

The Heart of John Middleton

Elizabeth Gaskell

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I was born at Sawley, where the shadow of Pendle Hill falls at sunrise. I suppose Sawley sprang up into a village in the time of the monks, who had an abbey there. Many of the cottages are strange old places; others, again, are built of the abbey stones, mixed up with the shale from the neighbouring quarries; and you may see many a quaint bit of carving worked into the walls, or forming the lintels of the doors. There is a row of houses, built still more recently, where one Mr Peel came to live there for the sake of the water-power, and gave the place a fillip into something like life; though a different kind of life, as I take it, from the grand, slow ways folks had when the monks were about.

Now it was six o'clock, ring the bell, throng to the factory; sharp home at twelve; and even at night, when work was done, we hardly knew how to walk slowly, we had been so bustled all day long. I can't recollect the time when I did not go to the factory. My father used to drag me there when I was quite a little fellow, in order to wind reels for him. I never remember my mother. I should have been a better man than I have been, if I had only had a notion of the sound of her voice, or the look on her face.

My father and I lodged in the house of a man who also worked in the factory. We were sadly thronged in Sawley, so many people came from different parts of the country to earn a livelihood at the new work; and it was some time before the row of cottages I have spoken of could be built. While they were building, my father was turned out of his lodgings for drinking and being disorderly, and he and I slept in the brick-kiln; that is to say, when we did sleep o' nights; hut, often and often, we went poaching; and many a hare and pheasant have I rolled up in clay, and roasted in the embers of the kiln. Then, as followed to reason, I was drowsy next day over my work; but father had no mercy on me for sleeping, for all he knew the cause of it, but kicked me where I lay, a heavy lump on the factory floor, and cursed and swore at me till I got up for very fear, and to my winding again. But, when his back was turned, I paid him off with heavier curses than he had given me, and longed to be a man, that I might be revenged on him. The words I then spoke I would not now dare to repeat; and worse than hating words, a hating heart went with them. I forget the time when I did not know how to hate. When I first came to read, and learnt about Ishmael, I thought I must be of his doomed race, for my hand was against every man, and every man's against me. But I was seventeen or more before I cared for my book enough to learn to read.

After the row of works was finished, lather took one, and set up for himself, in letting lodgings. I can't say much for the furnishing; but there was plenty of straw, and we kept up good fires; and there is a set of people who value warmth above everything. The worst lot about the place lodged with us. We used to have a supper in the middle of the night; there was game enough, or if there was not game, there was poultry to be had for the stealing. By day, we all made a show of working in the factory. By night, we feasted and drank.

Now this web of my life was black enough, and coarse enough; but, by-and-by, a little golden, filmy thread began to be woven in; the dawn of God's mercy was at hand.

One blowy October morning, as I sauntered lazily along to the mill, I came to the little wooden bridge over a brook that falls into the Bribble. On the plank there stood a child, balancing the pitcher on her head, with which she had been to fetch water. She was so light on her feet that, had it not been for the weight of the pitcher, I almost believe the wind would have taken her up, and wafted her away as it carries off a blow-ball in seed-time;

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her blue cotton dress was blown before her, as if she were spreading her wings for a flight; she turned her face round, as if to ask me for something, but when she saw who it was, she hesitated, for I had a bad name in the village, and I doubt not she had been warned against me. But her heart was too innocent to be distrustful; so she said to me, timidly,

'Please, John Middleton, will you carry me this heavy jug just over the bridge?'

It was the very first time I had ever been spoken to gently. I was ordered here and there by my father and his rough companions; I was abused, and cursed by them if I failed in doing what they wished; if I succeeded, there came no expression of thanks or gratitude. I was informed of facts necessary for me to know. But the gentle words of request or entreaty were aforetime unknown to me, and now their tones fell on my ear soft and sweet as a distant peal of bells. I wished that I knew how to speak properly in reply; but though we were of the same standing as regarded worldly circumstances, there was some mighty difference between us, which made me unable to speak in her language of soft words and modest entreaty. There was nothing for me but to take up the pitcher in a kind of gruff, shy silence, and carry it over the bridge, as she had asked me. When I gave it her back again, she thanked me and tripped away, leaving me, wordless, gazing after her like an awkward lout as I was. I knew well enough who she was. She was grandchild to Eleanor Hadfield, an aged woman, who was reputed as a witch by my father and his set, for no other reason, that I can make out, than her scorn, dignity, and fearlessness of rancour. It was true we often met her in the grey dawn of the morning, when we returned from poaching, and my father used to curse her, under his breath, for a witch, such as were burnt long ago on Pendle Hill top; but I had heard that Eleanor was a skilful sick nurse, and ever ready to give her services to those who were ill; and I believe that she had been sitting up through the night (the night that we had been spending under the wild heavens, in deeds as wild), with those who were appointed to die. Nelly was her orphan granddaughter; her little hand-maiden; her treasure; her one ewe lamb. Many and many a day have I watched by the brook-side, hoping that some happy gust of wind, coming with opportune bluster down the hollow of the dale, might make me necessary once more to her. I longed to hear her speak to me again. I said the words she had used to myself, trying to catch her tone; but the chance never came again. I do not know that she ever knew how I watched for her there. I found out that she went to school, and nothing would serve me but that I must go too. My father scoffed at me; I did not care. I knew nought of what reading was, nor that it was likely that I should be laughed at; I, a great hulking lad of seventeen or upwards, for going to learn my A, B, C, in the midst of a crowd of little ones. I stood just this way in my mind. Nelly was at school; it was the best place for seeing her, and hearing her voice again. Therefore I would go too. My father talked, and swore, and threatened, but I stood to it. He said I should leave school, weary of it in a month. I swore a deeper oath than I like to remember, that I would stay a year, and come out a reader and a writer. My father hated the notion of folks learning to read, and said it took all the spirit out of them; besides, he thought he had a right to every penny of my wages, and though, when he was in good humour, he might have given me many a jug of ale, he grudged my twopence a week for schooling. However, to school I went. It was a different place to what I had thought it before I went inside. The girls sat on one side, and the boys on the other; so I was not near Nelly. She, too, was in the first class; I was put with the little toddling things that could hardly tun alone. The master sat in the middle, and kept pretty strict watch over us. But I could see Nelly, and hear her read her chapter; and even when it was one with a long list of hard names, such as the master was very fond of giving her, to show how well she could hit them off without spelling, I thought I had never heard a prettier music. Now and then she read other things. I did not know what they were, true or false; but I listened because she read; and, by-and-by, I began to wonder. I remember the first word I ever spoke to her was to ask her (as we were coming out of school) who was the Father of whom she had been reading, for when she said the words 'Our Father,' her voice dropped into a soft, holy kind of low sound, which struck me more than any loud reading, it seemed so loving and tender. When I asked her this, she looked at me with her great blue wondering eyes, at first shocked; and then, as it were, melted down into pity and sorrow, she said in the same way, below her breath, in which she read the words, 'Our Father,'

'Don't you know? It is God.'

'God?'

'Yes; the God that grandmother tells me about.'

'Tell me what she says, will you?' So we sat down on the hedge-bank, she a little above me, while I looked up into her face, and she told me all the holy texts her grandmother had taught her, as explaining all that could be explained of the Almighty. I listened in silence, for indeed I was overwhelmed with astonishment. Her knowledge was principally rote-knowledge; she was too young for much more; but we, in Lancashire, speak a rough kind of Bible language, and the texts seemed very clear to me. I rose up, dazed and overpowered. I was going away in silence, when I bethought me of my manners, and turned back, and said, 'Thank you,' for the first time I ever remember saying it in my life. That was a great day for me, in more ways than one.

I was always one who could keep very steady to an object when once I had set it before me. My object was to know Nelly. I was conscious of nothing more. But it made me regardless of all other things. The master might scold, the little ones might laugh; I bore it all without giving it a second thought. I kept to my year, and came out a reader and writer; more, however, to stand well in Nelly's good opinion, than because of my oath. About this time, my father committed some bad, cruel deed, and had to fly the country. I was glad he went; for I had never loved or cared for him, and wanted to shake myself clear of his set. But it was no easy matter. Honest folk stood aloof; only bad men held out their arms to me with a welcome. Even Nelly seemed to have a mixture of fear now with her kind ways towards me. I was the son of John Middleton, who, if he were caught, would be hung at Lancaster Castle. I thought she looked at me sometimes with a sort of sorrowful horror. Others were not forbearing enough to keep their expression of feeling confined to looks. The son of the overlooker at the mill never ceased twitting me with my father's crime; he now brought up his poaching against him, though I knew very well how many a good supper he himself had made on game which had been given him to make him and his lather wink at late hours in the morning. And how were such as my father to come honestly by game?

This lad, Dick Jackson, was the bane of my life. He was a year or two older than I was, and had much power over the men who worked at the mill, as he could report to his lather what he chose. I could not always hold my peace when he 'threatened' me with my father's sins, but gave it him back sometimes in a storm of passion. It did me no good; only threw me farther from the company of better men, who looked aghast and shocked at the oaths I poured out – blasphemous words learnt in my childhood, which I could not forget now that I would fain have purified myself of them; while all the time Dick Jackson stood by, with a mocking smile of intelligence; and when I had ended, breathless and weary with spent passion, he would run to those whose respect I longed to earn, and ask if I were not a worthy son of my lather, and likely to tread in his steps. But this smiling indifference of his to my miserable vehemence was not all, though it was the worst part of his conduct, for it made the rankling hatred grow up in my heart, and overshadow it like the great gourd-tree of the prophet Jonah. But his was a merciful shade, keeping out the burning sun; mine blighted what it fell upon.

What Dick Jackson did besides, was this. His father was a skilful overlooker, and a good man. Mr Peel valued him so much, that he was kept on, although his health was failing; and when he was unable, through illness, to come to the mill, he deputed his son to watch over, and report the men. It was too much power for one so young I speak it calmly now. Whatever Dick Jackson became, he had strong temptations when he was young, which will be allowed for hereafter. But at the time of which I am telling, my hate raged like a fire. I believed that he was the one sole obstacle to my being received as fit to mix with good and honest men. I was sick of crime and disorder, and would fain have come over to a different kind of life, and have been industrious, sober, honest, and right-spoken (I had no idea of higher virtue then), and at every turn Dick Jackson met me with his sneers. I have walked the night through, in the old abbey field, planning how I could outwit him, and win men's respect in spite of him. The first time I ever prayed, was underneath the silent stars, kneeling by the old abbey walls, throwing up my arms, and asking God for the power of revenge upon him.

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I had heard that if I prayed earnestly, God would give me what I asked for, and I looked upon it as a kind of chance for the fulfilment of my wishes. If earnestness would have won the boon for me, never were wicked words so earnestly spoken. And oh, later on, my prayer was heard, and my wish granted! All this time I saw little of Nelly. Her grandmother was failing, and she had much to do in-doors. Besides, I believed I had read her looks aright, when I took them to speak of aversion; and I planned to hide myself from her sight, as it were, until I could stand upright before men, with fearless eyes, dreading no face of accusation. It was possible to acquire a good character; I would do it I did it: but no one brought up among respectable untempted people can tell the unspeakable hardness of the task. In the evenings I would not go forth among the village throng; for the acquaintances that claimed me were my father's old associates, who would have been glad enough to enlist a strong young man like me in their projects; and the men who would have shunned me and kept aloof, were the steady and orderly. So I stayed in-doors, and practised myself in reading. You will say, I should have found it easier to earn a good character away from Sawley, at some place where neither I nor my father was known. So I should; but it would not have been the same thing to my mind. Besides, representing all good men, all goodness to me, in Sawley Nelly lived. In her sight I would work out my life, and fight my way upwards to men's respect. Two years passed on. Every day I strove fiercely; every day my struggles were made fruitless by the son of the overlooker; and I seemed but where I was but where I must ever be esteemed by all who knew me but as the son of the criminal wild, reckless, ripe for crime myself. Where was the use of my reading and writing? These acquirements were disregarded and scouted by those among whom I was thrust back to take my portion. I could have read any chapter in the Bible now; and Nelly seemed as though she would never know it. I was driven in upon my books; and few enough of them I had. The pedlars brought them round in their packs, and I bought what I could. I had the Seven Champions, and the Pilgrim's Progress, and both seemed to me equally wonderful, and equally founded on fact. I got Byron's Narrative, and Milton's Paradise Lost; but I lacked the knowledge which would give a clue to all. Still they afforded me pleasure, because they took me out of myself, and made me forget my miserable position, and made me unconscious (for the time at least) of my one great passion of hatred against Dick Jackson.

When Nelly was about seventeen her grandmother died. I stood aloof in the churchyard, behind the great yew-tree, and watched the funeral. It was the first religious service that ever I heard; and, to my shame, as I thought, it affected me to tears. The words seemed so peaceful and holy that I longed to go to church, but I durst not, because I had never been. The parish church was at Bolton, far enough away to serve as an excuse for all who did not care to go. I heard Noel's sobs filling up every pause in the clergyman's voice; and every sob of hers went to my heart. She passed me on her way out of the churchyard; she was so near I might have touched her; but her head was hanging down, and I durst not speak to her. Then the question arose, what was to become of her? She must earn her living! was it to be as a farm-servant, or by working at the mill? I knew enough of both kinds of life to make me tremble for her. My wages were such as to enable me to marry, if I chose; and I never thought of woman, for my wife, but Nelly. Still, I would not have married her now, if I could; for, as yet, I had not risen up to the character which I determined it was fit that Nelly's husband should have. When I was rich in good report, I would come forwards, and take my chance, but until then I would hold my peace. I had faith in the power of my long-continued dogged breasting of opinion. Sooner or later it must, it should, yield, and I be received among the ranks of good men. But, meanwhile, what was to become of Nelly? I reckoned up my wages; I went to inquire what the board of a girl would be who should help her in her household work, and live with her as a daughter, at the house of one of the most decent women of the place; she looked at me suspiciously. I kept down my temper, and told her I would never come near the place; that I would keep away from that end of the village, and that the girl for whom I made the inquiry should never know but what the parish paid for her keep. It would not do; she suspected me; but I know I had power over myself to have kept my word; and besides, I would not for worlds have had Nelly put under any obligation to me, which should speck the purity of her love, or dim it by a mixture of gratitude, the love that I craved to earn, not for my money, not for my kindness, but for myself. I heard that Nelly had met with a place in Bolland; and I could see no reason why I might not speak to her once before she left our neighbourhood. I meant it to be a quiet friendly telling her of my sympathy in her sorrow. I felt I could command myself. So, on the Sunday before she was to leave Sawley, I waited near the wood-path, by which I knew that she would return from afternoon church. The birds made such a melodious warble, such a busy sound

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among the leaves, that I did not hear approaching footsteps till they were close at hand; and then there were sounds of two persons' voices. The wood was near that part of Sawley where Nelly was staying with friends; the path through it led to their house, and theirs only, so I knew it must be she, for I had watched her setting out to church alone.

But who was the other?

The blood went to my heart and head, as if I were shot, when I saw that it was Dick Jackson. Was this the end of it all? In the steps of sin which my father had trod, I would rush to my death and my doom. Even where I stood I longed for a weapon to slay him. How dared he come near my Nelly? She too. I thought her faithless, and forgot how little I had ever been to her in outward action; how few words, and those how uncouth, I had ever spoken to her; and I hated her for a traitress. These feelings passed through me before I could see, my eyes and head were so dizzy and blind. When I looked I saw Dick Jackson holding her hand, and speaking quick and low and thick, as a man speaks in great vehemence. She seemed white and dismayed; but all at once, at some word of his (and what it was she never would tell me), she looked as though she defied a fiend, and wrenched herself out of his grasp. He caught hold of her again, and began once more the thick whisper that I loathed. I could bear it no longer, nor did I see why I should. I stepped out from behind the tree where I had been lying. When she saw me, she lost her look of one strung up to desperation. and came and clung to me; and I felt like a giant in strength and might. I held her with one arm, but I did not take my eyes off him; I felt as if they blazed down into his soul, and scorched him up. He never spoke, but tried to look as though he defied me. At last, his eyes fell before mine, I dared not speak; for the old horrid oaths thronged up to my mouth; and I dreaded giving them way, and terrifying my poor, trembling Nelly.

At last, he made to go past me: I drew her out of the pathway. By instinct she wrapped her garments round her, as if to avoid his accidental touch; and he was stung by this, I suppose I believe to the mad, miserable revenge he took. As my back was turned to him, in an endeavour to speak some words to Nelly that might soothe her into calmness, she, who was looking after him, like one fascinated with terror, saw him take a sharp, shaley stone, and aim it at me. Poor darling! she clung round me as a shield, making her sweet body into a defence for mine. It hit her, and she spoke no word, kept back her cry of pain, but fell at my feet in a swoon. He the coward! ran off as soon as he saw what he had done. I was with Nelly alone in the green gloom of the wood. The quivering and leaf-tinted light made her look as if she were dead. I carried her, not knowing if I bore a corpse or not, to her friend's house. I did not stay to explain, but ran madly for the doctor.

Well! I cannot bear to recur to that time again. Five weeks I lived in the agony of suspense; from which my only relief was in laying savage plans for revenge. If I hated him before, what think ye I did now? It seemed as if earth could not hold us twain, but that one of us must go down to Gehenna. I could have killed him; and would have done it without a scruple, but that seemed too poor and bold a revenge. At length oh! the weary waiting oh! the sickening of my heart Nelly grew better; as well as she was ever to grow. The bright colour had left her cheek; the mouth quivered with repressed pain, the eyes were dim with tears that agony had forced into them; and I loved her a thousand times better and more than when she was bright and blooming! What was best of all, I began to perceive that she cared for me. I know her grandmother's friends warned her against me, and told her I came of a bad stock; but she had passed the point where remonstrance from bystanders can take effect she loved me as I was, a strange mixture of bad and good. all unworthy of her. We spoke together now, as those do whose lives are bound up in each other. I told her I would marry her as Soon as she had recovered her health. Her friends shook their heads; but they saw she would be unfit for farm-service or heavy work, and they perhaps thought, as many a one does, that a bad husband was better than none at all. Anyhow, we were married; and I learnt to bless God for my happiness, so far beyond my deserts. I kept her like a lady. I was a skilful workman, and earned good wages; and every want she had I tried to gratify. Her wishes were few and simple enough, poor Nelly! If they had been ever so fanciful, I should have had my reward in the new feeling of the holiness of home. She could lead me as a little child, with the charm of her gentle voice, and her ever-kind words. She would plead for all when I was frill of anger and passion; only Dick Jackson's name passed never between our lips during all that time. In the evening

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she lay back in her beehive chair, and read to me. I think I see her now, pale and weak, with her sweet, young face, lighted by her holy, earnest eyes, telling me of the Saviour's life and death, till they were filled with tears. I longed to have been there, to have avenged him on the wicked Jews. I liked Peter the best of all the disciples. But I got the Bible myself, and read the mighty act of God's vengeance, in the Old Testament, with a kind of triumphant faith that, sooner or later, He would take my cause in hand, and revenge me on mine enemy.

In a year or so, Nelly had a baby a little girl, with eyes just like Nelly recovered but slowly. It was just before winter, the cotton-crop had failed, and master had to turn off many hands. I thought I was sure of being kept on, for I had earned a steady character, and did my work well; but once again it was permitted that Dick Jackson should do me wrong. He induced his father to dismiss me among the first in my branch of the business; and there was I, just before winter set in, with a wife and new-born child, and a small enough store of money to keep body and soul together, till I could get to work again. All my savings had gone by Christmas Eve, and we sat in the house, foodless for the morrow's festival. Nelly looked pinched and worn; the baby cried for a larger supply of milk than its poor, starving mother could give it. My right hand had not forgot its cunning, and I went out once more to my poaching. I knew where the gang met; and I knew what a welcome back I should have, a far warmer and more hearty welcome than good men had given me when I tried to enter their ranks. On the road to the meeting-place I fell in with an old man, – one who had been a companion to my father in his early days.

'What, lad!' said he, 'art thou turning back to the old trade? It's the better business, now that cotton has failed.'

'Ay,' said I, 'cotton is starving us outright. A man may bear a deal himself, but he'll do aught bad and sinful to save his wife and child.'

'Nay, lad,' said he, 'poaching is not sinful; it goes against man's laws, but not against God's.'

I was too weak to argue or talk much. I had not tasted food for two days. But I murmured, 'At any rate, I trusted to have been clear of it for the rest of my days. It led my father wrong at first. I have tried and I have striven. Now I give all up. Right or wrong shall be the same to me. Some are foredoomed; and so am I.' And as I spoke, some notion of the futurity that would separate Nelly, the pure and holy, from me, the reckless and desperate one, came over me with an irrepressible burst of anguish. Just then the bells of Bolton-in-Bolland struck up a glad peal, which came over the woods, in the solemn midnight air, like the sons of the morning shouting for joy they seemed so clear and jubilant. It was Christmas Day: and I felt like an outcast from the gladness and the salvation. Old Jonah spoke out:

'Yon's the Christmas bells. I say, Johnny, my lad, I've no notion of taking such a spiritless chap as thou into the thick of it, with thy rights and thy wrongs. We don't trouble ourselves with such fine lawyer's stuff, and we bring down the "varmint" all the better. Now, I'll not have thee in our gang, for thou art not up to the fun, and thou'd hang fire when the time came to be doing. But I've a shrewd guess that plaguy wife and child of thine are at the bottom of thy half-and-half joining. Now, I was thy father's friend afore he took to them helter-skelter ways, and I've five shillings and a neck of mutton at thy service. I'll not list a fasting man; but if thou'lt come to us with a full stomach, and say, "I like your life, my lads, and I'll make one of you with pleasure, the first shiny night," why, we'll give you a welcome and a half; but, to-night, make no more ado. but turn back with me for the mutton and the money.'

I was not proud: nay, I was most thankful. I took the meat, and boiled some broth for my poor Nelly. She was in a sleep, or a faint, I know not which; but I roused her, and held her up in bed, and fed her with a teaspoon, and the light came back to her eyes, and the faint, moonlight smile to her lips; and when she had ended, she said her innocent grace, and fell asleep, with her baby on her breast. I sat over the fire, and listened to the bells, as they swept past my cottage on the gusts of the wind. I longed and yearned for the second coming of Christ, of which Nelly had told me. The world seemed cruel, and hard, and strong too strong for me; and I prayed to cling to the hem of His garment, and be borne over the rough places when I fainted, and bled, and found no man to pity or

help me, but poor old Jonah, the publican and sinner. All this time my own woes and my own self were uppermost in my mind. as they are in the minds of most who have been hardly used. As I thought of my wrongs, and my sufferings, my heart burned against Dick Jackson; and as the bells rose and fell, so my hopes waxed and waned, that in those mysterious days, of which they were both the remembrance and the prophecy, he would be purged from off the earth. I took Nelly's Bible, and turned, not to the gracious story of the Saviour's birth, but to the records of the former days, when the Jews took such wild revenge upon all their opponents. I was a Jew, a leader among the people. Dick Jackson was as Pharaoh, as the King Agag, who walked delicately, thinking the bitterness of death was past, in short, he was the conquered enemy, over whom I gloated, with my Bible in my hand that Bible which contained our Saviour's words on the Cross. As yet, those words seemed faint and meaningless to me, like a tract of country seen in the starlight haze; while the histories of the Old Testament were grand and distinct in the blood-red colour of sunset. By-and-by that night passed into day, and little piping voices came round, carol-singing. They wakened Nelly. I went to her as soon as I heard her stirring.

'Nelly,' said I, 'there's money and food in the house; I will be off to Padiham seeking work, while thou hast something to go upon.

'Not to-day,' said she; 'stay to-day with me. If thou wouldst only go to church with me this once' for you see I had never been inside a church but when we were married, and she was often praying me to go; and now she looked at me, with a sigh just creeping forth from her lips, as she expected a refusal. But I did not refuse. I had been kept away from church before because I dared not go; and now I was desperate, and dared do anything. If I did look like a heathen in the face of all men, why, I was a heathen in my heart; for I was falling back into all my evil ways. I had resolved if my search of work at Padiham should fail, I would follow my father's footsteps, and take with my own right hand and by my strength of arm what it was denied me to obtain honestly. I had resolved to leave Sawley, where a curse seemed to hang over me; so, what did it matter if I went to church, all unknowing what strange ceremonies were there performed? I walked thither as a sinful man sinful in my heart. Nelly hung on my arm, but even she could not get me to speak. I went in; she found my places, and pointed to the words, and looked up into my eyes with hers, so full of faith and joy. But I saw nothing but Richard Jackson I heard nothing but his loud nasal voice, making response, and desecrating all the holy words. He was in broadcloth of the best I in my fustian jacket. He was prosperous and glad I was starving and desperate. Nelly grew pale. as she saw the expression in my eyes; and she prayed ever, and ever more fervently as the thought of me tempted by the Devil even at that very moment came more fully before her.

By-and-by she forgot even me, and laid her soul bare before God, in a long, silent, weeping prayer, before we left the church. Nearly all had gone; and I stood by her, unwilling to disturb her, unable to join her. At last she rose up, heavenly calm. She took my arm, and we went home through the woods, where all the birds seemed tame and familiar. Nelly said she thought all living creatures knew it was Christmas Day, and rejoiced, and were loving together. I believed it was the frost that had tamed them; and I felt the hatred that was in me, and knew that whatever else was loving, I was full of malice and uncharitableness, nor did I wish to be otherwise. That afternoon I bade Nelly and our child farewell, and tramped to Padiham. I got work how I hardly know; for stronger and stronger came the force of the temptation to lead a wild, free life of sin; legions seemed whispering evil thoughts to me, and only my gentle, pleading Newly to pull me back from the great gulf. However, as I said before, I got work, and set off homewards to move my wife and child to that neighbourhood. I hated Sawley, and yet I was fiercely indignant to leave it, with my purposes unaccomplished. I was still an outcast from the more respectable, who stood afar off from such as I; and mine enemy lived and flourished in their regard. Padiham, however, was not so far away for me to despair to relinquish my fixed determination. It was on the eastern side of the great Pendle Hill, ten miles away maybe. Hate will overleap a greater obstacle. I took a cottage on the Fell, high up on the side of the hill. We saw a long black moorland slope before us, and then the grey stone houses of Padiham, over which a black cloud hung, different from the blue wood or turf smoke about Sawley. The wild winds came down and whistled round our house many a day when all was still below. But I was happy then. I rose in men's esteem. I had work in plenty. Our child lived and thrived. But I forgot not our country proverb 'Keep a stone in thy pocket for seven years: turn it, and keep it seven years more; but have it ever ready to cast at thine

enemy when the time comes.'

One day a fellow-workman asked me to go to a hill-side preaching. Now, I never cared to go to church; but there was something newer and freer in the notion of praying to God right under His great dome; and the open air had had a charm to me ever since my wild boyhood. Besides, they said, these ranters had strange ways with them, and I thought it would be fun to see their way of setting about it; and this ranter of all others had made himself a name in our parts. Accordingly we went; it was a fine summer's evening, after work was done. When we got to the place we saw such a crowd as I never saw before men, women, and children; all ages were gathered together, and sat on the hill-side. They were care-worn, diseased, sorrowful, criminal'. all that was told on their faces. which were hard and strongly marked. In the midst, standing in a cart, was the ranger. When I first saw him, I said to my companion, 'Lord! what a little man to make all this pother! I could trio him up with one of my fingers,' and then I sat down, and looked about me a bit. All eyes were fixed on the preacher; and I turned mine upon him too. He began to speak; it was in no fine-drawn language, but in words such as we heard every day of our lives, and about things we did every day of our lives. He did nor call our shortcomings pride or worldliness, or pleasure-seeking, which would have given us no clear notion of what he meant, but he just told us outright what we did, and then he gave it a name. and said that it was accursed, and that we were lost if we went on so doing.

By this time the tears and sweat were running down his face; he was wrestling for our souls. We wondered how he knew our innermost lives as he did, for each one of us saw his sin set before him in plain-spoken words. Then he cried out to us to repent; and spoke first to us, and then to God, in a way that would have shocked many but it did not shock me. I liked strong things; and I liked the bare, hill truth: and I felt brought nearer to God in that hour the summer darkness creeping over us, and one after one the stars coming out above us, like the eyes of the angels watching us than I had ever done in my life before. When he had brought us to our tears and sighs, he stopped his loud voice of upbraiding, and there was a hush, only broken by sobs and quivering moans, in which I heard through the gloom the voices of strong men in anguish and supplication, as well as the shriller tones or women. Suddenly he was heard again; by this time we could not see him; but his voice was now tender as the voice of an angel, and he told us of Christ, and implored us to come to Him. I never heard such passionate entreaty. He spoke as if he saw Satan hovering near us in the dark, dense night, and as if our only safety lay in a very present coming to the Cross; I believe he did see Satan; we know he haunts the desolate old hills, awaiting his time, and now or never it was with many a soul. At length there was a sudden silence; and by the cries of those nearest to the preacher, we heard that he had fainted. We had all crowded round him, as if he were our safety and our guide; and he was overcome by the heat and the fatigue, for we were the fifth set of people whom he had addressed that day. I left the crowd who were leading him down, and took a lonely path myself.

Here was the earnestness I needed. To this weak and weary fainting man, religion was a life and a passion. I look back now, and wonder at my blindness as to what was the took of all my Noel's patience and long-suffering; for I thought, now I had found out what religion was, and that hitherto it had been all an unknown thing to me.

Henceforward, my life was changed. I was zealous and fanatical. Beyond the set to whom I had affiliated myself, I had no sympathy. I would have persecuted all who differed from me, if I had only had the power. I became an ascetic in all bodily enjoyments. And, strange and inexplicable mystery, I had some thoughts that by every act of self-denial I was attaining to my unholy end, and that, when I had fasted and prayed long enough, God would place my vengeance in my hands. I have knelt by Nelly's bedside, and vowed to live a self-denying life, as regarded all outward things, if so that God would grant my prayer. I left it in His hands. I felt sure He would trace out the token and the word; and Nelly would listen to my passionate words, and lie awake sorrowful and heart-sore through the night; and I would get up and make her tea, and rearrange her pillows, with a strange and willful blindness that my bitter words and blasphemous prayers had cost her miserable, sleepless nights. My Nelly was suffering yet from that blow. How or where the stone had hurt her, I never understood; but in consequence of that one moment's action, her limbs became numb and dead, and, by slow degrees, she took to her bed, from whence she was never carried alive. There she lay, propped up by pillows, her meek face ever bright, and smiling forth a greeting; her white, pale hands ever busy with some kind of work; and our little Grace was as the power of

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motion to her. Fierce as I was away from her, I never could speak to her but in my gentlest tones. She seemed to me as if she had never wrestled for salvation as I had; and when away from her, I resolved many a time and oft, that I would rouse her up to her state of danger when I returned home that evening even if strong reproach were required I would rouse her up to her soul's need. But I came in and heard her voice singing softly some holy word of patience, some psalm which, maybe, had comforted the martyrs, and when I saw her face like the face of an angel, full of patience and happy faith, I put off my awakening speeches nil another time.

One night, long ago, when I was yet young and strong, although my years were past forty, I sat alone in my houseplace. Nelly was always in bed, as I have told you, and Grace lay in a cot by her side. I believed them to be both asleep; though how they could sleep I could not conceive, so wild and terrible was the night. The wind came sweeping down from the hill—top in great beats, like the pulses of heaven; and, during the pauses, while I listened for the coming roar, I felt the earth shiver beneath me. The rain beat against windows and doors, and sobbed for entrance. I thought the Prince of the Air was abroad; and I heard, or fancied I heard, shrieks come on the blast, like the cries of sinful souls given over to his power.

The sounds came nearer and neater. I got up and saw to the fastenings of the door, for though I cared not for mortal man, I did care for what I believed was surrounding the house, in evil might and power. But the door shook as though it, too, were in deadly terror, and I thought the fastenings would give way. I stood facing the entrance, lashing my heart up to defy the spiritual enemy that I looked to see, every instant, in bodily presence; and the door did burst open; and before me stood what was it? man or demon? a grey-haired man, with poor, worn clothes all wringing wet, and he himself battered and piteous to look upon, from the storm he had passed through.

'Let me in!' he said. 'Give me shelter. I am poor, or I would reward you. And I am friendless, too,' he said, looking up in my face, like one seeking what he cannot find. In that look, strangely changed, I knew that God had heard me; for it was the old cowardly look of my life's enemy. Had he been a stranger, I might not have welcomed him; but as he was mine enemy, I gave him welcome in a lordly dish. I sat opposite to him. 'Whence do you come?' said I. 'It is a strange night to be out on the fells.'

He looked up at me sharp; but in general he held his head down like a beast or hound.

You won't betray me. I'll not trouble you long. As soon as the storm abates, I'll go.'

'Friend!' said I, 'what have I to betray?' and I trembled lest he should keep himself out of my power and not tell me. 'You come for shelter, and I give you of my best. Why do you suspect me?'

'Because,' said he, in his abject bitterness, all the world is against me. I never met with goodness or kindness; and now I am hunted like a wild beast. I'll tell you I'm a convict returned before my time. I was a Sway man' (as if I, of all men, did not know it!), 'and I went back, like a fool, to the old place. They've hunted me out where I would fain have lived rightly and quietly, and they'll send me back to that hell upon earth, if they catch me. I did not know it would be such a night. Only let me rest and get warm once more, and I'll go away. Good, kind man, have pity upon me!' I smiled all his doubts away; I promised him a bed on the floor, and I thought of Jael and Sisera. My heart leaped up like a war-horse at the sound of the trumpet, and said, 'Ha, ha, the Lord hath heard my prayer and supplication; I shall have vengeance at last!'

He did not dream who I was. He was changed; so that I, who had learned his features with all the diligence of hatred, did not, at first, recognize him; and he thought not of me, only of his own woe and affright. He looked into the fire with the dreamy gaze of one whose strength of character, if he had any, is beaten out of him, and cannot return at any emergency whatsoever. He sighed and pitied himself, yet could not decide on what to do. I went softly about my business, which was to make him up a bed on the floor, and, when he was lulled to sleep and security, to make the best of my way to Padiham, and summon the constable, into whose hands I would give him

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up, to be taken back to his 'hell upon earth.' I went into Nelly's room. She was awake and anxious. I saw she had been listening to the voices.

'Who is there?' said she. 'John, tell me; it sounded like a voice I knew. For God's sake, speak!'

I smiled a quiet smile. It is a poor man, who has lost his way. Go to sleep, my dear I shall make him up on the floor. I may not come for some time. Go to sleep;' and I kissed her. I thought she was soothed, but not fully satisfied. However, I hastened away before there was any further time for questioning. I made up the bed, and Richard Jackson, tired out, lay down and fell asleep. My contempt for him almost equalled my hate. If I were avoiding return to a place which I thought to be a hell upon earth, think you I would have taken a quiet sleep under any man's roof till, somehow or another, I was secure. Now comes this man, and, with incontinence of tongue, blabs out the very thing he most should conceal, and then lies down to a good, quiet, snoring sleep. I looked again. His face was old, and worn, and miserable. So should mine enemy look. And yet it was sad to gaze upon him, poor, hunted creature!

I would gaze no more, lest I grew weak and pitiful. Thus I took my hat, and softly opened the door. The wind blew in, but did not disturb him, he was so utterly weary. I was out in the open air of night. The storm was ceasing, and, instead of the black sky of doom that I had seen when I last looked forth, the moon was come out, wan and pale, as if wearied with the fight in the heavens, and her white light fell ghostly and calm on many a well-known object. Now and then, a dark, torn cloud was blown across her home in the sky; but they grew fewer and fewer, and at last she shone out steady and clear. I could see Padiham down before me. I heard the noise of the watercourses down the hill-side. My mind was full of one thought, and strained upon that one thought, and yet my senses were most acute and observant. When I came to the brook, it was swollen to a rapid, tossing river; and the little bridge, with its hand-rail, was utterly swept away. It was like the bridge at Sway, where I had first seen Newly; and I remembered that day even then in the midst of my vexation at having to go round. I turned away from the brook, and there stood a little figure facing me. No spirit from the dead could have affrighted me as it did; for I saw it was Grace, whom I had left in bed by her mother's side.

She came to me, and took my hand. Her bare feet glittered white in the moonshine, and sprinkled the light upwards, as they plashed through the pool.

'Father,' said she, 'mother bade me say this.' Then pausing to gather breath and memory. she repeated these words, like a lesson of which she feared to forget a syllable:

'Mother says, "There is a God in heaven; and in His house are many mansions. If you hope to meet her there, you will come back and speak to her; if you are to be separate for ever and ever, you will go on, and may God have mercy on her and on you!" Father, I have said it right every word.' I was silent. At last, I said,

'What made mother say this? How came she to send you out?'

'I was asleep, father, and I heard her cry. I wakened up, and I think you had but just left the house, and that she was calling for you. Then she prayed, with the tears rolling down her cheeks, and kept saying "Oh, that I could walk! oh, that for one hour I could run and walk!" So I said, "Mother, I can run and walk. Where must I go?" And she clutched at my arm, and bade God bless me, and told me not to fear, for that He would compass me about, and taught me my message: and now, father, dear father, you will meet mother in heaven, won't you, and not be separate for ever and ever?' She clung to my knees, and pleaded once more in her mother's words. I took her up in my arms, and turned homewards.

'Is yon man there, on the kitchen floor?' asked I.

'Yes!' she answered. At any rate, my vengeance was not out of my power yet.

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When we got home I passed him, dead asleep.

In our room, to which my child guided me, was Nelly. She sat up in bed, a most unusual attitude for her, and one of which I thought she had been incapable of attaining to without help. She had her hands clasped, and her face rapt, as if in prayer; and when she saw me. she lay back with a sweet ineffable smile. She could not speak at first; but when I came near, she took my hand and kissed it, and then she called Grace to her, and made her take off her cloak and her wet things, and dressed in her short scanty nightgown, she slipped in to her mother's warm side; and all this time my Nelly never told me why she summoned me: it seemed enough that she should hold my hand, and feel that I was there. I believed she had read my heart; and yet I durst not speak to ask her. At last, she looked up. 'My husband,' said she, 'God has saved you and me from a great sorrow this night.' I would not understand, and I felt her look die away into disappointment.

'That poor wanderer in the house—place is Richard Jackson, is it not?'

I made no answer. Her face grew white and wan. 'Oh,' said she, 'this is hard to bear. Speak what is in your mind, I beg of you. I will not thwart you harshly; dearest John, only speak to me.'

'Why need I speak? You seem to know all.'

'I do know that his is a voice I can never forget; and I do know the awful prayers you have prayed; and I know how I have lain awake, to pray that your words might never be heard; and I am a powerless cripple. I put my cause in God's hands. You shall not do the man any harm. What you have it in your thoughts to do, I cannot tell. But I know that you cannot do it. My eyes are dim with a strange mist; but some voice tells me that you will forgive even Richard Jackson. Dear husband dearest John, it is so dark, I cannot see you: but speak once to me.'

I moved the candle; but when I saw her face, I saw what was drawing the mist over those loving eyes how strange and woeful that she could die! Her little girl lying by her side looked in my face, and then at her; and the wild knowledge of death shot through her young heart, and she screamed aloud.

Nelly opened her eyes once more. They fell upon the gaunt, sorrow—worn man who was the cause of all. He roused him from his sleep, at that child's piercing cry, and stood at the doorway. looking in. He knew Nelly, and understood where the storm had driven him to shelter. He came towards her

'Oh, woman dying woman you have haunted me in the loneliness of the Bush far away you have been in my dreams for ever the hunting of men has not been so terrible as the hunting of your spirit, that stone that stone!' He fell down by her bedside in an agony; above which her saint—like face looked on us all, for the last time, glorious with the coming light of heaven. She spoke once again:

'It was a moment of passion; I never bore you malice for it. I forgive you; and so does John, I trust.'

Could I keep my purpose there? It faded into nothing. But, above my choking tears, I strove to speak clear and distinct, for her dying ear to hear, and her sinking heart to be gladdened.

'I forgive you, Richard; I will befriend you in your trouble.'

She could not see; but, instead of the dim shadow of death stealing over her face, a quiet light came over it, which we knew was the look of a soul at rest.

That night I listened to his tale for her sake; and I learned that it is better to be sinned against than to sin. In the storm of the night mine enemy came to me; in the calm of the grey morning I led him forth, and bade him 'God speed.' And a woe had come upon me, but the burning burden of a sinful, angry heart was taken off. I am old now,

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and my daughter is married. I try to go about preaching and teaching in my rough, rude way; and what I teach is, how Christ lived and died, and what was Nelly's faith of love.