that description, unless their mind had received a bias to a contrary opinion from the sophistical arguments of those who fear not to show a practical contempt of God's laws and ordinances; and it seemed to her a very horrible thing that Richard should hold in such light esteem the sacred tie which had united him to Elizabeth, that he thus openly set at nought the indissoluble bonds with which it had bound him as brother to her sister. Soon, however, when the first feelings of astonishment and indignation had subsided, it was with no small delight that Mrs. Sharp found she had now a fair and most legitimate ground for inveighing against Agnes in the strongest terms; and she so worked on the minds of Richard's servants, already sufficiently excited on the subject, that they received the newly-married couple on their arrival with the most cold and sullen looks; some of them, full of that superstitious dread of a judgment on those who do such deeds (which is not altogether a superstition), did not even delay an hour informing their master that they would not remain in his service. This was a chilling reception for the unhonoured bride; but a sharper pang awaited her. Mary had been left entirely to the care of the servants, and to the tender mercies of Mrs. Sharp, and they had not failed to fill her young mind with many painful ideas respecting her father and aunt, which, with all the strength and power of early impressions, were destined to influence her feelings towards them during the remainder of her life. No attempt is made at the age of this innocent little being to hide what passes in the mind, and they received their first bitter lesson as to the manner in which both God and man were to view this deed, from the pure lips of the child they loved so well.

Richard was furiously angry, Agnes miserable, and their first evening at home was a very sad one.

The next morning, Richard wrote a note to Mr. Clayton, requesting to know when he could see him. It was not without a pang that they felt such a measure to be necessary. The answer was delayed some hours; it came at last, merely a verbal message, naming an hour on the following day, when Mr. Clayton would receive them. They looked forward with the most painful anxiety to the interview. The profound affection which both felt almost equally for him, was mingled with a respect amounting to awe; for it does not require a mind of a high order to feel the influence of superior holiness.

At the appointed hour they walked together to the vicarage. They had to cross the church-yard, which was separated from the garden only by an invisible fence; there was a grave laid there, which they passed with hurried steps and averted head; the church stood so near the house, that it seemed placed almost within the grounds, and the east window was close to that of the drawing-room.

It was impossible at the vicarage of B to be indifferent to the proximity of that holy and beautiful house, with its quiet grass-grown tombs, telling of the body sown in dishonour and weakness, and its cross, giving a hope of that which is raised in glory and power. It was a blessed thing when some earthly sorrow was at work, and many a hidden pang smote through the soul, to be able at once to lift the eyes to that fair church and think of the sure rest that remaineth for the people of God: but these two, as they sat waiting in the drawing-room of the vicarage, turned away their eyes from the sight.

It was some time before Mr. Clayton appeared. Agnes had buried her face in her hands. Richard walked moodily to and fro. He entered at last. Their hearts sunk within them at sight of him who for their sakes had spent the last three days in fasting and prayer. He was not stern, but grave and calm; his face had the traces of bitter suffering, but it wore also an expression of firm determination, which they knew resulted from the triumph of duty over natural affection.

They all seemed simultaneously to feel that the customary expressions of welcome and greeting would be a bitter mockery, and for a few minutes no one spoke. The tears which Agnes had shed abundantly over the estrangement of the little Mary were dried up now by the burning blush that crimsoned her face when she found herself standing before that grey-haired old man, who had so struggled after a rigid and unshrinking holiness, that his life and thoughts were pure as those of an innocent child. Richard seemed endeavouring to conceal his fierce

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uneasiness, his restless angry suffering. Mr. Clayton looked from the one to the other, and became much agitated; he turned to the window to hide his emotion; the sight probably of the church, at whose altar he ministered as priest, restored to him his courage and his strength. He came and stood before them severe and unmoved.

"It is best we should understand each other," he said, addressing his son. "Richard, you have taken a step which you were perfectly aware could only meet with the most severe and unqualified disapprobation from me; but you will doubtless say that you have long since cast off the trammels of paternal authority that you are no longer of an age when it is necessary for you to be influenced by my opinions, or to consult my wishes that we stand together as man with man, the one as likely to be right in his ideas as the other, each holding his own views in independence, acting by his own standard of right and wrong. Be this as it may, certain it is that you stand on your own responsibility so far as regards the ordering of your life in the sight of God. I have not the power, because I am your earthly father, of compelling you to serve your Father which is in heaven. As your parent, then, I profess no authority to condemn the deed which you have done; but on far higher ground I do most solemnly condemn it, even as a priest of the Most High! Let me set aside, then, all other relationship save that of a clergyman and his parishioner; as such, I must tell you plainly, that the union you have contracted is contrary to the will of God, to the authority of the Church, and to the law of the land; it is unhallowed, it must be unblest. Your purpose in coming here to-day is to request that I, a minister of Christ, will sanction the marriage of a man with a woman who is virtually his sister. You are aware that my first and highest duty is to my flock; I am set before them not as a teacher only, but as an example, in humblest imitation of Him whose servant I am, and who was Teacher and Example to the world. You know that I have always most strongly prohibited amongst them such marriages as that which you have contracted. I have turned away persons so connected from the very steps of the altar where they came to be united. I have spoken against them from the pulpit. I have admonished my people on the subject in their own houses. I have openly refused to sanction parties joined in such unlawful unions, even though already married when they came into my parish. And now, Richard, I ask it of yourself, do you think it possible for me, to whom is committed authority in the Church of God, without derogating fearfully from my holy calling, to countenance the man who has made such a marriage, although that man is my son?"

"You need not have said all this, to prove to me what you mean to do," exclaimed Richard, taking refuge from the painful feelings that oppressed him, in a burst of anger; "I have guessed it from the first. You mean that you will cast us off, at least that you will not receive us, or come to visit us."

"I do mean it," said Mr. Clayton, calmly, though sadly; "since by no other means can I prove to my flock how profoundly I disapprove of your act, now, alas! so irrevocable."

"What an existence!" said Richard, rising and pacing the room in violent agitation; "father and son living within a few hundred yards of each other on such terms as these! You will bear it calmly, I doubt not; but to me it will be insupportable."

"Richard," said Mr. Clayton, his voice trembling with emotion, "I did not expect that you would do me justice in believing with what bitter anguish to myself I have taken this resolution respecting you; but I have at least an opportunity of showing you that, however rigidly I must adhere to my most painful duty, I have not been without consideration for your feelings. I am quite aware how galling it would be to you to have your residence henceforward so near to mine. I know, also, that it would be very injurious to your prospects in life, were you to quit this place, on many accounts. I have, therefore, determined on leaving B myself, at the same time openly informing my flock of the reason which induces me to do so. A clergyman with whom I am acquainted, in Kent, has long been desirous of holding this living. I have effected an exchange with him: in a week he comes to this house, and I leave it for ever."

"Impossible it cannot be!" exclaimed Richard and Agnes both at once. "Oh no!" continued the latter, horror-stricken at finding that they were to be the means of driving the old man from his sweet and peaceful home; "you must not go, you cannot leave a place you have loved so well."

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"I love **him** more than all upon this earth," said Mr. Clayton, pointing to his son; "and yet I leave him for conscience sake. Therefore the love of this home shall not detain me, though you said truly that it has been very dear to me." He looked towards the church as he spoke, with quivering lips, and then continued, after a moment's silence, "I may still believe and hope that the unnumbered prayers I have uttered within these sacred walls for him have not all been said in vain. Thank Heaven, I need not scruple to come to you, were you in sickness or in sorrow: suffering casts down all barriers for the servant of Him who in all our afflictions was afflicted. Meantime, do not think to change my resolution in any way; there is but one path opened for me in this, as in all other earthly trials the path of duty and that alone will I follow."

Agnes turned away, weeping bitterly. Richard flung himself into a chair, and hid his face on his arm. There was a painful silence for a few minutes, till Mr. Clayton spoke again.

"I have yet a painful task to perform," he said; "I have to request a favour of you both, which you can only grant with a great sacrifice to yourselves, but which I might, perhaps, claim as a right."

"We will refuse you nothing," said Richard, in a voice hoarse from agitation; "you may ask what you will of us."

"Oh yes," exclaimed Agnes, "give us the means of making some sacrifice for you who have made such an one for us!"

They were rewarded for these words by the look of tenderness which Mr. Clayton cast upon them both; but he went on:

"Mary Clayton is my god-child," he said; "I am responsible for her spiritual welfare, and, as her grandfather, deeply interested also in her temporal concerns. Agnes, it grieves me to utter so painful a truth, but I am compelled to tell you that I must now consider you as wholly unfit to have the charge of this child, and that it would be highly injurious to her interests, both earthly and eternal, were she to remain with you. Her prospects in this world would be seriously affected by it. It is perfectly clear to me that you have never either of you viewed the matter in this light, that you are altogether unaware how severely your conduct will be denounced in society. Would that you had known it! it might have deterred you from the step you have taken; but at least this innocent child must not suffer. You, Agnes, have lived for two years in the house of the man whom you have now thought fit to marry; you could only do so, you only obtained my sanction for so doing, on the ground that he was your **brother**. Had you continued to consider him as such, not the faintest breath of slander could have reached your name, even though such a letter as that of Mr. Hardman compelled you to leave your home. But you have not done so. Since you have now married him, it is impossible that you can ever have looked upon him as your brother, at least so must the world conclude. If you cast aside the relationship, they must do so also, nay, Heaven forbid it should now be supposed to exist!" he added, with a slight shudder, as his eye fell on Agnes' wedding-ring. "I leave you, therefore, to draw your own conclusion as to the opinion that will be formed of your conduct, in residing for so long a period alone with the person to whom you are now united; and from that you may also clearly perceive what a fatal influence it might have on Mary's whole existence, that she should be educated by you."

"Do you really mean," interrupted Richard, "that our marriage will be so strongly disapproved of by society in general, by any, in fact, excepting, perhaps, a few clergymen like yourself?"

"I fear you will not have to ask me that question a month or two hence," replied Mr. Clayton. "I feel certain you will have but too many palpable proofs of the truth of my words. However fearfully corrupt may be the internal machinery of society, they yet have outwardly a code of laws, against which they allow none to rebel with impunity."



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It was evident that this idea was as new as it was bitter to Richard. He saw at once, that if his marriage was a sin against the world's rule of propriety, he might expect to be visited with no light punishment. He literally groaned as he thought of what he had done, and of what was to come. The union he had contracted, suddenly appeared before him in the light of an irretrievable mistake. Agnes saw what was passing in his mind; and no words can describe how her heart died within her.

"And now," said Mr. Clayton, "I have shown you why, in a worldly point of view, it is necessary that Mary should not remain with you. I have myself far higher motives for requiring of you that she should be entrusted to my own care. I dare not, Agnes, consider you fit, at least at present, to guide an immortal soul in that most difficult and painful course of bitter self-denial which alone can bring us to the feet of the Crucified. In the most important occasion of your life, you have preferred your own will to the will of God. You have thrown off the yoke of the Saviour, who bade you serve Him in suffering. You have trampled under foot the cross which He presented before you, in the heavy trial laid upon you, to quit all most dear on earth, rather than remain with them by means of an unhallowed alliance. You will say you did not know that the course you took was so wrong; **how** wrong it was, I believe, in truth, you did not dream; but that you had more than misgivings on the subject, is sufficiently proved by the fact that you concealed it from me. Had you felt but one conscientious earnest desire to do what was right, at the expense of any amount of pain to yourself; you would have consulted Mr. Lambert, or myself, and you know that we would have prohibited your doing as you have done. You will say you did it for the sake of Richard's children, but I ask by what right you did evil that good might come? How did you dare to doubt, that He who carries the lambs in his bosom would have cared for these little ones? But I spare you; only I must repeat and enforce my request, that you submit to a separation from Mary, and that you entrust her entirely to my care. I demand this sacrifice of you. My sister, Mrs. Harewood, has consented to come and reside with me in order to take charge of her; you need have no fear for the dear child's welfare." He paused waiting for a reply. Richard rose instantly.

"Agnes, you must not dream of hesitating one instant; he shall have the child. I would rather never see her again, than that my innocent daughter should suffer by any imprudence of yours or mine," he added more gently, as he saw her start with the pang his words had caused. "It is better clearly that Mary should go to her grandfather," continued Richard, bitterly; "we have had a specimen these last two days as to the manner in which the mind of a child may be worked upon; I have no doubt that in a very little time we should find the sacrifice far less severe than it seems to us at present; her health is besides well established now it was for my little son that I was chiefly desirous to secure your care; there is, therefore, no reason why I should scruple to give my free and full consent, and I wish that the matter should be settled at once." And it was so decided.

Agnes offered no opposition, she was utterly bewildered and overwhelmed with all that had passed, she did not even remind him of what rose so painfully to her own mind at the moment, that by giving up Mary, however advisable such a measure might be, they were rendering altogether null the one potent argument which had principally induced them to marry, namely, the absolute necessity of the children being left to her care! She said nothing of this, although it proved to her how weak and sophistical had been the reasoning with which they had quieted their consciences, for she felt crushed to the very earth with the painful thoughts that were crowding on her. The whole affair had been shown to her in a new and terrible light; she had acted thoughtlessly, recklessly; and now all was most different from what she had expected, her heart was full of a bitter dread for the consequences, enduring even to her life's end, of the deed she had done. She could not collect her ideas, or bring her mind thoroughly to understand her position; she had a sort of feeling as though she had been hardly dealt with; she had always anticipated a happy and an honoured life as a kind of right; gay and beautiful as she had ever been, she had looked upon admiration and affection as her due; and now, she scarce knew how, she found herself in a situation where it would seem that not only trial, but disgrace was to be her portion.

Agnes was too much absorbed with a miser-able foreboding of future suffering to herself, to find any difficulty in submitting to her husband's decision that Mary should be taken from her; and when the matter was thus finally arranged, Richard Clayton and his wife left the Vicarage to enter it no more.

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Mr. Clayton dismissed them with one parting injunction, addressed chiefly to Agnes. He implored them if sorrow or suffering came upon them, more especially if penitence came as he prayed it might to apply at once to Mr. Lambert, and to open their griefs to him; doubtless the Curate would not countenance them now, but in their distress he would be a valuable and faithful friend. They saw that the old man murmured a blessing as they passed him, but Richard was in no humour to feel softened by it: he drew Agnes almost roughly from the room, and they quitted the house that had been as a home to them, with downcast eyes and sorrowful hearts.

Agnes Clayton had never been accustomed, as we have said before, to control her feelings. She did not remember, that there is a profound selfishness in allowing those around us to be saddened with the aspect of our suffering; there is enough of sorrow in this world without our adding to it by constraining others to feel for us a painful sympathy. We have a Friend most merciful, to whom we may pour out the bitterness of our soul; but let us ever walk among men with calm face and serene aspect, whatever may be our internal anguish, lest haply we cast a shadow over the sunshine which He hath given them. She had no thought for this; as soon as they had entered their own house, she went and flung herself upon a sofa, and burst into a passion of tears. It could not be an agreeable sight for Richard to see her there; her face disfigured with weeping, her frame convulsed with sobs. He had followed her into the room, in the hope that her cheerful voice and loving eyes might have dispelled the gloom that hung upon him; when he saw how she thought only of indulging her grief he turned abruptly and went out. Agnes loved him well and truly, but she had not for him that noble affection which would have made her rather die of her inward agony than let him suffer by it.

Richard took a long walk, but solitude was unsupportable to him, and he returned towards evening, trusting to find his house restored to cheerfulness and comfort. Agnes still lay in the same position; her tangled hair falling over her face stained with tears, and for the time devoid of beauty. The room was dark and cold, the whole establishment in confusion. Richard was violent in temper, and he was not a man to submit easily to annoyance or vexation. He walked up to Agnes, and taking her angrily by the arm, he forced her to raise herself up. She trembled when she saw the expression of his countenance, and still more when he spoke, his voice was so stern and harsh.

"Agnes," he said, "let me beg of you to tell me once for all, whether you intend to render my life insupportable by this absurd and intolerable conduct? Instead of the gaiety and cheerfulness which made you attractive to me formerly, do you mean henceforward to regale me with scenes such as these, tears and ill humour, discomfort and confusion throughout the house?"

Agnes felt her face crimson at these words, with a feeling of something very like anger.

"Have I nothing to make me sorrowful?" she asked, reproachfully.

"Not half so much as I have, at all events," replied Richard; "but that is not the question. I wish to tell you most plainly that I will not submit for one hour to have a dismal companion at my side, complaining and groaning. I will give you your choice. You have your room, where you may go and weep and pine as much as you please, but there you must stay. You shall either appear before me with a look of cheerfulness at all times on your face, or else you shall not come into my presence at all. In the one case, I shall have you merry and bright as you were before; in the other, I may try to forget your existence so make your choice."

Agnes was completely subdued. She fancied that Richard was cruel to her, but still he was her husband, and she loved him. It was a mockery to say that he gave her any choice; she had no alternative; she could not go and shut herself up from him; she must submit to wear ever a smile as gay as her heart was sad. It was with a dreary sense of desolation that she thought how she must drive back all her feelings within her own breast, and never hope for the sympathy which, with her naturally frank disposition, she would so earnestly have sought; but her womanly powers of endurance came to her assistance. She scarce knew with what a strength of determination she at that moment resolved, henceforward, to bear all in silence. She was driven to it, partly by pride, partly by a helpless

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feeling of submission. She looked up, she dashed the tears from her eyes, and said calmly:

"I will endeavour to please you; you need not be afraid; I will look sad no more." She said this with a bitter conviction of his unkindness with a sullen morbid feeling rankling at her heart; and Richard understood, readily enough, what was passing in her mind, but from that hour she obeyed him so implicitly to the letter, that it was impossible for him to find fault with the thoughts which he could only guess to be in her heart; and, as a natural result, a sort of indefinite estrangement rose up between them. So commenced the married life of Elizabeth's husband and sister.

### CHAPTER IX.

**MR. CLAYTON** left B the following week, and Mr. Lambert duly communicated to all the parishioners the reasons which had induced him so to do. The event made a most powerful impression on them all. Their Vicar could not have taken any step which could have brought more strongly before them his uncompromising submission to the call of duty whenever it demanded the surrender of his own will, and also his deep disapprobation of that act of his son's which he was compelled thus openly to reprobate but he was greatly beloved. His departure was bitterly lamented, and a strong feeling against Richard and Agnes soon pervaded the village. What Mr. Clayton condemned, his people felt must be very wrong, and the marriage was loudly spoken against by all.

Never had Mr. Sharp enjoyed a season of such exquisite repose as that which followed the departure of the Vicar from B. This event would alone, at any time, have been sufficient to have engrossed the mind of his energetic wife, and provided her with a fund of matter whereon to exercise her conversational powers; but the circumstances attending it, the unlawful marriage, and the indignation which was felt against Richard and Agnes, were indeed to her sources of absorbing delight and occupation, such as she had seldom known. With ineffable satisfaction her husband saw her sally forth every morning, without having even remembered to take that peculiar cognizance of his own proceedings for the day, which often inspired him with a wild and frantic desire to embark forthwith for New Zealand, or to fly and endeavour to make a fortune in Kamtschatka. Mr. Sharp might do as he pleased now; he might have written a letter every day to his client without her looking over his shoulder, and he might have drawn up ever so many marriage contracts without her even asking who the parties were. Mrs. Sharp was far too busy to think of him at all; and not only she ceased for the time to watch over his affairs, but she resigned all thought of attending to his comforts. This was, however, one of the conditions of his unwonted peace to which that greatly persecuted gentleman was too happy to agree, and no one interfered with the excited lady in the pursuit of her present delightful occupation.

What in truth could be more charming than to go from house to house, informing every one that, after the most reprehensible conduct of Agnes, it would be impossible to visit her, or to acknowledge her acquaintance? Agnes! the haughty and exclusive person, who had refused to call upon **her**! Mrs. Sharp had such really substantial grounds for all she said, that she was listened to with more attention than she usually met with.

There was one painful idea, which had long been floating in the minds of those acquainted with the circumstances, which Mrs. Sharp now assisted in ripening into certainty it was the belief that Elizabeth's melancholy death had been occasioned by her jealousy of her husband and sister. Such being the case, nothing certainly could seem more revolting than the whole conduct of Agnes and Richard; and even the most charitable of their neighbours could not but think that they were not only devoid of all principle, but heartless and indelicate to the last degree, in thus speedily reaping the fruits of her death in their unblest union, and returning, without remorse or fear, to the very home where she had dwelt whom they had sent to her grave by so cruel a means. Mrs. Sharp loved to expatiate on these points with a warm enthusiasm, but she found that her eloquence was scarcely required to heighten the universal indignation. And then she would rush out to waylay Mr. Lambert at every corner, and detain him for a whole half hour, while she condoled with him on having so much to do since Mr.

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Clayton's departure, or comforted him by assuring him that he might do what he would, but that he never could make up to the people for their good old Vicar. He was far too young, so it was no fault of his; but she had no doubt he would kill himself in trying, for he looked very ill, and she did not think he had long to live; but if he did die, they would at least know at whose door to lay his death. It was Richard Clayton who would be guilty of it, as he had sent away his father, besides all the other mischief he had done.

At first Richard and Agnes were scarcely aware of the universal condemnation of their union. They had become more cheerful, in the hope that their father had exaggerated the extent to which they would be lowered in the opinion of the world; but they soon found that he had spoken but too truly; his own proceedings with regard to them had rendered it necessary for all persons of any weight in the society of the neighbourhood to adopt a marked line of conduct in the matter; and their decision was soon made. They were by birth and education entitled to delicacy of feeling; and Mr. Clayton had not been for so many years their pastor without instilling into their minds somewhat of his purity and strictness of principle. They determined that the brother and sister-in-law, now man and wife, were not to be visited or received; and the few influenced the many: it became the fashion to slight them as it had been the fashion to court them, and they were cut off from all society, except of such persons as they did not care to associate with. This trial, which to some minds would have been a light evil, was to them a most serious and grievous distress; it galled the proud spirit of Richard; it wounded the morbid sensibility of Agnes; it deprived them both of the excitement and amusement, without which they felt as though they could not exist. Richard became irritable and fretful; his wife was weighed down by a heavy despondency which she sought to hide under a forced unnatural gaiety.

After a time Agnes determined to enliven her dreary hours at least by resuming her visits in the village. Her mind had been so much preoccupied for some time past that she had neglected her poorer friends completely; but she had always been beloved and respected amongst them. She felt that now, humble as they were, even their homage and attention would be soothing to her.

On a beautiful morning in the early spring, she went out into the village, nothing doubting that she would be received as she had always been; for she and her husband had never thought of inquiring into the opinion of their humbler neighbours respecting their conduct. The first person she went to visit, was old Martha Hyans, who, with her husband, were parishioners of long standing in the village of B. This good old couple exhibited in their lives a practical refutation of the saying, that love cannot exist in a cottage, more especially if it be allied to poverty. The little hut where they dwelt had been decked, fifty years before, for their wedding-day; and the love that bound them, now wrinkled and decrepit as they were, was fresh and pure as in their prime of youth and joy. They had gone through many trials together in that narrow space, but never had an unkind word passed the lips of either. Poor Elizabeth had often felt that she might have learnt a valuable lesson from old Martha's patient and tried affection; and now, of this good old woman's many trials, it seemed to her that one of the greatest was Mr. Clayton's departure. He had baptized her children, and laid more than one of them in their graves. She had verily trusted that he should have closed her eyes also. But he was gone; and she knew perfectly well that he had good reasons for going. She never doubted that everything he did was right at all times; but in this instance, simple and humble as she was, her own opinion and feelings perfectly coincided with his. Her childlike, unbiassed mind revolted against the union of Richard and his wife's sister.

Agnes perceived the change in the old woman's feelings towards her, the moment she entered the house. Martha was civil; but she manifested not the slightest pleasure on seeing her. She did not ask her advice, or detail her grievances, and positively declined accepting various little comforts which Agnes proposed to send her. The only words she spoke were, to inquire after the children, in a tone dearly full of profound commiseration for the little ones. She shook her head when Agnes volunteered the information that Richard was well, as though she thought he had no right to be so; and then sat sighing and lifting up her eyes in the most eloquent manner. Agnes made one last attempt to induce her to speak, by quoting the Litany, which Martha was in the habit of repeating from beginning to end, for the edification of her visitors; but even this tempting bait had no allurements to-day. She remained unmoved; and Agnes angrily left the house, with the determination never to enter it again. She could

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not, however, yet believe it possible that she was exiled from the society of the village, as well as that of the higher classes. She attributed Martha's conduct merely to her peculiar attachment for Mr. Clayton, and trusted to find matters very different in the other cottages where she was going.

Her next visit was to Mrs. Savage, the hard-featured, large-handed Mrs. Savage, who was singularly unfortunate in appearance (to the annoyance of all lovers of the picturesque, as her little dwelling was beyond measure charming and romantic), and who appeared for the last twenty years to have been engaged in the care of a huge baby, who never grew, and never became a day older, a phenomenon which was to be accounted for by the fact that she was constantly supplied with a succession of grandchildren, who, after a certain troublesome age, were removed, to be replaced with another just entering on it.

In the house of this good woman poor Agnes fared much worse than with Martha. Mrs. Savage did not scruple to tell her openly all she thought and felt, and all that was thought and felt by her neighbours, on the subject of Richard's second marriage; and Agnes brought the visit speedily to a conclusion, by hurrying out to hide the indignant tears that rose to her eyes as she listened.

She walked along the road towards The Mount, her heart swelling within her, and as she passed on she perceived Thomas, the clerk and schoolmaster, the most respectful and estimable of men, coming towards her. Instead of approaching to give her all the details of the progress of her class or of the choir, he passed on the other side with merely a grave salutation, which sufficiently proved to her that henceforward the doors of the school were closed against her.

She had to pass yet another cottage before reaching home; it was one of the humblest in B , and was the abode of a poor imbecile creature, known in the village by the name of Jack, who lived in it with his old mother. He was perfectly harmless in his idiotcy, and was allowed to wander about at will, even within the grounds of The Mount. It was in fact his favourite resort, as Agnes took a particular interest in him, and always treated him with the utmost kindness. She used to bring him his food herself, that she might teach him to recognise her; and now when he saw her, he never failed to greet her with his wild laugh of discordant glee. Jack was seated at the door of his house as she approached, and starting up, he ran to meet her with a shout of delight. She stopped to speak to him, and he stood joyfully before her, clapping his hands, and muttering in his own senseless language his unintelligible expressions of pleasure.

Poor Jack was little aware of the pang which he caused to Agnes at that moment, for there was in truth a most bitter sting in the thought that his was the first smile of kindness and the first words of welcome which had been bestowed upon **her** that day, who formerly had been so warmly received by all. No sterner lesson could have been given to her than this one fact, that she had been shunned and scorned as one who had done an unholy deed, by all save this poor idiot, to whom it had pleased Heaven to deny the knowledge of right and wrong!

The bitter experience of this day was quite enough. Agnes now understood what was in fact the truth, that the poor people of the village had lost all respect for her, and that consequently her influence amongst them was gone for ever. The casualties of birth and education are by no means sufficient to command the esteem of the lower orders. They are keen and penetrating judges as to what is really estimable in the character of their superiors, and thoroughly alive to any inconsistency in their precepts and practice. The villagers of B thought that Agnes had greatly erred, and therefore it would have been in vain for her to have talked to them of the errors of their own ways; whilst some of the younger girls possibly found no small excuse for levity in their conduct from the fact, that even the lady at The Mount had thought the Vicar's notions on the subject of marriage so very strict, that she had distinctly acted against them. Agnes felt all this, and though perhaps in her secret heart she acknowledged its justice, it was yet with a proud indignation that she determined never again to visit a single person in the village.

The annoyance which all these circumstances caused to Richard and his wife is not to be told. On the fiery temper and undisciplined mind of the former especially, the effect was most grievous. He now found himself deprived of

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all the amusement which hunting and similar occupations had afforded him, for he was far too proud ever to place himself voluntarily in the society of those who would no longer admit him to their houses. Wounded to the uttermost by the treatment he had met with, he shut himself up entirely in his own house, and gave way to a sullen, discontented state of mind, which was most distressing to all around him. A man without employment is always a miserable individual, and he had no intellectual resources. He betook himself to amusements which were frivolous and useless, if not pernicious; and much of his time, which now hung so heavily on his hands, was spent in exercising a most harassing control over his household. He occupied himself with all the little petty arrangements and minor details on which it was painful to see the strong mind of a man engaged; and it almost seemed as though he sought to compensate himself for the humiliations he met with in the world, by his overbearing treatment of his wife and servants.

In the midst of all this misery, for it was misery both to Agnes and Richard, though no positive misfortune had as yet befallen them, a gleam of sunshine came to revive their hearts in the birth of a son, an event which soon banished all their regrets for the absence of Mary, who had long since been removed from her father's house, to enter it no more for years.

On the other poor infant, the son of Elizabeth, Agnes had in truth bestowed the utmost care and attention ever since her marriage. It had been chiefly on his account that they had taken this step, which in all other respects had proved so unfortunate; and it seemed to her an imperative duty to render it productive of good results to this child at least. With unremitting tenderness she had therefore watched over him; all the careful affection which Richard had trusted she would bestow upon his son, and which he had married her partly to ensure, she did, indeed, give to the infant, whose health had greatly improved; and now, as though to show how very vainly (as well as sinfully) we would seek to interfere with the Providence of God, by doing evil that good may come, and what madness it is to follow any other course save that of rigid duty, (leaving the result submissively in His hands,) the little child was suddenly taken from them. There had been no neglect, no illness even to cause them any apprehension; but unexpectedly one night he was seized with convulsions, and died whilst they stood helpless beside him. With a brief struggle his brief life closed. Pure and innocent he went with his baptismal cross yet shining on his brow, to join his brethren who had borne theirs through the burden and heat of the day.

It was impossible for Richard and Agnes, as they stood looking down upon that infant face sublime now, because of the holy peace that was stamped upon it not to perceive how clearly the sin and folly of their deed was pointed out to them in this bereavement. They had acted against the laws of God and man for the sake of these children; the one they had themselves delivered up to their father's charge, and the other had now been taken to a Care more tender still. No good could now result from their union to these or to any other; but themselves must reap its bitter fruits. And from that hour Richard and his wife repented them of the **deed** which they had done, because the world had visited them heavily for it; but they repented not yet of the **crime**, for the judgment of God was still to come.

## CHAPTER X.

**SEVENTEEN** years had passed away since the birth of Edward Clayton, the only child of Richard and Agnes, when Mr. Clayton died. His life had been greatly protracted, doubtless, because he laboured well in the vineyard of the Lord; but at length his weary feet were arrested at the gate of the heavenly fold; his aged form was laid down to rest among the green pastures and by the still waters. Mary Clayton knelt beside his coffin, looking for the last time on his serene face; restored now to the look of innocence and of placid rest which only guileless infants and the dead can know; but she shed no tears whilst she laid her cheek upon his cold stiff hand, for she dared not weep for him.

She had been his chief thought and care; for the last years of his life he had but one wish respecting her, and that was to educate in her a true and devoted servant for his Master. He set before himself, as the type of what he

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desired her to be, a lily of the field humble, spotless, having but slender root in the earth; giving no fragrance to the world around, but lifting up the sweet head ever towards heaven: and she became such. His tenderness and prayers were not in vain. Deep set within her heart was the desire to keep herself blameless against the coming of our Lord. In disposition she was meek, gentle, and unselfish; but her grandfather saw that she inherited all her mother's acuteness of feeling and intensity of affection, and from this peculiarity in her character he rightly judged that her trials in life would spring. He sought then to fortify her beforehand for that struggle, which sooner or later comes to us all, of our human wishes and feelings with our sworn allegiance to the cross; for none ever sought in sincerity to follow Him, but at some one period of their existence they are called on to suffer for His sake. Mr. Clayton saw with delight that on Mary his lessons were not thrown away; and he died in peace at last, with the firm conviction, that whatever might be her fate in this world, she would never accept the highest joys it could offer if they involved a dereliction from duty.

Very different had been the education and very different was now the character of Edward Clayton, Mary's half-brother, whom she had seen only at rare intervals. He resembled his father in disposition; he was clever, impetuous, and wilful proud to the very uttermost; and he had become profoundly selfish. His was precisely one of those characters which, rightly controlled and judiciously guided, might have been moulded to great excellence. Had he been drawn to follow and to seek after the good, he would have struggled on in the right path with all the energy of his ardent mind; but he was left to pursue the bent of his own inclination, and he turned reckless and unthinking to evil.

It may seem strange that the only child of parents yet living should have been abandoned to the fatal guidance of his own will; but it arose from the fact, that although outwardly they held him in control, they had lost all moral influence over him so soon as he was of an age to gather from the remarks of the servants and the taunts of his schoolfellows in what light esteem they themselves were held by the world in general; from that hour he lost all respect for them, and they became powerless to sway **his mind** for right or wrong, however much they might regulate his outward actions. There is no observer more keen and acute than a shrewd and clever child. Edward soon understood that his parents were exiled from society solely on account of their own conduct; he saw that they were not treated with the same consideration as the relations of his companions at school; he learnt that his own grandfather had been driven from the village because he would not countenance his son, and that his sister had been taken away because his mother was deemed an unfit guide for her. Mr. Lambert, revered and respected by the whole neighbourhood, never visited his father; he himself was sent to church with a servant only, because his parents were too proud and too ashamed to face, in that holy place, all those who so openly disapproved of their conduct, and therefore seldom went there, thinking too little of the guilt they were incurring by neglecting so inestimable a privilege. Was it not, therefore, inevitable that when Agnes and Richard attempted to enforce upon their son the necessity of religious principle and self-discipline, he could only treat their effort as a mockery? Still deeper, however, lay the cause which rendered it impossible for Edward to feel either respect or esteem for his parents it lay in the dissension and misery which reigned in his own home, in the mutual recriminations and disagreements which seemed to have taken the place of the affection that had once subsisted between his father and mother.

Richard Clayton had become embittered to the very last degree by the results of what he now termed his most unfortunate marriage. After the birth of Edward, when he saw how completely he was cut off from society, he was very anxious to go abroad, and seek acquaintances in some part of the world where his name was not known. But his circumstances rendered it quite out of the question for him to think of leaving B; he had nothing to depend upon but the allowance which his father still continued to give him; and as The Mount was Mr. Clayton's property, where he allowed him to reside, free of expense, he could not have lived in the same manner elsewhere. He was, therefore, compelled to remain where every day and hour he was subjected to treatment most galling to his haughty spirit. The sinful pride which restrained himself and Agnes from entering the church door, augmented very much the discomfort of their position: it prevented the possibility of any softening of the severity with which the world had visited his conduct. It was quite impossible for Mr. Lambert to hold any intercourse with persons who showed so pernicious an example to the poor of his parish who had, in fact, removed themselves from

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communion with the Church; and his open disapprobation was necessarily imitated by the parishioners, who held him in such high esteem.

Mr. and Mrs. Clayton were, probably, not altogether aware how great was the sin they committed in allowing an unholy pride to debar them of the means of grace. Richard had always been careless respecting these things; and now his inward uneasiness and bitterness of spirit, which arose, though he admitted it not, from the smitings of an unquiet conscience, had rendered him sneering, and well-nigh sceptical, on the subject of religion. It is no uncommon case, when a man has wilfully sinned against the light, that he should seek for a refuge in the falsehood which calls it darkness.

Richard Clayton had taken his first step in the downward course, when he placed his foot within the church where Agnes became his wife; and the descent was becoming daily more abrupt and easy, although he was himself, perhaps, scarce aware of the danger in which he stood, when he began to find relief and satisfaction in scoffing at what he had once at least held sacred. Even Agnes had not learnt, in her fashionable Parisian school, to attach much value to Church principles. Both now resented very strongly the judgment of public opinion, which consigned them, in the midst of a populous neighbourhood, to an exile as complete as though they had been sent to the wilds of Siberia. But this resentment Richard vented on his wife, being unable to give it scope elsewhere.

A torturing conviction took possession of his mind, that the consequences of his marriage were to follow him throughout his life, in every possible shape in which misfortune could visit him. He felt certain that it would cause the failure of every scheme and every hope, that it would pursue him, to his continual vexation and annoyance, and would finally hunt him down, as it were, to a dishonoured and untimely end. This idea, which really became a species of monomania, caused him to acquire an irritable dislike to Agnes, which he made her feel every hour of the day. During Edward's childhood, it sufficed that his mother had given him some order, for the father to reverse it, a system which would ruin any child; and as the boy grew up, when Richard perceived that his son openly showed how little respect he felt for the parents whom he heard universally slighted and condemned, his father declared it was but a part of the fatality which had pursued him since his Union with Agnes; and he recklessly abandoned Edward, without an attempt to reclaim him, to the evil course which he began so early.

Edward found that his own position in the world was seriously injured by that of his father; and whilst he nourished a most unhallowed anger against his parents for what he considered an injury inflicted on him by them, he was too proud to court the acquaintance of those who shunned him; and therefore flung himself, without restraint, into the only society which was open to him, that of low and dissipated company.

It was impossible for the father and mother not to tremble at the course which it seemed likely would be taken by their only son. They had made no attempt to place him in any profession, because Richard had been so completely severed from all connexion with the world that he would have found great difficulty in opening out for him any honourable career. Edward was his grandfather's heir, and therefore, in a pecuniary point of view, it was not necessary that he should find any means of existence for himself; but both Richard and Agnes were passionately attached to their son, and keenly alive to the incalculable evils which would probably result to him from their unhappy position. This feeling produced, however, a very different effect upon the minds of each. In Richard it only increased to an alarming extent the gloomy morbid despondency in which he indulged, under the belief that all was to go wrong with him henceforward, and which paralyzed him so much, that he made no attempt to rectify the evil fruits of his own action, though he failed not bitterly to reproach Agnes as the cause of it all. Mrs. Clayton meantime felt that her husband was both unjust and cruel, in accusing her so harshly of the consequences of that which she had done at his own solicitation for the sake of his own children. But there was now in the midst of **her** trials a dawning of better feeling than she had ever been blessed with in happier days.

That is a beautiful provision of nature, which causes the purest and tenderest affections of our humanity to be very often the instruments for awakening in our souls a holier love. In the deep anxiety and terror which the mother felt lest her only son should suffer by her former conduct, she was led to turn imploringly to Him who alone could



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avert the evil she dreaded. But she could not approach the Throne of all Purity without looking also into her own life, and learning how far she had erred and strayed from His ways. Her heart was full of penitence, but she was too much bewildered by the mists and obscurity of a life of negligence and sin, to understand as yet what the Lord would have her to do, and how, if she could not retrieve the past, she might at least sanctify the future by deep submission and repentance. She longed earnestly to apply to Mr. Lambert for counsel and instruction; but she dared not do it she dared not brave the fierce anger which she knew such a proceeding would awaken in her husband. In like manner she would now gladly have gone to church, though she did not even yet appreciate either the duty or the privilege of worshipping in His courts; but this was equally impossible Richard would never have permitted it. Remorse and uncertainty for herself, and profound anxiety for her son, rendered Agnes Clayton a miserable being.

Such was the condition of the inhabitants of The Mount at the period of Mr. Clayton's death. But immediately on this event there followed another, which gave Mr. and Mrs. Clayton the first moment of joy, real heartfelt joy, which they had known for years. Intelligence was brought them of the approaching marriage of Mary Clayton with one to whom it was most desirable, under every point of view, that she should be united.

Mr. Verney was the heir and future representative of a most ancient and noble house. He was the only child of Lord and Lady Verney, who were chiefly remarkable for the pride of birth, which was to them almost a hereditary possession. Forgetting how their name would avail them nothing in the dust, their whole thoughts and hopes and schemes in this life were given to maintain the honour of that which had come to them unstained through a long line of ances- try. In their only son, as was to be expected, all their plans and wishes were centred. Their pride and their ancient title were allied to a poverty which they held to be a most unseemly condition for the members of so noble a family; and it was their favourite project that he should make some wealthy alliance, which should restore them to their former grandeur; at the same time, no desire for riches could have induced them to overlook the necessity that the wife of their son should bear a name, if not as noble, at least as honourable and unsullied as their own. It was their wish that she should be possessed of rank also, and for this reason they were at first highly displeased when they perceived that their son had formed a very serious attachment with Mary Clayton, whose grandfather's residence was close to their own. Gradually, however, they became somewhat more reconciled to the idea that she was to be their daughter-in-law, not because she was in herself everything they could wish, but because they believed her to be the heiress of all Mr. Clayton's property: and they were also well aware, that though not of noble birth, he was of a good old family, and of a most honourable reputation. Of the existence of her father, mother-in-law, and brother, they knew nothing whatever; Mary never mentioned them, know- ing how painful the subject was to her grandfather; and he himself never allowed those names to pass his lips which he sent up hourly in prayer to heaven.

If Mr. Clayton had entertained the slightest idea that Mr. Verney wished to marry his granddaughter, he would at once have stated the whole circumstances of his son's second marriage and present position to Lord Verney, with which it was in fact impossible he could be acquainted, as the family had resided abroad until lately. But the good old Vicar was far too unworldly and simple-minded to think of such an occurrence at all; he could scarce have believed that his little Mary had left her childhood so far behind her. And his death, somewhat unexpected at the last, occurred before Mr. Verney had taken any steps for arranging the matter beyond his own secret determination.

When Mr. Clayton died, Lady Verney, at her son's solicitation, persuaded Mary to leave the house where she was now quite alone (as Mrs. Harewood had died some years previously), and conveyed her to their own home, to remain with them till her future plans were arranged.

Mary then communicated to them the fact, that her father was living, and that she had decided, of course, on returning to his house.

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This intelligence was rather startling to Lord and Lady Verney, but as Mary herself had been kept very much in ignorance of the circumstances of her family, they still believed that her grandfather must have left her a large fortune, and at all events, the universal lamentations which his death called forth from high and low, sufficiently proved that his virtues had rendered an alliance with her in truth, an honour. They therefore acquiesced in their son's wishes, when he announced to them that Mary had given her consent to the marriage, provided theirs could be obtained. And they could not but admit that by doing so they insured him every prospect of happiness, for the quiet and gentle Mary Clayton was not one to feel a light attachment for her future husband. They saw that her affection for him was deeply rooted and intense, of a nature to endure even to her life's end, alike unchanging whether it were destined to work her happiness or misery.

Lady Verney could not but agree with Mary, that she ought now at once to repair to her father's house, there to pass the time which must intervene till the period fixed for her marriage. But as they were all anxious that they should not be completely separated for so many months, the Verneys determined to come themselves to spend the interval at a place of public resort in the vicinity of B. It so chanced that one of the most aristocratic and exclusive of the families in the neighbourhood of that village were old acquaintances of theirs, which was of course an additional inducement to them to visit the place. But it more than once occurred to Lady Verney as a strange circumstance, that her noble friends had never mentioned the father of her future daughter-in-law among their list of acquaintances, for she never doubted but that he was held in the same consideration as Mr. Clayton had been in their own county. She did not, however, dwell much on the fact; and when Mary left them to proceed to The Mount, she promised that they would all join her at B in a very short time. Mr. Verney himself followed her almost immediately, that he might be introduced to the family of his future wife; their ready consent having been obtained, of course, before the marriage was finally settled.

### CHAPTER XI.

**IT** may be imagined with what delight Richard welcomed his child and her future husband to the home which had so long been cheerless and unblest. He almost fancied, as he looked on his fair and innocent daughter, that she was to be the means of redeeming him from the fatality which pursued him, from the sort of curse which he asserted had settled upon him and his family since the day when he made his sister-in-law his wife. Not only did he believe that Mary would herself have a most happy fate, but by her marriage with a man of rank and station, he trusted she would restore to him the honour and consideration he had lost, and she might even regain for him his former footing in society. He forgot in what awful words it had been said, that the sins of the fathers should be visited on the children.

Mary Clayton found much in her father's house to startle and distress her. Of her father and step-mother's conduct and state of mind she would not allow herself to form an opinion. At her age and in their relative positions she would have held it the height of presumption to have done so; but the condition of her brother Edward filled her with anxiety. She saw that he had already gone very far astray; his parents had not now the slightest authority over him, and he treated them both with disrespect and unkindness; he took care to let them see how much he thought they had injured him; and yet Mary could not help perceiving clearly, that his faults and follies were only the result of his neglected education, and of the unfortunate circumstances in which he was placed. She believed that he might even yet be led to know the unspeakable happiness of abjuring all unholy things, and doing His will in submission and in love; and she determined to try at least what her own gentle influence could effect.

She soon won his warmest affection; for few could know Mary Clayton without loving her. Her pure and elevated character, and the daily shining forth in all her actions of the holy faith which Edward had never before seen thus practically illustrated in the life of an individual, failed not to inspire him with a degree of respect and almost reverence for his sister, which had a strong effect upon his mind. Already he had begun to attend to her counsels; he seemed disposed to admit, at least, the Glory and the Beauty of the Truths which she set before him; and Richard Clayton dwelt more and more on the flattering hope, that his daughter was as a good angel sent to restore

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peace and honour and happiness to his house.

At this juncture Lord and Lady Verney arrived at B. They were to spend the first few weeks of their stay in this place at the house of the noble family who had been the most rigid and uncompromising in their just exclusion of Richard and his wife from all respectable society. The marriage of Mary and Mr. Verney had not been announced till the arrival of his father and mother, and they were themselves the first to mention it to their friends.

Their horror and indignation may be imagined at the revelation which followed from their astonished acquaintance. They were told at once who and what was the man to whose daughter their son and heir was to be united. They learnt that he was one who had contracted a union which, by the most holy authority, has been pronounced a sin worthy to be branded with a fearful name; a union which the Church of Christ in all ages has openly denounced and solemnly prohibited; so that none professing themselves members of the same, dare countenance him who has not feared to disregard that stern prohibition; a union which, if ever in a Christian country it came to be regarded with other feelings than those of the profoundest abhorrence, would serve as a precedent to the license that might then be taken for the commission of the most awful crimes. This unnatural and most unholy union Richard Clayton had contracted, in defiance of his father's righteous indignation as a Priest, steward of the mysteries of God, and as a man serving an All-pure Master in defiance of a distinct law Divine and human.

Lord and Lady Verney further learnt that Richard, and the wife who had co-operated with him in this sinful act, had been by just and universal judgment expelled from society in all the bitterness of disgrace. The history of their life from that period to the present day was then detailed; the birth of the son, whose social position was so questionable, that the very companions of his games taunted him with many a galling name; the reckless and dissipated course he was now pursuing, whereby it seemed likely that he would add to the dishonour which had in fact made him what he was; the self-excommunication of Mr. and Mrs. Clayton, sufficiently showing that they dared not for very shame pass the sacred threshold of the house of God; and, finally, the condition to which they had for some years been reduced, so disgraceful and humiliating, shunned by high and low, and above all, avoided by those, like Mr. Lambert, whose holiness of life and faithful obedience to the given laws, rendered their disapprobation of any individual a sure sign of his unworthiness.

Amidst the contending feelings of excessive anger and vexation, which filled the minds of Lord and Lady Verney when they had heard all these facts, there were two ideas which predominated over the rest. The first was, a sensation of profound thankfulness, that it was yet time to prevent their only son from contracting the disgraceful alliance, to which no power on earth would ever induce them to consent; and the next, a feeling of the very deepest indignation against Mary and her relations, for having concealed these dishonouring circumstances from them, and so having artfully stolen, as it were, their consent from them.

Their anger at what they held to be an unworthy deception had certainly been justly incurred by Richard, who ought in strictest honour to have acquainted them with the whole truth the moment he heard of the proposed alliance; and who had not done so merely because he was too weak and selfish to risk the failure of the plan which gave him so much pleasure. A man who once indulges in laxity of principle, as Richard had done when he married his sister-in-law, will have no scruple in carrying out the same system in all other matters.

But poor Mary was most innocent of the contemptible and wicked conduct of which they had accused her. No one had ever ventured to enlarge to her upon her father's sins, or their consequences; she knew far too little of the world to be aware of their peculiar and painful position in society. She was perfectly aware, as a Christian, what a great and grievous sin Richard and Agnes had committed in their marriage; but, as a daughter, she considered it unwarrantable in herself to allow her mind to dwell one moment on their failings; and she had never opened her lips on the subject to any human being, or allowed a whisper connected with it to meet her ear. But as for concealment, Mary was too guileless to suppose that it could exist; she had never doubted but that Lord and Lady Verney were thoroughly acquainted with all circumstances connected with herself and her family.

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Meantime, they determined at once to take vigorous measures for terminating an affair which they considered already but too dishonouring to themselves. That their son's name should ever have been even coupled with that of Richard Clayton's daughter was a disgrace most galling to their pride. They sent for Mr. Verney, they acquainted him with all the unhappy circumstances of the case, and commanded him from that moment to give up all thoughts of ever making Mary Clayton his wife. Never, under any circumstances, would they consent to such a marriage; sooner would they see him laid in his grave with an unstained name sooner would they disown him altogether, and alienate from him the family estates, so that he should have but an empty title to dishonour. Nothing is too violent for injured pride, when pride has become a passion; and Lord and Lady Verney spoke violently, unmoved by their son's despair. But they took a yet stronger measure for putting a complete stop to an affair now most hateful to them.

They wrote two letters, Lord Verney to Richard, his wife to Mary; the tenor of both was the same. In unsparing terms they qualified the dishonourable position of Mr. and Mrs. Clayton; solemnly and with a cruel haughtiness they declared that nothing should ever induce them to allow their son to have the slightest connexion with such a family. With the most cutting bitterness they intimated that if Richard chose to take legal measures for forcing Mr. Verney to keep his engagement, they were willing to sacrifice their whole fortune to save him from the disgrace of the proposed marriage; and they concluded by openly expressing their utter contempt of the miserable deception which they declared had been practised upon them by Mary and her father.

Richard Clayton was alone when this cruel letter reached him, whereby he saw that the retribution of his sin, which he termed a curse, so far from being removed by his daughter's hand, was now about to take effect upon herself. By this anticipated marriage he had looked for happiness to Mary, and restored honour to himself, and straightway his unforgotten deed, his inefaceable act, rose up before him, and turned that bright prospect into gloom and bitterness; it changed the hope of his daughter's happiness to the certainty of her misery; it converted the vision of his own renewed prosperity into the palpable evidence of the actual dishonour that sullied his name with a stain never to be blotted out. At once his conviction of the fatality which he believed had pursued him ever since his marriage, (bringing upon him the results of that fatal step in the shape of unceasing misfortune,) returned to his mind with redoubled vigour. It had but gained new strength from its temporary banishment by that delusive hope, and it came to him now in the guise of despair. He saw clearly that the effects of his crime were coming at last to their full fruition; they were spreading on to sufferers most innocent of the guilt. "The father had eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth were set on edge."

Hitherto the punishment of his deed had been administered by the world, because of his dereliction from the merely human laws of morality; but now, for the first time, he perceived and understood his sin in its true nature and actual criminality, for the judgment of God had commenced. Truly Lord Verney's letter was an awful blow to Richard Clayton.

When Agnes, alarmed at his long absence, entered his room, she found him lying back in his armchair, speechless and well nigh senseless; breathing only in short suffocating gasps, his face livid, his whole frame convulsed, his appearance was fearful. It was clear that he had been stricken with some physical attack of a dreadful nature. The screams of his terrified wife brought the servants flocking in. A physician was instantly sent for; he soon arrived, and seemed quite appalled at the state in which he found Mr. Clayton. He used the strongest remedies, but for some hours he would give little hope. At length his patient breathed more freely, his countenance resumed its natural hue, and without having spoken, or appeared aware of his position, he sunk into a deep lethargic sleep. The physician then pronounced him out of danger, and informed Agnes that her husband had been seized with an attack evidently brought on by some overpowering mental excitement, and which had well nigh proved fatal. He earnestly urged upon her the necessity of his being kept free henceforward from all agitation or uneasiness. It would be next to impossible that he should rise from another such seizure.

Agnes literally shuddered at these words. She knew it would be madness even to hope that Richard could henceforward be preserved, either from mental anxiety, or from bitter corroding grief. She had taken Lord

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Verney's letter from the stiffened hand of her unhappy husband, and she knew its contents. She had already seen that which Lady Verney had written to her step-daughter; and she had met the piteous despairing gaze of Mary Clayton's sweet blue eyes, when she received from it the blow whereby she was smitten to the very dust.

Agnes Clayton betook herself to her knees, crushed and bewildered with anguish, but she scarce knew what to pray for; it seemed to her a hopeless task to seek to avert from Richard and herself the misfortunes that were springing so thickly from the seed they had sown in their reckless sin and folly years ago. Truly it was bearing such fruit as they had never dreamt of; and there fell a terrible weight upon her heart, when she thought of that innocent one whose whole existence was too probably blighted by her father's fault.

It was some days before Richard was sufficiently recovered to inquire how it fared with his daughter since she had learnt the utter destruction of her whole earthly happiness. The misery which Mary Clayton was enduring would have been altogether insupportable to her but for **one** thought of holy hope. The affection she felt for him she had believed was to be her husband, was of a nature to be felt but once in a lifetime, and never to be forgotten or replaced full of an unchanging clinging tenderness, which must turn to bitterest suffering if rejected. There is no trial purely of this earth which can bring greater agony to a human heart, than the conviction that its true and devoted affection has been for ever given in vain. It seemed to her, when she was thus suddenly flung down from her bright hope and joy into such exceeding wretchedness, as though the eyes that were to look on him no more might well refuse to meet again the light of day; and the sinking heart revolt from bearing the heavy load of that dark cheerless future, which was all that now remained to her on earth. Her sorrow had every aggravation which man could give it; for not only was she rejected and cast off by him to whom she had trusted for her life's happiness, but she was treated with the most unmerited and cutting contempt by his family.

Mary would have sunk altogether under this overwhelming burden of sudden trial, had it not been, as we have said, for one thought. It was the recollection of the Love of Him who alone is holy, who only is the Lord, for her that was even as a worm in His sight; a love that was manifest in His unutterable agony, that hereafter might be manifest in her unutterable bliss; that even now was shown forth in the light affliction, enduring but for a moment, wherewith He chastened her, in order that at the last it might bear fruit in a great and exceeding weight of glory. She felt that though by His will the soul may be cast forth into the deep waters of human misery, whose bitterness no earthly power can assuage, still this one hope shall uphold it in the fearful struggle, as with the hand of an angel, and teach it through its very suffering (tempered by submission and faith) that neither in this world nor in the world to come can the redeemed of Christ know aught of despair.

Richard Clayton rose from his dangerous illness a humbled and remorseful man. It may be doubted whether his was a repentance not to be repented of; but, at least, he now thoroughly understood how glaring was the sin from which so much suffering was springing, not to those only who had erred, but to those also who were altogether guiltless of it. He no longer felt any power to struggle with the retribution which had so clearly commenced; silent and hopeless, he seemed constrained to sit by and watch the working of all the misery and ruin which his selfishness had wrought.

The first meeting between the father and daughter was a terrible one. Richard gave but one glance to that pale sad face, with its look of patient wretchedness, and to the dim eyes from which the sunshine of hope and joy was for ever fled, quenched in bitterest tears, and then he almost crouched down before her as though he would have implored her forgiveness.

Mary understood from that moment that a great duty and task were now set before her, in the soothing and comforting of the father, who had so profoundly though unwillingly injured her. She must not only be resigned, but cheerful; that he might never know how sorely stricken and overwhelmed she was by the sorrow he had brought upon her. She nerved herself at once to this holy effort of filial love, but the struggle was severe, and she felt it would undermine both health and life.

## CHAPTER XII.

**MEANWHILE** Mr. Verney was by no means disposed to submit without a struggle to the stern commands of his proud father. His affection for the quiet gentle Mary Clayton had taken deep root in his heart, with a strength of which he was not aware till she was actually taken from him. For the time it absorbed all other considerations, and extinguished whatever pride he might have inherited from his parents. They had accustomed him from childhood to the unrestrained indulgence of every wish, and now when, for the first time, they thwarted him, he resolved to cast off their authority altogether. If they would not give their consent to his union with Mr. Clayton's daughter, he would marry her without it.

After about three weeks spent in vain expostulations with Lord and Lady Verney, Mr. Verney went to The Mount, to announce his resolution to Mary, and to obtain her consent to a private marriage. He was perfectly aware of the depth of the attachment with which he had inspired her, and of all the worldly advantages of an alliance with him; and his astonishment was therefore unbounded when Mary positively refused to marry him without the full consent of his father and mother.

Mr. Verney would not believe it possible that she could continue firm in her determination, for her extreme agitation showed what the sacrifice cost her, and he used every argument to induce her to relent. He assured her that as soon as the marriage was over, and opposition of no further avail, Lord and Lady Verney would gladly receive her; and he called upon Richard to use all his influence with her. It was, perhaps, the bitterest pang which Mary Clayton had yet experienced in this sore trial, when her father, complying with Mr. Verney's request, urged her to do that which was actually wrong. Gently and even humbly, (for was she not his daughter?) she implored of him to desist from further entreaties, and again quietly repeated her refusal to Mr. Verney. He saw that she was too resolute in the strait and narrow path of duty, to be allured from it, though he tempted her with a whole life of happiness; and in his bitter anger and disappointment, he upbraided her with many a cruel reproach. He declared that she had never really felt any true affection for him, that she was cold and heartless, that it cost her nothing to consign him to misery. These were terrible words to her who would so thankfully have devoted her whole existence to make him happy but no answering word of bitterness came from her colourless lips. She bade him farewell meekly, as though she had really injured him; and when he was gone, she returned to all her home duties with a strong effort to appear contented and at peace, at least in her father's eyes.

During Richard Clayton's illness, Mr. Lambert, now Vicar of B , had, unasked, come to visit him, and from that period he continued ministering to the spiritual necessities of the various members of the family, with faithfulness and zeal. Agnes had surrendered herself as an humble penitent entirely to his guidance. Richard himself seemed now well disposed to follow her example; and to Mary, his counsels were of inestimable benefit. He advised her as to her conduct towards her father and stepmother, for her position was by no means an easy one in their house, and he now confirmed and strengthened her in her resolution to do that which was right, however much suffering it might entail upon herself. Very soon, however, her miserable father began to fear that she would prove, with her life itself, the falsity of Mr. Verney's assertion, that he was the only sufferer in this trial, for her health and strength began gradually to sink under her constant mental exertion.

Mr. Verney, though he professed to leave The Mount angry and hopeless, had in truth only felt his esteem and affection for Mary increased by her holy resignation and obedience to the Will of Heaven. He was more than ever determined not to lose her, and he spent his days in devising some means of overcoming the difficulties in his way. Lord and Lady Verney had returned to their own home, but he himself persisted in remaining at B , though he consented, at their earnest request, to stay at the house of their friends, who received private instructions to watch his proceedings. They were continually enlarging on the disgrace which he would have incurred by his marriage with Mary Clayton; and one day in particular they expatiated much on the miserable position of her brother Edward; who, although he would be allowed quietly to succeed to his father's property, might have his legitimacy called in question any day.

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These casual remarks suddenly gave Mr. Verney a new and hopeful idea. It struck him that if Mary could be put in possession of the whole of the large fortune which belonged to the Clayton family, by the setting aside of her brother's claim, his proud but poverty-stricken parents might possibly be induced to overlook Richard's disgraced name, and receive her as their daughter even yet. It seemed clear to him, that if Edward's legal right were disproved, Mary would succeed to an amount of wealth which might well cover the dishonour of her family, and enable him at once to obtain the consent of his parents; but it was a question which a lawyer alone could answer, and Mr. Verney repaired without loss of time to Mr. Sharp, who had now a considerable reputation in the neighbourhood of B.

He was too much absorbed in his resolution to remember how cruel and selfish he was towards Edward and his unhappy parents, in contemplating such a measure. He quieted his conscience with the conviction, that Mary would make a much better use of the money than her dissipated brother, and never thought of the shame and misery he was bringing upon Agnes, or of her son's existence thus early ruined and blighted.

Mr. Verney put the question to Mr. Sharp, and received at once a decisive answer. The passing of the act in 1835, respecting marriages within the prohibited degrees of affinity, has made the law in the present day different to what it was at the period to which we refer. At that time, as the lawyer informed Mr. Verney, the legitimacy of the offspring of a man and his sister-in-law could be set aside if an action were brought against them during the lifetime of both parents. Thus, in the case of Edward Clayton, the thing was perfectly possible, and his sister might unquestionably succeed to the property; but, of course, the necessary measures could only be taken by Mr. Verney when he should be her husband. This was, however, quite satisfactory to him; as he thought it by no means impossible that his father and mother might consent to his marriage, if he could hold out so sure a prospect of his wife's becoming a wealthy heiress.

He therefore determined to proceed at once to his own home, in order to acquaint his parents with his plans; but he could not resist the temptation of first paying a visit at The Mount, that Mary might learn the new hopes which cheered him. He informed both her and Richard, that he had found a means whereby he hoped to overcome all the obstacles to their union; and with all the ardour of his peculiarly sanguine temperament, he assured her, that he doubted not his parents would soon come themselves to claim her as their daughter. Mr. Verney was scrupulously careful to conceal from Mary the cruel and wicked scheme he had devised. He knew enough of her character and principles to feel certain that she would never consent to be his wife on such terms, and he resolved that she should only know the truth, when as her husband he could claim her obedience to his wishes.

Mary never asked, however, what was the plan of which he spoke. She was bewildered with joy; for she implicitly believed his assurance, that they should yet be happy, and the sudden revulsion of feeling was almost too much for her enfeebled frame.

After he left her Mr. Verney wrote to Mr. Sharp, to inform him that his marriage would be concluded very shortly, and that he held him engaged to commence immediately afterwards the legal proceedings against Edward Clayton.

This letter was entrusted by Mr. Sharp to his son, who was in the habit of making copies of such documents for his father's use. It so chanced that this young man had once a violent quarrel with Edward when he was little more than a boy. He had taunted him, as many others were in the habit of doing, with the circumstances of his birth, and the insult had been answered by a blow. This indignity was never forgotten by the lawyer's son, who was a mean and pitiful character; and even if he had been disposed to forgive it, his mother was at hand to foster his anger and encourage his desire for revenge. Mrs. Sharp saw, in the insult her son had received from Edward, only an aggravation of that offered to herself by Agnes, many years previously; for the lapse of time had but served to strengthen her enmity against the whole family, which was now brought to its height by her son's complaints. Of late she had been bitterly displeased at the bright prospects which had seemed to dawn for them in the proposed marriage of Mary Clayton, and it was now with a spiteful pleasure that she learnt, from Mr. Verney's letter, the

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disgrace and misery which were preparing for them. Neither she nor her son, however, could resist forestalling the evils which threatened the Claytons, when so favourable an opportunity for revenge presented itself. Together they arranged a plan for Edward's public humiliation, which Mr. Sharp's son knew he could put in execution without loss of time.

That same evening he took Mr. Verney's letter with him when he went to join a dinner party of young men, where he knew he should meet Edward. There he openly repeated the insult which years before had provoked the return he resented; and when Edward, stung almost to fury at his words, would have called him to account for them, he flung Mr. Verney's letter across the table to him, and told him he might learn there how he would soon have to fight the whole world for attributing to him a disgrace which was to be publicly and legally proved. The lawyer's son was perfectly aware that he was betraying his employer's confidence by this proceeding, but he had the less scruple in doing it for the gratification of his own malice, because he knew that it was perfectly impossible for Edward or his family to avert the threatened evil, if Mary's husband chose to institute proceedings against him.

It was late in the evening, and the family at The Mount were assembled together in the drawing-room. Richard and Agnes were both silently watching Mary, whose sweet face, though still pale from recent suffering, was now once again brightened by the light of hope, like sunshine beaming on a placid lake. There was no balm to the wounded conscience of Agnes Clayton like to that of a smile on the face of Elizabeth's daughter; but Richard could not yet believe there was any happiness in store for them; his health was dreadfully shaken by his late attack, and he was now the victim to a settled despondency. Still the sound of Mary's cheerful voice was as music to his ears to-night, and he felt a greater sensation of peace than he had known for many weeks.

Suddenly, as they sat there quietly, there was a sound of rushing footsteps in the hall without; exclamations of astonishment from some of the servants, and the door of the room was burst open by a furious hand. They all looked round trembling, and the conviction of some new misfortune darted like lightning into the minds of each member of this unhappy family. They were not mistaken.

Edward Clayton rushed into the room, seemingly half frantic; he had never curbed his anger, even for trifling causes, and now it was ungovernable. His face was actually livid with rage, his teeth set, the veins starting on his forehead. In his clenched hand he held a letter, which he flung down before his father, and in a few words, that sounded to the miserable man like the sentence of a terrible judgment, he told him how it contained the assurance that he, his innocent son, should for his parents' sin be publicly branded with disgrace, deprived of the property he had always considered his own, and sent out into the world to struggle in poverty with a blighting stain upon his name. Then (the sense of his misery, and of the injustice done to him increasing as he spoke,) Edward looked for a moment on both his parents with a glance they never forgot, and burst into a storm of invective against them, upbraiding them in terms too dreadful to be recorded here, for having given him an existence, which by their fault was already blighted and destroyed.

To Mary, also, he turned, and thanked her with taunting bitterness for the lessons of Christianity which she had given him; her religion was bearing noble fruit truly, when it permitted her to rob her brother by such a cruel means, and to seek for his ruin and dishonour, that she might herself become the happy wife of her proud lover. He heeded not her wild frantic protestation, that she knew nothing of such a scheme; but, gathering all the passion that was bursting from his lips, as it were into one sentence, he frantically declared, that he would not remain another moment in the place, where he was soon to be stripped of his lawful inheritance, and made an object of public scorn. He would never look again on those who had so injured him; he would go to plunge into the only mode of life, which now was open to him in the haunts of vice and misery; he would find an existence in gaming, or cheating; and when his parents heard of him in disgrace, in crime, in infamy, let them remember that they themselves had driven him to it!

With these words he dashed aside the clinging hands of his mother, who had fallen almost at his feet, and rushed from the room. They heard his frantic steps in the hall, then outside, passing the window; his flying figure



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appeared for a moment among the trees; it vanished swiftly, and he was gone their only son self-exiled from his home; driven forth from it by the shadow of their crime, which haunted him like a mysterious avenger.

For a few moments all three were so paralyzed with the suddenness of this event, that they were incapable of speaking or moving. Mary was the first to awaken from the sort of stupor into which they were plunged: she started up with an expression of so much anguish, that it attracted the attention even of the parents, in whose ears the terrible words of their son were yet ringing.

"He must not go, thinking I could be so base, so wicked!" she exclaimed; "I cannot bear it I must find him, or I shall never know peace again!" And careless of the rain, which now was pouring down in torrents, or of the chill and gloom of the night, she darted from the house, and followed wildly on the path which Edward had taken.

More than an hour elapsed before Richard could find her again. He sought for her in vain through the grounds, and out on the road which Edward had already quitted long since on his way to London. It was a wild tempestuous night, and the father felt an indescribable terror as he thought of his child, so fragile and tender, exposed to the fury of the storm. He saw that she had gone out bewildered and almost unconscious of what she did, her brain reeling under the terrible remorse which her brother's misery had caused her, though she was so innocent of it. And when at length he discerned her standing on the brink of the river, which rolled with a deep strong current below the house, a dreadful fear took possession of him that she was about to seek oblivion of her bitter sorrow within its whelming waters.

She was standing fixed and rigid on the steep bank, gazing on the stream with eyes wide and dilated, unconscious apparently of the drenching rain. Richard flew towards her he seized her in his arms, and called her by every endearing name, but she did not seem to hear him; and he saw at once, by the vacant stare of her glazed eyes, and the expression of her open mouth, that reason had for the time deserted her. He could not wonder that it was so, for to a person of her peculiarly sensitive nature, Edward's bitter accusation against herself, and his look and manner when he well-nigh cursed his parents, was in truth a trial sufficient, seriously to affect her mind. He carried her back, passive and unconscious, to the house. Throughout the whole of that long dreadful night he watched beside her, with Agnes kneeling by his side, and when morning broke, just as he expected, she was in the first stage of a violent brain fever.

### CHAPTER XIII.

**MR. VERNEY** might have spared all the misery which his unworthy scheme had caused to the Clayton family, for it entirely failed of the effect he had hoped it would have produced on his father and mother. Desirable as wealth would now have been to them, pride was their first idol, and they were true in their allegiance to it.

No advantages which were to be found in the alliance, would have induced them to allow the daughter of Richard Clayton to be the wife of their son and heir; still less, by means of a project against which their honourable feelings revolted, and which would but have entailed a more effectual disgrace on the despised family.

Bitterly disappointed, and hopeless at last, Mr. Verney returned to B in time to hear that Mary Clayton lay insensible and dangerously ill. It was known at the village and at The Mount that Edward was pursuing a reckless course of dissipation in London. His extravagance was carried on with money borrowed on false pretences. But his father and mother seemed to take little heed of the details of the progressive ruin of their only son. Their whole thoughts were now absorbed in the most overwhelming anxiety for the daughter of Elizabeth, who lay upon her bed of sickness and pain, uttering such plaintive words in her delirium as pierced their very hearts. Richard was convinced she would die. His diseased imagination now set no limit to the misfortunes which were to spring from his marriage. His own health was completely shaken, and his mind filled with the darkest thoughts. He neither ate nor slept, but haunted Mary's room night and day like a spectre. He felt exactly as though he had killed

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her killed the gentle, loving child that never had injured a human being. He could not endure the sight of Agnes: he never looked upon her now but he heard the words of Elizabeth ringing on his ear, as though she were repeating them even then in her grave: "Oh, Richard, she is your sister, your sister!"

One night, by a most unusual occurrence, Mary was left for a few minutes alone, although her fever was then at its height. Richard and Agnes had quitted her while the nurse arranged the room, and the woman had carelessly gone down stairs, intending to return immediately, and thinking that Mary was asleep.

The peculiar form which her delirium had taken was naturally enough the continual repetition in her own fancy of the scene which had caused her illness. She was incessantly imagining she saw Edward rushing in with his livid distorted face; she heard his terrible words; she saw him leave them, maddened with the injuries they had done him; and she fled out to follow him through the storm and the gloom. Many times she had actually risen to pursue the phantom of her raving, and they had held her down. To-night the vision returned, and there was no one to prevent her following the wild impulse. She rose from her bed, and, in the strength of fever, fled from the room and the house with noiseless steps.

There was but one person who saw that white ghost-like figure passing rapidly among the trees. This was old Jack, the idiot, who had come to The Mount for his dinner as usual. Poor Jack was no wiser than he had been years before, when he alone had been found to welcome Agnes Clayton as the wife of her brother-in-law; but as his mother was now bedridden from age, she had provided him with a guardian, without whom she would not have allowed him to leave her sight. This was his dog Charlie, who invariably accompanied him wherever he went.

Charlie was certainly not a beauty, especially when he had been indulging in a duel with a neighbouring cat, of which delectable amusement he was extremely fond, although he never failed to retire from the combat with one eye unfit for use, and the whole of his intelligent countenance seamed and scored in a most disfiguring manner. His coat also, which ought to have been of a pure white, was much soiled and blackened by his unfortunate predilection for rolling in the dust, and squeezing himself through all sorts of unpracticable holes, instead of taking the legitimate entrances; but in temper and disposition Charlie was of inestimable worth, and his faithful attachment to poor Jack was beautiful in the extreme. The old woman, in fact, had literally given the latter in charge to this sage animal, who was infinitely more rational and intelligent than her poor son, and both Jack and Charlie thoroughly understood their respective positions. The man yielded obedience with the utmost submission to the authority which the dog wielded in a very dignified manner; and many a time Charlie had, on the dark winter's nights, brought his charge safe home when he would have been lost in the snow without his protection.

They were seated together under a tree on this calm mild evening, when poor Mary tottered past them, moaning and calling out her brother's name. Jack looked after her with the wild senseless laugh to which he was continually giving vent unconsciously; but Charlie seemed to consider that this was a matter in which they ought to interfere, and, with that strange instinct that often seems almost prophetic in dogs, he took Jack's coat between his teeth, and insisted on his following in Mary's steps.

She went staggering on, taking exactly the path she had gone on that fatal night; but when she reached the precipitous bank of the river, her unsteady feet failed her, and she fell headlong into the water. With one single bound Charlie plunged in after her, and he secured a firm hold of her dress as soon as she rose to the surface; then panting, snorting, and struggling, he swam with her to the bank, found footing for himself, and intimated to Jack, by his impatient pulling at the weight so far beyond his own strength, that he was to lift the sinking body from the water. The poor fool understood, and obeyed. He was of great bodily strength, and he drew poor Mary out of the river, with perfect ease, and laid her on the bank, where he stood over her, laughing out in his discordant glee.

Charlie, however, was not yet satisfied; he once more seized hold of Jack, and drew him towards the house, where, by his vehement barking, and Jack's incoherent exclamations, the servants became convinced that

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something had occurred. They followed the sagacious dog and his companion to the spot where Mary was lying, now quite senseless, though still living.

They took her home, and carried her straight into the first room they came to, where Richard Clayton was sitting alone. He heard the shuffling feet, and started up; he saw the men enter with their burden. With the first glimpse he obtained of that seemingly lifeless form, with the wet hair streaming over her death-like face, the terrible idea took possession of him at once that she had destroyed herself. He had fancied that this was her intention when he had found her, on that night, standing by the river side, because he knew the depth of her mental anguish, and he did **not** know the strength of a Christian's submission and resignation; and now he never doubted but that she had seized the first moment when she was left unguarded, to rid herself, by this violent means, of a life that was insupportable.

Careless and worldly as Richard Clayton had been, he never could have thought, with any thing but horror, of the awful sin of suicide that crime which never can be repented of! And to find that this beloved daughter, for whom he had so securely anticipated an eternity of happiness, although for his sake this mortal life had grown so bitter to her to find that she, in her agony, had forgotten alike her faith and her obedience, and had rushed madly to the destruction both of soul and body, was more than the father, broken spirited and feeble, could endure.

He would have advanced to meet his hapless child, but his steps were suddenly arrested; it was as though an iron hand had fastened on his heart; its action was impeded; his breath was choked; his face assumed a dark leaden hue; he well knew **whose** was the grasp that was checking the pulses of his life, and he lifted up his darkening eyes imploringly. The terrible expression of his countenance long after haunted all those who saw it; for, in that one awful moment, there passed before his spirit all the occurrences of his past life. Clear, distinct, rapid as the lightning's flash, he could discern the unbroken links of the whole chain of events which had risen out of that one hour when he had knelt at the altar with the sister of his wife now but a part of the irrevocable past. Their joy and their sorrow alike were gone, and he must go forth to see what fruits they would bear to his soul in eternity. His whole existence now was shrivelling up into a vapour, a dream that was flitting away from him. One thing only stood real and palpable before him: the judgment to come for the deeds done in the body. He made one wild effort to place himself upon his knees, but strength and life failed him at the same moment, and he fell heavily and unresisting on the floor.

When Mary Clayton gradually returned to consciousness, the first sight that met her eyes was the corpse of her father, round which those who had carried her from the river were standing in hopeless dismay.

### CHAPTER XIV.

**A YEAR** and more had elapsed since the awfully sudden death of Richard Clayton; and of all the actors in this tragedy, which had sprung from one single fault, Agnes and Mary alone remained. The youth and good constitution of Elizabeth's daughter had enabled her to rally from her fever. Her life was spared, but not her intellect; the succession of violent shocks she had received, had completely overthrown her reason, and she rose from her illness a confirmed and helpless idiot.

Shortly after the death of his father, the health of Edward began to give way completely under the life of dissipation and excess he was leading. At last they heard that he was sinking prematurely into the grave. Agnes could not leave her step-daughter; and Mr. Lambert himself went to London, to ascertain the real state of matters. He found Edward, deserted now by his gay companions, in an advanced stage of a hopeless decline. He was still, however, able to bear removal; and Mr. Lambert brought him back to The Mount, where he consigned him to his poor mother's care, for the brief space that yet remained of his short and unhappy life. For six months he lingered with the seal of death set surely on his forehead, and his young existence ebbing visibly away. Mr. Lambert attended him assiduously; and when, at length, the sun of his life set in its untimely night, he laid him in the grave

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by the side of Elizabeth and Richard, feeling that another victim was added to the number of those who had suffered by that man's unholy deed. Whilst he taught the penitent mother that it was not for them to speculate on his future fate, they must only resign him in unquestioning obedience to the mercy of his God.

It was in truth a sore chastisement to Agnes Clayton, thus to lose her only son, to see that she had but given him life that through her means that life might be unhallowed and unhappy, condemned to an untimely sad decay. But she bowed to the decree with the meekest submission; for it seemed to her that nothing could be more distinct than the hand of the retributive Justice, in all the trials which had visited their house. She and her husband had sinned against a law, because they believed that law to be unnecessary and overstrained; they believed that their departure from it would be productive of good results; and it had been ordained that their deed should work precisely the opposite effects from what they expected, in order that they might see clearly that he who would gain his life shall lose it that he who would gain aught by means contrary to the will of God, shall not only unquestionably lose it, but find that the thing he sought has turned to poison. He who would presume to take his destiny out of the hands of the Almighty, to mould it at his pleasure, shall never fail to find that he has worked his own ruin. There is but one safe course in this twilight world "to hear and to obey." Light is given to all who follow Him, that they should not walk in darkness; but the Blessed Light irradiates only the steps which we must take **this** day: it shows us nothing of the morrow. Steadily we must follow it, faithfully submit to the given laws, calmly leave the result in His safe-keeping.

These were the lessons which Agnes Clayton learned from the bitter misfortunes which had tracked their path since the hour of her unlawful marriage. More terrible to her even than the death of her son, was the visitation which had fallen on Mary Clayton, her sister's child. It was, indeed, an awful punishment that was inflicted on Agnes, when she was condemned to see before her, day by day, for the remainder of her life, that melancholy spectacle a being so young, so beautiful, with her earthly existence thus fatally destroyed, the fine mind ruined and lost, the intellect laid prostrate, nothing left but vacant, helpless idiotcy. Agnes saw distinctly what was the duty set before her now, and she determined resolutely to perform it, (by His help,) if so be she might yet be forgiven for the great transgression of which she so bitterly repented.

Her task and duty henceforward were to devote herself exclusively to Mary, the innocent sufferer by a parent's sin; and it was a touching sight to see how, from the hour of her son's death, Agnes gave up her life to the solace and comfort of the helpless being now so utterly dependent on her. Sad at heart as she was, haunted by the never-fading remembrance of those beloved and gone, she yet strove unwearied to amuse her niece, and preserve her from the bodily pain which was the only suffering she now could know; and many times a day she was constrained to kneel down before this living monument of her past sins, and implore of Mary to pardon her, though she knew she could not understand her words; for she was ever stricken with a terrible remorse when she looked into that sad young face, with its unmeaning expression, and wild vacant stare.

It was a comfort to her that poor Mary was happy. She had become as a little child again, as helpless and ignorant, but as free from care. She would sit for hours on the grass, playing with flowers, as in the days when her dead mother watched beside her. One of her chief pleasures was to go to church, although she could not now understand anything which took place within that holy house. Some dim association, connected with the past, seemed to fill her with a vague longing to go there whenever she heard the bell; and Agnes never refused her, as she was always still and quiet during the service. But it was a bitter trial to the widowed, childless woman, to sit beside her there, and see how, instead of the fervent devotion that formerly characterised poor Mary, she now sat smiling childishly, as she held up her thin white hand, to catch the bright colours of the stained glass, when the sunbeam was passing through them. At such moments, Agnes always saw, as in a vision, the scene that had taken place in the cold dark church in London, when she had taken the unlawful vows that never should have been uttered by one who called herself a Christian.

Many wondered that Mrs. Clayton could thus expose herself to the public gaze, with her whom they could not but term her victim by her side. But Agnes was now a penitent, not in name only; and she was ready nay, anxious to

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humble herself in the sight both of God and man. As for Mary, she could not but think that she was perhaps more fit to be within that church than many who came there; for she was well disposed to believe in her case at least that beautiful Eastern superstition which holds that those who labour under any mental infirmity are the favoured of heaven; that many things are shown to them of which we dream not; and that they hold converse with the holy angels, as we think the little infants also do.

There was another haunt, however, which Mary loved especially to frequent; and this fancy caused Agnes many a sharp remorseful pang, though she did not shrink from enduring them, for she was willing to submit to all the bitterness of the punishment laid upon her. It was to the churchyard that she had to follow her charge, day after day. Some faint recollection of the time before her illness, when she used to come and sit by her mother's grave, seemed to compel Mary to go there constantly; but she came not, as formerly, to think of those who are departed in the true faith of His holy Name, and pray that herself might have the perfect consummation and bliss in His eternal glory, but to pluck the flowers from the grass with unconscious hand, and sing gay, wild songs, ill-suited to the scene; and Agnes sat beside her, looking on the graves of all those she had loved, on the family gathered at her feet, of which Mary was the sole living representative, and humbled herself to the very dust before the stern lessons learned in that place. Elizabeth's children, for whom she and her husband had sinned, were beside her there, the one nestling calmly in the dust by the side of the true mother to whom he had been so soon restored, the other living a life which was most heavily afflicted by the very means wherewith they sought to make it blessed; and Agnes acknowledged those truths which she had refused to believe before, and had now learnt, at a fearful cost, that "There is no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel, **AGAINST THE LORD;**" "That he that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination;" "That out of evil no good can ever come."

R. CLAY, PRINTER, BREAD STREET HILL.