

Overdale

Emma Jane Worboise

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Chapter 1. AGATHA'S FUTURE

“Agatha, my dear, you have quite finished your packing?”

“Yes, ma'am I have only the labels to write. And oh, please, Miss Frere, may we have a last walk round the garden?”

“Most certainly. The evening is delightfully soft and mild; I hope we have had the last of the keen east winds. But, my dear, you should not say, 'and oh, please, Miss Frere.'”

“Should I not, ma'am? is it incorrect?”

“Not strictly incorrect, Agatha; but it is not in keeping with the character you now assume. It is too girlish, too impulsive; it savours too much of the schoolroom.”

“Indeed, Miss Frere, I feel that I am too girlish; but what can I do? I was only nineteen last birthday. It is so difficult to be always on one's guard, always wise in speech and action, behaving one's self with due circumspection, and maintaining a character for unimpeachable discretion!”

“It is difficult at your age, I grant, my dear; nevertheless, it is a difficulty that can be surmounted, and I need not say that in your case everything depends upon maintaining a proper decorum and gravity of demeanour. Child, I wish—I heartily wish—you were seven years older!”

“You think I am too young for this situation?”

“I do. And if I had not the most perfect confidence in your steadiness, in your religious principles, I would not let you go to Overdale. And there are peculiar and very delicate circumstances—But let us go into the garden, my love; the girls may be about, some of them, and I do not wish anyone to hear what I have to say to you, on the eve of your departure. 'Let girls remain girls,' is one of my maxims, you know. It is time enough for them to become women when they assume women's duties. You, my dear, leave your girlhood behind you, here at Cotswoldbury, and I have a few special words for your own ears only.”

The speakers in this dialogue were Miss Frere, an excellent middle-aged woman, the principal of a highly respectable and prosperous ladies' boarding school, and Agatha Bevan, who had been her pupil for eight years, her Junior teacher for two more years, and her dear child for both periods. Agatha was an orphan, the daughter of a poor but well-born clergyman, who could leave his little girl scarcely more than his blessing when, in the early summer of his days, God called him from his vineyard toil. Agatha's mother had died shortly after the birth of this her only child, and her father lived but a few years longer. Agatha had only just entered her seventh year when the death of her paternal grandmother left her quite alone in the world. She had, however, several distant relatives, who had little desire to trouble themselves about her, but who could not very well ignore her existence, since they would certainly be sought out, and sooner or later importuned to “do something for her,” as the phrase goes. “Virtue is its own reward” is a trite and common saying; but as the Galbraiths made a virtue of necessity, I am not sure that they could expect the axiom to hold good. They were not wealthy, they were very proud, they were not generous, and they were blessed with large families of their own; therefore it is not surprising that they looked askance at the idea of an addition to their cares and responsibilities.

Still, their pride would not allow them to leave their small kinswoman to the world's cold charity. They could only send over a trustworthy person to St. Beetha's, in which cathedral city old Mrs. Bevan had died—her income also expiring with her—to fetch the little Agatha to Sutton-Magna, seven miles out of the great smoky town of Blackingham, to the home of her father's eldest half-sister, Mrs. Horace Galbraith. There were two Mrs. Galbraiths, Mrs. Horace and Mrs. Alexander, and they were both half-sisters of the late Rev. John Bevan, vicar of Bishop's Mortimer, in the county of Salop. Both had married Galbraiths, and both lived on the outskirts of the dull and ancient little country town of Sutton-Magna, where they held themselves coldly aloof from the Blackingham people, who, waxing rich, built themselves *quasi* mansions and desirable villa-residences in the vicinity of Sutton-Magna; and they professed to consort only with the county families, and to visit chiefly at a few houses between their own neighbourhood and St. Chad's, seven or eight miles further away on the other side from Blackingham.

After all, though, little Agatha had a very tiny fortune of her own. Her father had insured his life for a small sum; and her grandmother, by dint of pinching and contriving, had managed to save nearly two hundred pounds,

which the will said was to be devoted to “the education and maintenance of the said Agatha Bevan, till she reached her eighteenth birthday.”

Altogether, Agatha might have two hundred and fifty pounds, and that was to last her till she was eighteen.

Mrs. Horace Galbraith, who was supposed to be chiefly Agatha's guardian, was a very wise woman. She had drunk largely in her youth from the fountain of worldly wisdom, and the result in mature age was a profound and never-failing sagacity. She argued that they could easily take Agatha Bevan into their family, and clothe, and feed, and teach her without being much out of pocket. One child's keep is scarcely missed where there are half-a-dozen more, and the governess might as well have five as four round the schoolroom table. “But then,” continued the wise and worldly Mrs. Horace, speaking to her sister, the less wise less worldly Mrs. Alexander, “*then*, Kezia, there is the child's future to be considered. If we do as Horace and Alexander proposed last night—and at the first glance I must say it seems the fittest thing to do—we find her a home at a very small expense, and probably with very little trouble to ourselves; but at eighteen she will be a young woman, and all her money will be spent, and she will have to be provided for. She promises to be rather pretty; but girls without money do not marry well now-a-days unless they are well got off; and I shall have enough to do in getting off my own six daughters, without concerning myself about a penniless half-niece.”

“But I have no daughters,” said Mrs. Alexander.

“But, my dear Kezia, you have *sons*.”

“Sons! oh, yes. What of that, Jemima?”

“When will you learn prudence, common prudence, Kezia? You do not want your boys to marry her, I suppose?”

“Only one of them *could*. And it seems so absurd to talk of marriage between such children. Alick is only fourteen.”

“And in ten years' time he will be four-and-twenty. You never think of consequences, Kezia. Now, listen to my plan. We have children of our own, and we do not want interlopers, either now or in time to come. This child has a little money, which is to be spent on her maintenance and education. Let us place her in some good school for a term of years. Let us stipulate that she shall learn everything for which she evinces a capacity, and teach the junior pupils as she becomes older; that her home shall be with the lady with whom we place her; and that, upon attaining her eighteenth year, she shall be provided with a situation as governess in a gentleman's family. Then she is off our hands entirely; she is thrown upon her own resources; but she has a fortune at her command—the fortune of talents, and knowledge, and accomplishments, and such training as must fit her for the station in life to which Providence has destined her,”

Mrs. Alexander was not very clear-minded, and she spent several minutes in wondering whether Providence really destined Agatha Bevan to the station assigned her, or whether the destiny was not rather of her sister's contriving. But Kezia never pretended to argue with Jemima; for Jemima was always right somehow, and everybody knew that she was one of the cleverest, most managing, most self-reliant women in the world, brimming over with common sense, and uncommon sense as well, and bristling with facts and statistics, and strong-minded to a proverb.

So Mrs. Horace had her way, and Agatha went to school, and to a good school too. Happily for the child, Providence, who was arranging for her destinies never dreamed of by her aunts, brought Miss Frere and Mrs. Horace into contact. Miss Frere was well known as the head of an excellent boarding-school at Cotswoldbury; she was a very kind woman, a very conscientious woman, a real Christian. She was not accomplished, but then she kept efficient teachers, and employed the best professors; she was well read, and thoroughly mistress of her own language; also she was decidedly a gentlewoman, though, perhaps, a trifle too stiff both in manners and ideas; but that was the natural consequence of her life-long vocation. Fifty years of spinsterhood, and five-and-thirty years of governessing, would make Hebe herself precise and stiff.

At first Miss Frere demurred to receive Miss Bevan for so small a premium. £250 for ten or eleven years was not much, since once at Cotswoldbury, under the wing of Miss Frere, the Galbraiths washed their hands of her entirely. It was very much as if Mrs. Horace wanted to get rid of all responsibilities; for Agatha was not to come home for the holidays; she was to live entirely with Miss Frere, and be to her as a daughter, only Miss Frere was to receive a certain sum in compensation. This sum was finally fixed at £800, the two Mr. Galbraiths each furnishing £25, at the instance of Mrs. Horace, who had the sagacity to discover Miss Frere's sterling qualities,

and also a real desire that Agatha should be happy and done well by, provided she herself was not inconvenienced. So Miss Frere, who wanted ready-money, was glad of £800 paid down at once, and, in consideration thereof, she engaged to educate the little girl for a governess, to clothe her, feed her, doctor her if necessary, and at the right time to provide her with a suitable situation, which should be a good starting-point for her career.

All this and more Miss Frere faithfully accomplished, for, she took the orphan child to her heart, and was as a mother to her; and Agatha had a happy home, and she grew up fair to look at, clever, sweet-tempered, graceful, and accomplished.

It was not till she was nineteen that Miss Frere thought it incumbent on her to provide the situation spoken of at the commencement of the child's pupilage, and she was sorely tempted to keep her altogether; but it seemed best and right that, for several years at least, she should be away from Cotswoldbury, gaining new experience, Learning something of the world, and acquiring that dignity and composure which is so necessary to the principal of such an establishment as that over which Miss Frere held the rule; for the good lady, though for the present she kept her anticipations to herself, resolved that Agatha should only be "tossed about in the world," as she emphatically called it, with a bitter remembrance of her own youth, for a limited term of years; then she should return to Sunny Lawn as Miss Frere's partner, and finally succeed in all the responsibilities, honours, and pecuniary advantages accruing to the principal of a well-established, prosperous ladies' boarding-school. Well, we all know the old proverb, "*L'homme propose, et Dieu dispose;*" and Agatha had written it many times in her French copy-book; but, girl-like, had thought very little about it. She believed, of course, that God would dispose of her future as He saw fit but she believed it rather as a mere article of the Christian faith in which she had been brought up than as a blessed truth which should be as an anchor to her soul in all seasons of sorrow and perplexity. As to what man proposed for her, or rather woman—for Agatha took no cognisance of the male sex—she concerned herself very little, it had always been understood that she was to be a governess. She came to Sunny Lawn knowing that she was to work hard, and qualify herself for the position. The girls, her companions, all knew it; the teachers knew it, and would gently remind her of what lay before her, when she seemed inclined, in the exuberance of youthful spirits, to give vent to all the fun and frolic that was usually pent up within her. The masters knew it, and gave her certain instructions not accorded to other pupils, who were going to be "finished," prior to an introduction into society. Everybody knew it; and Agatha accepted her lot without a misgiving. She was quite content to be a governess; she was rather inclined to fret, now that the time was come, at leaving Miss Frere, and several bosom companions who were to remain behind at Cotswoldbury; but these natural regrets were all that intervened to mar the full content with which a young, healthy, and hopeful nature contemplated a change which was to give it fuller, freer scope than it had ever known before. For it must be confessed that Sunny Lawn, though a very good school, and a really happy home for school-girls *who behaved themselves*, was rather conventual in its tone; and Miss Frere was a little of the Lady Abbess, and the girls were required to be rather nun-like in their demeanour, where the opposite sex was concerned; and it was forbidden under direct pains and penalties to speak of a lover, to whisper of an engagement, or to allude, however remotely, to a *billet* or valentine. But I need not tell you the girls at Sunny Lawn did talk about *beaux*, and some of them were unwisely thinking of possible engagements; and one or two were, or imagined themselves to be, deeply "in love," and sundry confidences were exchanged, though Agatha, being strictly conscientious, refused to join in such conversations, and begged that she might not be told any secrets, lest she should feel obliged to disclose them to Miss Frere.

Agatha was a little surprised when she joined Miss Frere in the garden, on the eve of her departure, to hear her say, "My dear, I have a word to say to you respecting your behaviour towards the other sex."

But she meekly replied, "Yes, ma'am," and wondered what was coming.

"My dear, for so young a girl, your situation will be—well, rather difficult. I am afraid *I* ought not to have allowed *you* to enter a family where there was no proper mistress."

"I thought that Lady Jane Aylmer lived at Overdale Rectory."

"Of course she does, or no advantages of salary or situation would have induced me to permit your entrance upon life, under the roof of the Hon. and Rev. Mr. Aylmer. I mean I would have preferred at your first leaving me that you should reside with a married couple, or, better still, with a widow who would not be likely to form a second alliance. Now, Mr. Aylmer is unfortunately a *widower*,"

Agatha wondered how that could concern her. She had pictured him to herself ever since it had been decided

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that she should go to Overdale. She had an affectionate veneration for all clergymen, for the sake of her dead and scarcely remembered father; and this one, under whose roof she was about to spend her days and nights for many months together, she idealised to her heart's content. An elderly man—say fifty—with dark, fine eyes, rather stem features, but mild expression, with authoritative mien, yet gentle bearing, half priestly, half paternal in his character, and altogether good, kind and gravely polite !—Such was the kind of man Agatha expected to meet with, as the Rector of Overdale; and she further supposed that his hair would be slightly silvered, and his brow shadowed with the sorrow of a bereavement still comparatively recent; for scarcely eighteen months had elapsed since Lady Augusta, the mother of the children she was going to teach, had been gathered to her noble ancestors; “And, of course,” said Agatha to herself, “losing his wife must have been a very great sorrow, and he cannot nearly have got over it.”

“My dear, you must be most circumspect in your manner towards Mr. Aylmer,” resumed Miss Frere, in a low, impressive voice.

“Indeed I will be,” returned Agatha; “you have always taught me, dear Miss Frere, to reverence the clergymen of our Church.”

“That is not quite what I mean. Mr. Aylmer's widowed position renders it necessary that you should not only pay him all respect and obedience as your patron and your pastor, but at the same time maintain a very strict *reserve* in your intercourse with him. But I trust your own instincts, your natural maiden delicacy, will teach you how to comport yourself, so as to steer clear of offensive prudery on the one hand, and to avoid the smallest semblance of forwardness on the other.”

“*Forwardness*, dear Miss Frere!” cried Agatha, violently distressed; “have you ever seen anything in my conduct which prompts you to give me such a caution?”

“Nothing, my love! I have not a fault to find with you on that head. Most maidenly has been your deportment, ever since you ceased to be a child. But now, you know, all will be so different; it will be such an entirely new life, Agatha.”

Agatha quite hoped it would be. She loved Miss Frere very truly, and the tears kept gathering in her eyes at the thought of the leave-taking of the morrow. Nevertheless, she was a little tired of Sunny Lawn. The other girls talked of a world of which she knew nothing, save from their report; and, as they painted it, a very felicitous world it seemed to be, arid she longed to be in it, sad of it, and acting her part in the great drama of life, which it seemed to her was being performed everywhere, except at Sunny Lawn.

Miss Frere had intended to give her pupil much good advice, and to lay down a whole cede of regulations for her benefit; but something in the girl's pure, sweet face told her that it was all unneeded. Agatha would be equal to the occasion, whatever it might be; and womanly dignity would be added to womanly delicacy of mind and manner all in due time. “Perhaps if I said too much,” thought Miss Frere to herself, “it might put things in her head— make her self-conscious and constrained. I have confidence in the child; I had better simply commend her to God, and leave all these matters to take their course. Still, I do wish Mr. Aylmer were not a widower. Fifty years old, is he? I never heard that he was fifty; he may be much younger! And men of fifty, aye, and clergymen too, do sometimes amuse themselves with paying attentions to young girls! But I am not going to tell the child that! How sweet she looks! I wish I had kept her with me. It might have been better, after all. Who knows?”

Who knows, indeed? And who of us shall say what is better, and what is worse, for ourselves or for others? Only the good Lord surely knows; and He will do that which is best, though we may never see that it is best, or *how* it is best, till in the world to come we know even as we are known. Let us, then, trust and be patient. Nay, more, let us be happy in the knowledge of the Fatherhood and the Sovereignty of God, who loves us with “an everlasting love.”

Next morning there were tearful embraces and tender adieux, and Agatha commenced her journey to Overdale. Sunny Lawn was never to be her home again.

Chapter 2. LADY JANE

It was towards five o'clock, when the train stopped at Blackmoor Station, the nearest on the line to the village of Overdale, which prided itself generally on an intense Conservatism, and especially on keeping the railway, which was "democratic, though convenient," at a respectful distance. Blackmoor is a small town lying among wide-spreading moors or downs, where the herbage, generally speaking, is scanty, and where dark rocks crop persistently whichever way you turn your eye; hence, no doubt, the quiet town and its locality. But the granite slags, or whatever they may be—I deprecate criticism on this head, being nothing of a geologist—spread not much further than the town itself. As you journey onwards towards the coast, the rocks and the hollows in the great scarp hills are grey and crumbling; and as you approach the sea, geologist or not, you make the discovery that you are somewhere in "the great chalk formation."

Agatha was not very tired with her journey. Miss Frere had insisted on her travelling first-class; the French governess had accompanied her for the first fifty miles, and then the guard had had her in charge; and he now recommended her to the favour of the Blackmoor station-master as a young lady for Overdale Rectory, whom he had better "see after." The kindly guard was a native of these parts, and he knew quite well that to be going to the Rectory ensured all manner of deference and trouble-taking, and attentions great and small; for the name of the Aylmers was great in that laud, and all the folks worshipped at their shrine.

Agatha felt quite lonely when the guard stepped back into the van, and the train began to move slowly away through the rocky cutting. It went faster and faster; It gave an unearthly shriek, a wild yell, as it plunged into the bowels of the earth, a tunnel swallowing it up, like some dreadful dragon taking in his unresisting prey! Arid then, and not till then, the young girl comprehended that her old life was a thing of the Past, and that a new Present, intensely real, and a strange Future, shadowy and ideal, lay before her. With that swiftly vanishing train, that last link between the old life and the new, seemed also to vanish the schoolgirl, Agatha Bevan, of Sunny Lawn, while in her place stood the staid, grave, reticent governess of Overdale Rectory.

She was only just awakening to a sense of her solitary position, and wondering what was to become of her and her luggage, and gazing with wonder at the miniature Stonehenges all around her, when a lady, followed by a footman, came quickly down the path which led from the high road to the platform. The lady was about forty years of age, tall, handsome, and gracious-looking. She had remarkably brilliant eyes, dark, silken hair, and a clear, pale complexion. There was something in her face at once cordial and commanding, something to be loved, and trusted, and *obeyed*. Agatha read it all at a moment's glance, while the lustrous eyes were looking straight into hers, and the well-set lips were uttering words of kindly welcome. And she knew at once that this was the Lady Jane Aylmer, who had been the mistress of the Rectory since the Lady Augusta's death.

"My dear, I am so sorry," said a clear, full, soft voice; "I quite intended to be here to meet you; but some of the old almshouse-women met me as I came out of the village, and began to tell me their grievances; and, poor souls! I could not stop them peremptorily, though I did at last drive away, leaving the tale half told, and the consequence is I am too late. How long have you been here?"

"Not many minutes, ma'am—I beg your pardon—my lady."

Lady Jane smiled.

"You must not say 'my lady'; my lady is for servants and tradespeople. I hope you will be my friend; and when you think it necessary to address me by name, say simply Lady Jane."

"Thank you, Lady Jane; you are very kind."

"That being settled, suppose we go to the carriage? Sheldon and Foster will see to your packages; there is a cart come down, or coming down, for your heavy luggage. Up this path, please."

It was something fresh to Agatha not to have to trouble herself about her belongings. At Sunny Lawn she had had to be scrupulously exact, not only in regard to her own small properties, but in regard to the properties of others. However, she was a girl of good perceptions and ready tact, and she caught at once at the Overdale tone, and instead of fussing and fidgeting about her "things," as a common-minded young woman would have done, she calmly followed Lady Jane to the small enclosure where the carriage waited, and left her trunks, etc., containing the whole sum of her worldly possessions, to the guardianship of the station-master and Foster, who

looked the very model of a servant attached to an honourable and reverend gentleman of good income.

It was a pretty low carriage into which Agatha stepped, and it was drawn by two long-tailed, cream-coloured ponies, beautiful, spirited creatures; though Lady Jane contrived to tool them along most dexterously. Agatha never forgot that drive to her dying day. They were soon off the barren, slaggy moor, crossing pleasant downs, where tracts of fern were just springing into life on gentle slopes or in low hollows, where the wild thyme spread its fragrant carpet, and spring flowers were nestling among the tiny crags. Behind the moor they had left rose a range of blue hills, and all the ground, as far as they could see, was undulating. Now they were under the shadow of some green, fir-crowned hill; now they looked into some quiet little valley or bosky dell, where clear streams were trickling through the grass, and birds were warbling among the emerald-tinted branches, or else they were passing over a smooth plain, where already the purple stems and red-green leaves of the lovely burnet rose were springing from the chalky soil, where hawthorn-bushes were yet in all their first May loveliness, and where the tender foliage of the young nut-trees glistened in the brilliant evening sunshine.

But all the while they were gradually gaining higher ground, and at length they reached the edge of the common, and entered upon a broad road, cut terrace-like half-way down the slope of a low, chalky hill, enamelled here and there with magnificent spreading tufts of the lovely poly-gala, or milk-wort, with its blooms pure white, and deep rich blue, and rosy pink. Agatha had seen it in all three varieties on her own Woldscotes, as she tenderly called the bills that swept around the town of Cotswoldbury; but never before in such splendour of colour and in such wild profusion. A little further on and the road wound round a jutting promontory, and lo! the azure waters of the English Channel, spreading far as the eye could reach, and dancing in the cloudless sunshine, all gold arid purple and glittering points of light, like myriads of diamonds.

In a nook between the hills, yet high above the coastline, nestled the village of Overdale; all around it were grey downs or wooded ravines, and at last the cliffs—the grand white cliffs of old England—stretching far away east and west, like lines of solid frosted silver, and in the distance, ranging as it were in mid-air, for one scarce could say which was azure main or sapphire sky.

Agatha exclaimed with delight—she forgot her shyness, she forgot her natural shrinkings, as Overdale came in sight; she forgot that Lady Jane was a stranger, and, as she had been telling herself for the last quarter of an hour, her *mistress*, upon whose kindness she must not presume. She forgot everything, except the wondrous beauty of the scene that lay before her, and she grasped Lady Jane's hand, and with her eyes full of tears and her voice quivering with emotion, exclaimed,

“Oh, I never saw anything like this—it is too much!”

Lady Jane turned and looked into Agatha's face: what a sweet, fair face it was, she thought—fair as the beautiful May evening—

“Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.”

And Lady Jane, whose heart was as youthful as ever, and who had moreover a tolerable spice of romance in her composition—as indeed all nice women have—impulsively kissed Agatha, and told her she would have that view from her own bedroom window, and she would soon know it by rote, and be able to sketch it from memory.

“I shall never tire of it,” said Agatha.

“No; it is a mistake to think that one grows insensible to such beauty, because one sees it daily and hourly. On the contrary, I think one feels it more intensely, one learns to cherish it in detail, as well as to admire it as a whole. One gets to have favourite bits in the familiar landscape, to watch for certain combinations of lights and shades, according to the time of the day, or the season of the year, just as one has one's favourite passages in one's best beloved authors. Besides, there is no monotony in nature: these grey sweeps of hill and down wear countless aspects; yonder glorious waves change from hour to hour. To-day they are calm, reflecting back heaven's own cloudless blue, and sparkling in the sunshine. See that stretch yonder, like a lake of liquid sapphire. And, further on, a channel of pure pale green, like the jewel we call *Aqua-marine*, and then a line of what might be diamond-dust rising and falling, and twinkling like a million of stars. And there, a pathway of gold that will broaden and deepen as the sun sinks, till it makes one think of the track to the gates of the Celestial City. Arid when the sun has gone down, the waters will heave and burn, and there will be a crimson glory in the sky, and on the sea, and on these woods and hills; and as it fades, violet and amethyst hues will gather round, and these will melt into delicate opal-tints and steely grey, till the stars come out and are mirrored there, where now the

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sunshine is reflected. To-morrow the winds may awake, and storm-clouds may rise, and a leaden gloom be on the hills, and every wave be black as night, and wreathed with foam. Where now you see the blue and golden setting, and the showers of brilliants, you may watch to-morrow a restless, angry tide, deep valleys of inky blackness, with snowy crests of foam on every surging ridge, a low hanging sky like a funeral pall, and instead of the pleasant chiming of the waves, a deep and hollow thunder roaring ceaselessly among the rocks. But here is Overdale; the church lies at the entrance of the village, you perceive, and the Rectory is close to it. Here we are at our own gates. Yes, Scamper and Flyaway, you know the way to the stables, you lazy things; but you have had a smart trot of it, and you went to Hoveness this morning. Miss Bevan, do you drive?"

"Oh, no!" and Agatha trembled at the idea of acting as charioteer with those frisky little animals in the traces. Beautiful creatures certainly, but terribly self-willed, and needing a firm hand and matchless nerves to guide them.

"Oh! then we shall teach you. Rosamond, your eldest pupil, handles the reins most scientifically. But I seldom trust her alone with Flyaway and Scamper: they are riot so conscientious as I could wish them to be, and they are apt to take advantage of girlish wrists and fingers. And we have another pair of ponies, Dapple and Dumpling—fat, elderly, steady-going dowagers—who want the whip occasionally to make them trot at anything of a pace. And they go equally well in and out of harness; and Gertie is very fond of riding Dumpling about the lanes."

"Gertie is another Miss Aylmer?"

"Yes, the youngest girl—you know there are two—but not your youngest pupil: little Ernest will come into the schoolroom for several years, I hope; he is a delicate child, There was another boy—the one that cost poor Augusta her life—but he scarcely survived his mother. Claude, my eldest nephew, is at Eton. Now you are at home, Miss Bevan."

And a fairer home need no one wish to inhabit. The Overdale living was the property of the Aylmer family, and it had always been held by a younger son, when there was one, as was generally the case, in "holy orders." In fact, it had been a regular institution of the Aylmers to make a parson of the second or third boy, with a view, of course, to this excellent benefice, bringing in rather more than £900 per annum. Mr. Aylmer was the second son of the late Earl of Ashdown, and he had been destined from the cradle to hold the family living of Overdale; he seemed naturally fitted, too, for the position he was intended to fill: as a boy, he was studious, mild and thoughtful; as a youth, contemplative, unimpeachable in conduct, and delighting in religious exercises. He was distinguished at Oxford for his piety, no less than for his brilliant attainments; he lived as it behoved a gentleman and the son of a nobleman to live, but he was in no unprincipled tradesman's power, in the clutches of no cunning money-lender; he had a handsome allowance, which he never exceeded, but which he spent liberally, devoting a goodly portion of it to charitable objects. Church music and church architecture were his chief recreations; in later life he also gave himself much to botany and floriculture. With a reputation for high scholarship, with a character unblemished by the smallest taint; of noble family, and with most desirable prospects, he was regarded with pride by his college, and with esteem and affection by all who were privileged to call him friend. His theological views were those of the Keble and Pusey school. What are called "High Church principles" were, at the time of Eustace Aylmer's ordination, well developed and pretty widely spread; but *Ritualism*, as we know it now, was in its very feeblest infancy, and practised as it were by stealth.

Eustace Aylmer, at the age of twenty-three, received a title for holy orders from a distant relative, the Honourable and Rev. Mr. Frome, and his curate he remained for three years, when, the aged incumbent of Overdale felicitously departing this life, he took possession of the inheritance, which had been nursed up for him almost from his birth. He left Mr. Frome's parish amid the tears and blessings of the poor; to the extreme regret of the vicar, who had never had such a high-toned, thoroughly-working curate in all his clerical life; and he had the good wishes of all the higher classes to whom he had ministered. Every man, and woman, and child mourned his departure, and all fervently wished him God-speed. And heartfelt benedictions and earnest prayers followed him to his new sphere of labour.

There are some men who feel it to be a sort of duty to marry, yet never really and truly fall in love; and so they espouse the first eligible female who presents herself, or who is presented by her friends. And Eustace Aylmer was one of these men: at twenty-seven he had never seen the woman for whom he would sacrifice all but duty. Perhaps he had his ideal, as who has not? Perhaps he imagined what love, pure wedded love, might be, when heart and soul were one; when it was given to man to find

“A mirror in an answering mind.”

But he never found the creature of his dreams, and being importuned by his father, and coaxed by his mother, and talked to by certain friends, and feeling the need of a female head to his establishment, and the want of a priestess in his parish, he married the Lady Augusta de Kew, daughter of the Earl of Willesden, and she became “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh,” but soul of his soul *never!* It was a dangerous thing to do; for a man of his type, who misses finding his ideal at twenty, is terribly apt to stumble on it at forty, when it is all too late.

Lady Augusta had the character of being just what a country clergyman's wife ought to be. As a girl, she devoted herself to Sunday-schools, and waged unremitting warfare against the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, as displayed by her scholars in the article of dress. As the rector's wife, she had model schools of all sorts, and she devised a charmingly unbecoming uniform for the girls of her pet training-school. She sedulously taught everybody the Church Catechism; she instituted a Dorcas Society for the benefit of the fingers of the young ladies of Overdale; she had “baby-bags” for improvident mammas whose babies arrived to find themselves generally garment-less, and she took care that the said babies should be christened and the mammas duly “churched” at the very first convenient opportunity. Soup and flannel and medicated port wine were to be had at the rectory, provided the supplicants were regular at the Sunday services, and did not dishonour the Lenten observances, and sent their children to the schools, and dropped proper curtsies, or touched their hats in all humility when his reverence and “my lady” were encountered. So good a man as Eustace Aylmer must needs make a good husband. If sometimes he felt lonely and depressed for want of companionship, he never showed it; he paid his wife all due honour, he never interfered with her arrangements in the house, or for the children; and she, on her side, never matured any scheme for the benefit of the parishioners without first consulting him, and meekly abiding by his decision. As Lady Jane told her sister, Lady Caroline Fripp, who was very happily married,

“Augusta was not a bad sort, and she meant well in all she did, only she was not the wife for Eustace; then she was seven years her husband's senior, and had red hair and high cheek-bones, and freckles.”

“And she is so tall and so thin!” said Lady Caroline, who was only of medium stature, and as plump as a partridge, and excessively pretty and *spirituelle*. “And *seven* years older than Eustace! She is at least ten years older. Why, Jane, you and I were chits in pinafores when the Lady Augusta de Kew was presented! But she might be ten years older ad welcome, for some men prefer ripe charms to sweet suing blossoms or summer flowers; and Eustace seems content. But I cannot forgive her for being so dreadfully commonplace and unintellectual, so unsympathising, so miserably precise. She is a good manager, I suppose; she keep house well, and heads the table imposingly, in spite of her red ringlets; and as for her children, they are brought up in the way they should go, no doubt, but they are unnaturally good, undemonstrative little creatures. Poor darlings, they have not the spirit to rebel; for my part, prefer children a little naughty.”

Now, the Lady Caroline Fripp, *née* Aylmer, had a nursery full of the very naughtiest and most troublesome children in all Belgravia, and her nurses and governesses succeeded each other with marvellous rapidity. “I came, I saw, I fled!” might have been the motto of these dependents, to the no small astonishment and discomfiture of her ladyship.

Lady Augusta resented her husband with three sons and two daughters, and died very unexpectedly in giving birth to the youngest of the three boys. And the church bells tolled and rag a muffled peal, and all the household were arrayed in the deepest mourning, and the rector shut himself up in his study and saw nobody; but through what processes of rind he passed during his seclusion no one ever knew. After the funeral he went about as usual, looking very pale and grave, and a little sterner than usual: he never spoke of his dead wife, and the children were forbidden to mention to him their “poor mamma.”

Lady Jane, his only unmarried sister, came to take the head of his table; she was his favourite sister, and they got on very well together, and in a little while Eustace was ashamed and indignant with himself for feeling happier than he had been for many years.

Then the health of Miss Lawson, the governess, failed, and she went away, and no one deplored her exodus, for she was a strong-minded, grim spinster, of whom even Lady Jane stood secretly in awe. She taught the children herself for a little while, then a new governess was inquired for, and the result was—Agatha Bevan.

Chapter 3. THE NEW HOME

The carriage stopped before a deep Gothic porch, its graceful proportions and its airy pinnacles well covered with the purple and the sweet-scented clematis, with Virginian creepers, and noisette roses. The hall-door was open, and standing on the steps were two children, whom Agatha, of course, recognised as her future pupils. The elder—a tall, thin, dark girl of twelve—came silently forward, looking shy and constrained, but neither awkward nor sullen. The younger, a bright-haired, fair-complexioned child of ten, bounded into the drive, exclaiming, “Oh, auntie! auntie! you are come at last. What a time you have been! We thought Miss Bevan had not arrived, and that you were waiting for the next train. Is *that* Miss Bevan?”

“Yes, you little puss! who else should it be?”

The child replied by running up to Agatha, and putting up her pretty rosy mouth to be kissed.

“Oh! I am so glad you are who you are,” she exclaimed.

“I did not want another old governess. Old governesses are always—you know—they have no fun in them. But you are quite young-looking, and *so pretty!* Oh! I am glad you are pretty. I wanted a pretty governess; but I never thought I would have one. Rosie, is she not a darling?”

Agatha stood blushing, and half laughing.

Evidently Gertie's admiration was genuine; but it was rather confusing to the young governess, who had been sedulously trained to regard herself as a girl who looked nicely when she was neatly dressed, and in a cheerful mood; but nothing more—certainly nothing more. To believe in one's own prettiness was a cardinal sin at Sunny Lawn, and Miss Webster, the *belle* of the school, having weakly spoken of her own charms, had been sentenced to write six times, in English, French, German, and Italian, the text, “Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.”

Still Agatha had a dim idea that she really was pretty; and now she was told so very unceremoniously, by lips that were, at least, sincere, however indiscreet they might be. And she did look very lovely: the soft eyes cast down, the carmine deepening on each dimpled cheek, and the red lips quivering with something that was neither amusement nor emotion, but a curious compound of both. As Lady Jane regarded her, she was startled by the young girl's beauty—such an innocent, pure, half-childish beauty as it was. And yet the face was gravely sweet, and there was something in the droop of the full eyelids, and in the set of the clear-cut features, that told of no mere child's spirit within the lovely form. Lady Jane Aylmer was quick at reading characters, and after an hour's acquaintance she read Agatha's more intelligently than Miss Frere had ever succeeded in doing. But she hastened now to relieve the new governess from her very natural embarrassment, by presenting Rosamund, the elder of the two sisters, who all this time was leaning against the porch, twisting a spray of the noisette rose, saying nothing, but gazing with undisguised interest at the new arrival.

“Allow me to introduce my elder niece, Miss Bevan. I think I can promise that she will give you very little trouble: she is fond of study, and learns quickly, and I believe I may say she is conscientious. As for this little monkey, there is no such thing as taming her: she will not vex you if she can help it, but she will try your patience.”

“I know I tried Miss Lawson—but then she had a large hooked nose, and she wore little flat curls, and mittens. I shall never be naughty when I see Miss Bevan's long ringlets, and that pretty colour in her cheeks.”

“Gertie, my dear, you are very naughty at this moment. It is quite as unmannerly to tell people of their good looks as to blame them openly for their want of attractions. Well-bred people are never personal in their remarks: you have no more right to tell Miss Bevan of her prettiness than you had to remind poor Miss Lawson of her plainness. Now let Rosamund speak, if you please.”

But Rosamund was not inclined to make the best of her opportunity; she only put her hand in Agatha's, and murmured something meant to be courteous, which was, however, quite inaudible. Miss Aylmer was as shy and reticent as Miss Gertrude was *naïve* and impulsive. Gertie, the most affectionate little creature you can imagine, was constantly getting into trouble. Rosamund, undemonstrative, and by some deemed unloving, seldom earned even a passing reproof.

“Take Miss Bevan to her room,” said Lady Jane to Rosamund; “and, Gertrude, tell Sprawson to attend to Tea

will be ready in about twenty minutes, Miss Bevan. We dine early when we have no visitors; it suits my brother, and I like it better, because we can have the schoolroom party with us. Go, Rosamund! we have kept Miss Bevan too long. It is your fault—tiresome little pussy cat.”

“Pussy cat,” be it remarked, was Gertie's pet name. No one ever thought of giving Rosamund a cognomen of sort. She would have repudiated it quietly but very decidedly, had it been so given: she would not even t herself to be called Rosie by any one but her sister, who had her own way as a matter of course. “Miss Rosamund was upright and downright beyond belief!” nurse would say when she spoke confidentially about her eldest and best beloved nursling.

With the gliding step of a woman, rather than with the ~t tread of her years, Rosamund accompanied Agatha her room. They traversed a long passage, then they came to a baize-covered door, which led into a suite of apartments that Agatha quickly conjectured were her own special territory, and, passing by the schoolroom, and several sleeping-rooms, Rosamund led the way to the end of the broad, pleasant corridor, and showed her governess into the chamber which had been Miss Lawson's. Then she withdrew abruptly, and Agatha was left alone.

Indeed, it was a new life upon which she had entered, and altogether unlike her conceptions of governess-life, as represented by Miss Frere and the teachers, or as described in the few works of fiction which she had been permitted to peruse.

Surely the lines had fallen to her in pleasant places. Of course she had no room of her own at Sunny Lawn; she had occupied one of four little beds, with scanty white curtains; she had shared a chest of drawers with Mademoiselle and one of the elder girls; there had been four white ewers in four white basins, and two white soap-cups, and two white “tooth mugs” on a long deal washing stand let into the wall; and there had been a strip of faded carpet at each bedside, and a small looking-glass in a bad light—not at all calculated to minister to the vanity of the young ladies. Perhaps that was why Agatha only suspected herself of being pretty!

She anticipated something better than this in a gentleman's house, and she hoped to have a room all to herself; but she had never even imagined so much luxury and elegance as met her bewildered gaze, when, after Rosamund's departure, she proceeded to take a survey of her new quarters.

Could this be her room—the governess's? Had she not always been told that governesses were nobodies, and must accustom themselves from their very novitiate to consider themselves in that unflattering aspect? Had not Rosamund shown her by mistake to the guest chamber? That pretty, moss-like carpet, sprinkled with the most life-like pale rosebuds; the handsome Arabian bedstead, the winged wardrobe with plate-glass centre, the luxurious reading-chair, the convenient writing-table. Could all these be her portion? It seemed like a piece of an old fairy tale.

And still more like a fairy tale it felt, when she went to the window, round which roses were climbing, and gazed down upon the beautiful garden, all bright with early flowers, yet giving promise of more brilliant beauty still in store; velvet lawns, green, shady banks, rare shrubs, and a whole wilderness of the ordinary May blooms, red and white hawthorn, foam-like guelder roses, gay laburnums, covered with their golden tresses, fragrant masses of many-shaded lilacs, and beyond these, leafy limes, tall horse-chestnuts, glorious with their snowy rose-touched spirals, and broad sycamores, with their green tassels, swaying idly in the gentle breeze, and about them—

“The murmur of innumerable bees.”

And there were “immemorial elms,” too; but Agatha knew nothing of Tennyson as yet; her education, now that she was going to teach others, was really about to begin. And there was the grey church-tower, about which the jackdaws were very busy, and a glimpse of the village between the trees, and then green woodland slopes and some more heath-land, and rocks, and boulders, and then the glorious sea! And mingling with the warbling of happy birds, and the hum of the busy bees, and a tinkling sound of water near at hand, came the great chiming of the waves, sounding like some grand and solemn *jubilate* chanted afar off in the vast echoing cathedral of God's own beautiful world of nature. The tears came into Agatha's eyes as she listened to the “billowy anthem,” and looked upon the broad blue Channel, with its silvery cliffs, and again upon the hills, so richly clad with spiry spruce, dark pine, and feathery larch, and upon the wild moorland and the terrace-like ledges of slaggy rock beyond. And was she to wake up every morning, and look out upon that glorious landscape? Were the church bells she would hear on Sunday from that grey ivied tower to become to her as dear familiar friends? Was she to

stand by that open window in peaceful noontides and languid, golden afternoons, listening to the murmur of the tide, and the pleasant rustling of the leaves, and knowing by heart every tree and shrub, every winding walk, every sunny plot in that beautiful garden beneath? Would she come there evening after evening to watch the sun go down over the waste of moaning, darkening waters—or to see the moon rising over the eastern cliffs, bathing their white fretwork in her own pure silvery radiance, and casting lines of argent light upon the sea?

Yes, she would! Agatha had found her home, the home of her girlhood and her womanhood! The home of much deep, blissful happiness and full content;—the home, too, of anguish, and loneliness, and despair! But not yet were the days of darkness. Now was the time of gladness; and each hour, with only a few passing exceptions, was to be gladder than the last. She was roused by some one tapping at her door, and then she remembered that she had not even removed her bonnet, nor thought about the toilet she must make before she could appear downstairs. Sprawson, the schoolroom maid, as this elderly woman and old family servant was called, entered, and begged to know if she could not assist Miss Bevan; and she apologised for delaying, saying that she was in a distant part of the house when Miss Gertrude came to tell her that Miss Bevan had arrived.

Agatha was about to beg Sprawson to go away again. She was not accustomed to be waited upon, and the idea of an attendant in the room made her feel shy and nervous. But Mrs. Sprawson knew her duties; she did not ask permission to remain; she respectfully demanded the young lady's keys, and proceeded to unpack a small trunk, where Agatha told her she would find collars, and cuffs, and neck-ribbons.

There was no time to change her dress, so in a few minutes Agatha was ready; the cares of the toilet never occupied her very long. Sprawson showed her down into the hail, where a footman took charge of her, and ushered her into the dining-room, where Lady Jane was already, seated at the head of the table.

It was a pleasant, cheerful meal that followed. All sorts of good things were upon the board—tea and coffee, of course; honey, marmalades, cakes, all sorts of breads, tiny pats of golden butter, rich cream, cool salad, and boiled eggs; to say nothing of cold chicken and roast-beef on the sideboard. Agatha made a very satisfactory repast, for she had had no dinner, and she had still a school-girl's appetite. Lady Jane kept her in countenance, for she had dined early and hastily, and both the children seemed inclined to do full justice to the good things before them. Only Agatha wondered where the master of the house might be; for so far she had neither seen nor heard anything of the Honourable and Reverend Eustace Aylmer.

"If he were nice, too," she told herself, "it would be all charming together;" but of her patron and pastor she felt a little afraid. He would be much older than his sister: kind, but very grave, if not stern—perhaps melancholy, and brooding still over the loss of the mother of his children. Oh! she would never be at ease in his presence; she would always feel nervous and ridiculous at the sound of her own voice, if addressed by him, or by any one else, he being an auditor of her reply.

These were her private thoughts, when Lady Jane turned to Rosamund, and asked her— "Where did you say your papa was gone, my dear? I was speaking to Foster, when you told me."

"He is gone to Chatsley-Hayes. A man came for him in a great hurry."

"Was anything the matter?"

"Yes; Mrs. Calamy's baby was dying, and they feared it would not live till papa got there."

Agatha, for a moment, wondered why Mr. Aylmer was sent for to a child in the article of death. He was a clergyman, and not a doctor. Quickly, however, some shadowy reminiscences of her childhood came to her. She remembered that her father was occasionally called out with all speed to baptize a child who was not expected to survive, and she understood to what Rosamund alluded.

Lady Jane remarked, "I always thought that child would die; there was something wrong about its head. Poor little dear! Well, it will be the baby's gain; but it will be very hard for the mother: she has lost three infants."

"Poor woman!" said Agatha, feelingly.

"Yes, I must go and see her; she is an old servant of my father's; she was still-room maid at Ashdown, and she married a very respectable small farmer, and came to settle in these parts. It is lucky that Chatsley-Hayes is just within the boundary of my brother's parish, for in ecclesiastical matters he is very particular, and he pays the strictest attention to parochial limits; and Ellen Calamy is so attached to the family that I am sure she would never be comfortable under the spiritual guidance of a stranger."

"Aunt!" said Rosamund, as if waking up from a reverie, and crimsoning all over, "you do not think the baby will— I mean—you would be very sorry if papa were not in time?"

“Yes, I should be sorry, because I am afraid Mrs. Calamy would feel her loss still more deeply if the dear baby died without being baptized. But I should not be afraid myself.”

“Oh, aunt! would you not?”

“No, my dear; the Good Shepherd gathers His lambs into His bosom; the baby is His, and whether or not admitted to the rites of the Church, it is safe with Him.”

“But, aunt, the Prayer-book says, ‘It is certain that by God’s Word children which *are baptized*, dying before they commit actual sin, are undoubtedly saved.’”

“But it does not say that unbaptized infants are lost.”

“I think it implies it.”

“Perhaps it does, Rosamund; but the Book of Common Prayer, precious as it is, is not the Bible. It may err; it was compiled by men fallible as ourselves.”

“Papa thinks not,” replied Rosamund, eagerly; “and he gives to our Liturgy an apostolic origin. He says we have it undoubtedly from Irenaeus of Gaul, who received it from St. John the Divine. *I* forget, though, whether he had it directly from the Apostle, or through Polycarp. Do you remember which it was, Miss Bevan?”

Agatha was obliged to say she did not. Truth to tell, Church history had not been among her studies, and the erudition of her pupil fairly startled her. She resolved to “read up” with all possible dispatch. Lady Jane tried to change the conversation, for special reasons of her own. She could not agree with her brother on all points; indeed, Lady Augusta had taunted her with being a “Dissenter at heart.” But she did not wish to interfere with the children’s theological education; and though constrained sometimes, for conscience’ sake, to utter a mild protest, she never combated the ideas they had received from their father, however erroneous they appeared to her.

Lady Jane Aylmer held herself to be a sound Churchwoman, but she did not and could not believe in “baptismal regeneration,” as taught by the Church to which she belonged. She would have presented all infants to the font, but she had no fears of their being shut out of Paradise because a rite in which they must participate unconsciously was neglected, or wilfully withholden, or perhaps even unadministered purely from want of opportunity. She never liked to discuss theological points, and she was glad when her little nephew came and had to be introduced to Agatha. Ernest was a very delicate, pretty little fellow; partly on account of his fragile appearance and weak health, and partly because he was a very loveable child, he was the pet and darling of the whole household. He had been out with nurse, taking tea with some friends of hers, who lived under the cliffs.

Ernest’s arrival broke up the tea-table party, and all went into the garden, now delightfully cool, and fragrant with the breath of many flowers. The grounds were large, and the house, too, far exceeding the dimensions of most rural rectories; but then it was a family possession, and generation after generation of the Aylmers had held the living, and there had been rebuilding, and additions, and improvements at every stage of its history. The present rector had left the house, so far, pretty nearly as he found it; he had only put up more greenhouses, and enlarged the conservatory, and added some conveniences to the offices. But he had gone heart and soul into the restoration of his church, which was a peculiarly fine one. Indeed, it had been an abbey church before the Reformation, and the ruins of the stately old pile, sacredly preserved, yet lay around the beautiful sanctuary dating back to a remote century.

After a while, Lady Jane being called away, Agatha was left by herself and she was standing under the shelter of some splendid evergreens, admiring the unripened fruit of the arbutus, when she heard Gertie’s voice. She was going to call her, when out came, “And she is the very prettiest person you ever saw, papa—like my doll that Aunt Willesden sent me.”

“That is not saying much, Pussy,” replied a manly voice. “I hope you will not grow up to look like a doll.”

“Oh! she is sensible as well as pretty. I only thought of my Victoria Adelaide because Miss Bevan has the same lovely colour, and such dark curls.”

Agatha turned and fled—*where?*

Ignorant of the shrubbery paths, she took what she imagined to be an opposite direction, and almost ran into Mr. Aylmer’s arms. He was perfectly courteous and very kind; it was he who made all sorts of apologies, and his voice was wonderfully deep and melodious; something in it seemed to go straight to the heart of the young governess. Mr. Aylmer was certainly not fifty; he did not look even forty. He *was* grave, but oh! so handsome, so perfectly patrician in his tone and bearing!

They went back into the house very speedily, for the air was getting chilly, and as Agatha crossed the threshold

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of her new home she felt radiantly happy. Already the old life seemed to have faded into the far distance, yet only this morning she had been at Sunny Lawn! If she could have guessed what that home would be to her in years to come! But she could not, and her path seemed strewn with flowers.

Chapter 4. AYLMEER CHRONICLES

It was indeed “charming May” to Agatha Bevan that year. It was charming in doors and out of doors, on the hills and on the moors and on the sea. It was charming in its sparkling dewy mornings, in its brilliant afternoons, in its lovely, fragrant evenings, when sky and waves glowed with the splendour of the dying day, and the birds sang their vespers among the blossomy trees. It was charming from Monday morning to Saturday night, and most charming of all oh Sundays, when the mellow-toned bells rang from the grey tower, and the rich sunlight streamed in through the tall, painted windows, and cast upon the marble floor of the chancel rainbow-tinted reflections of the blazoned arms of the Aylmers; when the organ sent forth its pealing strains, and the white-robed choristers sang sweetly beneath the “high embowed roof”; and from the heights and from the valleys, from distant villages and from the hamlet by the sea, came a throng of worshippers to join in psalm and chant and prayer, and to listen to the counsel of their reverend and well-beloved pastor. Though pastor, by the way, was not the title he affected. He liked to call himself a *priest*. But whether priest, or pastor, or parson, he was universally beloved, and much looked up to; and mingled with the deference due to their clergyman was a sort of feudal allegiance which the people of Overdale were proud to render to the representative of the Aylmer family, who had been lords of the soil there for nearly seven hundred years. There had been abbots in the old time, of the name of Aylmer. When Overdale Abbey was in all the plenitude of its power and pride, the Aylmers had rule within its precincts. Aylmers had ministered at its altars, and Aylmers had richly endowed it with fat lands, and ample revenues, and all that in those days the secular arm freely yielded to the spiritual. There had been crusading Aylmers, and Aylmers who were Knights of Malta, and Aylmers who had borne themselves right nobly at Cressy and Poitiers and at Agincourt—Aylmers whose name was mighty when the red and white rose banners floated on the breeze, and when Charles Stuart and his Parliament were at fatal issue over all the length and breadth of “merrie England.” The Aylmers clung to the old faith long after the Reformation, and they suffered for their fidelity; but in course of time they joined the ranks of the Established Church of England, and became to her what their ancestors had been to her elder sister of Rome. As they had always combined the temporal with the ecclesiastical power and precedence of place, they had never been actually driven out of Overdale. It was true the Abbey was laid waste, its beautiful church was dismantled, and its cloisters left in ruins; also the Abbey lands were alienated, and some were given away to creatures of the King, and some were sold to any one who would buy, and for such fair acres there were plenty of purchasers, and the price of them went to replenish the royal exchequers. But by the close of the seventeenth century the Aylmers had regained their ancient patrimony. They had wealth and they had authority, also they had patience and were content to bide their time; and the result was, that when James II. died at St. Germain they held, under a different aspect, the same position which had been theirs in a greater or less degree ever since the Norman Aylmers settled at Ashdown and at Overdale in the days of the first Plantagenet.

Naturally the living of Overdale became theirs; though whether they bought the presentation thereof, or whether it came back to them as a sort of appanage, I really do not know; for in the chronicles of the Aylmer family, which I have in my possession, there is no mention whatever of the transaction. Before the dissolution of monastic foundations, an Aylmer was always Abbot of Overdale. In the reign of Queen Anne, I find the Earl of Ashdown presenting the living to his second son, Hugh, who seems to have been the black sheep of the family, and is spoken of with holy horror by later and more orthodox Aylmers as “a man of learning and piety, but weak-minded in the extreme, and undoubtedly inclined to Puritanism”—a fault, however, to which the Aylmers of Overdale were in nowise prone. Hugh Aylmer had travelled much in the Low Countries in his youth, and had probably there contracted his Puritanical tendencies. The next rector made amends, being of the extreme High Church party of his day; and then came a succession of fox-hunting, jovial parson-Aylmers, who cared little or nothing for the souls of the people committed to their charge. The rector who immediately preceded Eustace Aylmer was a distant cousin—a mumbling, toothless old man, who had been put in to keep the living warm for young Eustace, then a child in arms.

He had the consideration to resign his charge, *i.e.*, “depart this mortal life,” as his tombstone said, exactly in the nick of time. He died just when the young man was in full orders, and of an age to be presented to such a

living without any scandal. And very little he was missed, for he always felt himself to be a mere stop-gap, and he had been ordained late in life chiefly that he might become rector of Overdale, if need were till, having filled up his sum of years, his baby-cousin should have grown into a man, clerically qualified for preferment. Poor old man! he was rheumatic, and gouty, and ill-tempered, and wifeless, and childless, and he lived a lonely, miserable, loveless life, keeping a stupid middle-aged curate, who droned through the Sunday services, and christened, and married, and buried the parishioners, when it was required of him. The rector preached twice or thrice in a year, but no one ever heard a word of his sermon; very possibly no one wanted to hear it, people were not even very anxious to catch the text. The schools dwindled away sadly, and still more sadly needed reform; all the good old usages of the parish fell into desuetude; there was no visitation of the sick, and no catechising of the young; the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered only four times in the year; and the church itself was suffered to fall into a state of lamentable decay. No wonder that Hugh Aylmer was not missed, that no one wept for him, that all waited impatiently for the new dynasty that was to come; and the rector of Overdale was not only these people's minister, but the squire, the magistrate, their lord of the manor, and their universal patron.

Eustace Aylmer, when he took possession, found his hands about as full as they could be. All sorts of abuses abounded; the ruins of the abbey were neglected, and the boys had been allowed to play games in the cloisters. The church itself was damp, dirty, and disfigured by plaster and whitewash; the organ was out of repair, and the choir had long been at deadly feud with the organist, and sometimes they attempted to sing one tune while he played another. The children were untaught, the sick and poor neglected, and the rite of confirmation was participated in by all who had arrived at a certain age, without the slightest attempt at previous preparation. Of course, under such circumstances, morality could scarcely be expected to prevail.

But the new rector set to work with a will. He was young and resolute; his love of church architecture was almost a passion; he had musical tastes of the highest order; and, above all, he cared for the people committed to his charge, and earnestly desired to do his very best for them, both in a spiritual and in a temporal point of view. He desired to be a zealous, devoted "priest," and a good squire.

It should also be remarked that he had plenty of money. Besides the £900 per annum which the living yielded, he inherited considerable property from the countess, his mother, her marriage settlements providing that the bulk of her very handsome fortune should devolve on her younger sons, the eldest being naturally heir to his father's title and estates. And of the four sons which she had borne the Earl, only two survived, Lionel, who succeeded his father, and Eustace, the rector of Overdale. Neither had Lady Augusta come to her husband empty-handed; so that, taking one thing with another, Mr. Aylmer was certainly a wealthy man.

Neither funds, nor good-will, nor energy was wanting. The church was "restored," and became one of the show-places of the neighbourhood, the Earl of Ashdown and Lady Augusta's people contributing largely to the necessary funds; for many thousands were required in order to carry out the beautiful plan which Eustace himself had originated.

For full five years there was scaffolding in and about Overdale Church; and the noise of the workmen woke the echoes of the grand old pile day after day and month after month; and the congregation met sometimes in the nave and sometimes in the choir; and Lady Augusta had once proposed having service in the crypt. But the spacious new school-rooms were completed, and the largest room was licensed for Divine service; and that served the rector and the parishioners till, in the fullness of time, the last scaffold-pole was carried away, and the church, almost glorious as it had been in the bloom of its age, was opened with full choral service, the choristers having been trained by the rector himself, and a new organ erected at his sole expense.

More than fourteen years had now elapsed since first Eustace Aylmer came among his people. He had married twelve months after taking possession of the Rectory, and was now in the second year of his widowerhood, and in the forty-first year of his age.

So much for the chronicles of the Aylmers: a few words were necessary clearly to explain the position of the rector, and his relations with his parishioners. Now, then, I will go back to my story, and to the happy May days which Agatha was spending in her new home.

Very quickly she grew to feel as if she had been spending all her life at Overdale. She began to know the walks, the beautiful lone wood paths, the roads across the heath, the grey downs, and, above all, the sea-shore, which, to her surprise, was quite two miles away from the eyrie-like Overdale, perched aloft among the low green hills of the county. And the church, too! How her artist eye and her poetic tastes revelled in its long-drawn aisles,

its high pointed arches, its grand old tombs of Crusading Aylmers and right reverend abbots! How she gloried in its richly stained windows—some of them very ancient, and brought by Mr. Aylmer from the Continent—in its dark, carved oaken stalls, and in the solemn, shadowy gloom that rested on its long, dim naves, and in its lonely transepts and chapels, even when the moon was at its height. Agatha knew now what was meant by “a dim, religious light,” and she approved of it with all her heart; and when Mr. Aylmer found out that her water colour sketches were really of the highest merit, and that she was a complete mistress of perspective, he caught at once at her notion of taking views of the church and of the ruined cloisters and the shattered guesten-hall.

Her work in the schoolroom was not too arduous, only she began to be afraid that it would soon be terribly hard work to keep ahead of Rosamund. This eldest pupil of hers was rapidly winning her heart. Gertie was the sweetest little creature in the world—bright, loving, caressing, docile, and learning with great facility; it was impossible that Agatha should not fall into the ways of the household, and pet her, and treat her as a pretty plaything, and call her “Pussy,” like the others. And Ernest, so quiet and so gentle, so perfectly truthful and obedient, he too was a darling, and received his meed of praise when his governess wrote glowing descriptions of her model pupils to her old friends at Cotswoldbury. But Rosamund was the one in whom she felt most deeply interested. Rosamund was no talker, and not at all demonstrative; but she thought very deeply, and not at all as girls of twelve generally think. Shy almost to timidity, and reticent even to reserve, she seldom obtruded her opinions; but when they were called forth, there was a mingled soberness and enthusiasm about them that made them to Agatha at least, and very often to Lady Jane, seem incontrovertible.

Church history appeared to be her favourite study, and very often she would be found absorbed in books that Agatha would have hesitated to attack. A deeply religious sentiment pervaded all she said and did. Perhaps there was a slight tinge of melancholy in her character; yet she never seemed really unhappy; quiet pensiveness, rather than sadness, was the prevailing expression of her calm, serious face. Then her kindness of heart was proverbial. If the servants wanted to beg a favour, they would entreat Miss Aylmer to ask it for them; and if any one had offended, it was nearly always Rosamund who was sought as mediatrix. She had a class of her own in the schoolroom, and dearly the little girls loved her, treating her with the respect they would have accorded to a person twice her age. She had her fixed time for going to read to certain old women whom she called “hers”; and she had always on hand some garments for poor children.

“I wish she would be a child herself,” said Lady Jane one day to Agatha. “She seems old enough to be Gertie's mother. I wish she were not so unnaturally good.”

“Yet she is not dull,” replied Agatha, ready to speak up for the pupil she was beginning to love so dearly; “neither is there the slightest tinge of conceit or self-appreciation in her goodness.”

“No, indeed! her humility is the most beautiful part of her character. How do you find her in her studies?”

“Remarkably forward—too forward for me, I am afraid. I feel that I could go on teaching Gertie and Ernest for the next seven years; but every day I am afraid that Rosamund will be too much for me. She knows so much more than any one suspects, and it comes out now and then in lesson times. She is rather stupid at arithmetic, and she is not at all well up in geography. It is a real comfort to find her deficient in anything.”

“Never mind; you must be content to study with her as she grows older, and, as you say, it is quite a mercy that she is behindhand in some common branches of a child's education. Of course you have found out for yourself that she resembles her father far more than her mother.”

“I can see the strong personal likeness; it struck me the moment I saw Mr. Aylmer, and I should say the resemblance extends to character and temperament.”

“It does so to a marvellous precision. Rosamund is altogether her father's daughter. I may as well say to you in confidence that Lady Augusta never seemed quite to take to her. She repressed her in her early childhood, and she always petted Gertie, and treated Rosamund with a certain—well, I must call it *hauteur*. She was not unkind, or unjust—far from it. In actual treatment of the children she could scarcely be called partial even. Still, there was a coldness in her manner towards her eldest daughter, and Rosamund was always constrained in her mamma's presence. I tell you this because I think you ought to understand your pupil, and I believe this early repression and want of sympathy is the key to much that is singular in her character. I am glad to see that she has a strong liking for you, and seeks your companionship. In Miss Lawson's time she was always getting away into the church, or hiding in the shrubbery, or in some unfrequented corner of the house. She was far too much alone. Try to win her confidence, Agatha. I confess that I have been trying for a year and a half, and I have failed. Try to make her *seek*

your society.”

Chapter 5. THE PICNIC

“Oh, Miss Bevan!—dear Miss Bevan!—may we have a holiday?” cried Gertie, one brilliant June morning, as she rushed into the schoolroom, where Rosamund and Agatha were playing duets. “Papa says we may make a shore expedition to-day, if only you will excuse our lessons. Oh, it will be delicious!”

It was a study to contemplate the faces of the two sisters—Gertie's radiant with eager anticipation, her pretty rosebud lips apart, her large blue eyes sparkling with childish delight, and her cheeks blooming with health and happiness; Rosamund's grave and calm, a certain wistful expression creeping over it at the announcement of the intended pleasure, but quickly subsiding again into its natural quiet pensiveness. It is very certain that she desired the holiday, for a shore ramble was one of her greatest enjoyments; but it also seemed certain that she would not press the matter, and would meekly acquiesce in the decision of her elders, whatever it may be.

“Don't you *want* to go, Rosie?” asked Gertie, a little disappointed at her sister's lack of enthusiasm. “It will be so nice! and Miss Bevan has never properly seen our cliffs, and we shall go into the caves; and there is no doubt about the weather, gardener says, and auntie is giving orders to pack a hamper. Do say 'yes,' darling Miss Bevan.”

Agatha needed no pressing; convinced that the project was approved by Lady Jane, she was perfectly willing to grant a dispensation from all studies, and give herself up to the enjoyment of a long day by the sea; for all her rambles had been inland since her arrival at Overdale, and she had only driven round the downs and looked down upon the rocky shore, with its white pebbles, and shingle, and cool stretches of golden-brown sand. She had been wanting very much to scramble down to the beach, and wet her feet in the bright, curling waves, and gather up the pink shells, and the rare sea-weeds, and other treasures of the deep, which the children had assured her were to be found all about Overdale Bay. She was quite girl enough to feel excited at the prospect of her wishes being granted, and young enough to enjoy the fun of an impromptu picnic, so she responded with effusion to Gertie's caress, and replied, “Of course you may have a holiday, darling, if auntie wishes it! When must we be ready?”

“Oh, we are going to have luncheon or early dinner very soon, then nurse will change our frocks, and we shall start at once. *I* am going to ride Dumpling, and Ernest will ride Dapple, and you and Rosie and auntie will drive. Ah! what a race we will have on the downs with the ponies!”

“Take care! Ernest must not be overtired; you know he was ill the last time he rode with you, and the day is very warm, Gertie.”

“Ah, but there is a delicious breeze from the Channel, and it will be stronger near the shore; but I will be careful, Miss Bevan; perhaps we had better not race, Ernest will want all his strength to scramble about the rocks.”

“Good, reasonable child! Now let us finish our duet, Rosamund, then we will go down and see what Lady Jane is doing.” Gertie executed a sort of dervish-dance all round the room and disappeared, and then they heard her in the garden below calling to Ernest, who was lying on the grass under the shade of the ~great lime. The duet was a difficult one, and Agatha, who knew it perfectly well, and had frequently performed the treble part with applause at the select concerts given at Sunny Lawn, now stumbled more than once. She lost her place, she missed the tune, she felt inclined to slur the complicated passages; but Rosamund made no mistake. She counted every bar as painstakingly as was her wont; she never omitted a single note, and her hand was as steady, her fingers as firm, and her face as serene, as when the music lesson first commenced. At last the final chord was struck, to the young governess's great relief, and she sprang up, and clapped her hands, exclaiming—

“Now then, Rosamund, let us put away the music and the exercise-books, and prepare to enjoy ourselves.”

There was no reply, only a strange, doubtful glance, and then Rosamund turned away her face, and was busy at the book-shelves. But Agatha, feeling herself rather repressed at this utter want of girlish *abandon*, could not help questioning her pupil a little.

“My dear, are you quite well?”

“Oh, yes, Miss Bevan; quite well, thank you.”

“What is it, then? Does not the idea of the ramble please you?”

“Yes, but—but I am not certain that I ought to go.”

“Why not?”

Rosamund's face was crimson.

"Because, Miss Bevan, I did something wrong the other day; and I resolved that I would punish myself by giving up the first pleasure that was proposed to me."

Agatha felt not a little surprised; she scarcely knew what to think of so much self-discipline in one so young. Ought she to commend her pupil? was this sort of thing good for her? It would have been all very well in a woman grown, especially in a woman of unstable or impetuous character, but in a girl of Rosamund's age it was simply *unnatural*.

"My dear," replied Agatha, after she had thought for half a minute, "is not that something like doing penance?"

Again the rosy flush stole over Miss Aylmer's olive cheek. "I do not call it that," she said, gently; "but if it is penance, what then?"

"You are not a Roman Catholic, Rosamund?"

"No; but the Anglican Church permits it, if it does not insist upon it. And when one thinks it is right, one *must* do it, you know."

"But one should not merely think, one should be quite sure on such a head; certainly penance is not enjoined in the New Testament."

"Papa says it is! But I ought not to argue with you, Miss Bevan. It is one of my faults, feeling as if I knew better than my elders. I wish I were, as auntie says, mere child-like."

"I wish you were, dear, but not in the way you mew. There is nothing of self-conceit or of impertinence, nothing of obstinacy or of self-assertion, in your arguments; but I am not sure, dear child, that they are good for you."

"I suppose they foster pride," replied the girl, meekly.

"It is not that, Rosamund! I am only a girl myself, and I am afraid I am a very poor guide for you; but it seems to me that the sort of inner life you lead makes you morbid, makes you very far from happy. Of course I know that self-examination is very necessary; it is, in fact, a Christian duty, but I cannot help thinking that this continual introspection, this constant watch upon ourselves, this incessant probing of the conscience, must tend to overstrain notions of right and wrong. Also, I think it may create a self-righteous spirit."

"Not in me," replied Rosamund, dejectedly; "for I have nothing to feel self-righteous about, I am so constantly doing wrong."

"I think, my dear, you have a very sensitive conscience; and sensitiveness, if unduly cherished, becomes a disease."

"Please not to find excuses for me! I wish I knew whether I ought to go!"

"Do you mind telling me what you did wrong?"

"It was more than one thing! First of all I was hasty with Gertie, and I made her cry. Then nurse found fault with me, and I was proud and angry, though I said nothing. I hurt poor nurse very much! Then I went out and finished a story-book, till it was too late to go to read to blind Sarah, who was listening for my step all the evening; but the worst of all was giving way to vain and foolish thought in churchtime, Miss Bevan! I did not hear a word of the Absolution, and I only said the words of the Confession with my lips. Please you will not tell any one these things?"

"Certainly not! Whatever you may say about yourself shall be considered confidential, unless, indeed, you told me something which I felt it my duty to tell. But, Rosamund, why not talk to your aunt? She is so good and so kind!"

"I know she is; but she does not understand these things. I know I ought not to say it—and yet, perhaps, it is better said once, because it will explain a great deal. Auntie is not a good Churchwoman."

"You do not mean that she is inclined to be a *Dissenter*?"

"Oh, no, *no!* And yet papa says laxity on some points is nothing better than secret Dissent. What I mean is this: she does not think of Church ordinances as papa and I do. She is not willing to do a thing simply because the Church commands it; and she respects and honours papa as a man more than as a clergyman. I never talk to aunt on religious subjects, because she always distresses me. I want to be a loving, obedient child of the Church."

"Are you not putting the Church in the place of God—in the place of our Lord Jesus Christ?"

"Oh, no! indeed, no! God speaks to us through His Church, through His priests. When we think what the Church is—Christ's spouse, the only ark of safety—can we love her too much? Can we obey her too humbly? Can

we reverence her too devoutly? But I ought not to talk so to you. If you want to know anything you should ask papa, he is your clergyman.”

Just then lily Jane entered the room.

“My dears, the dinner is delayed. Pray go and dress at once. Gingham frocks, and Holland jackets, and straw hats—that is tie shore costume, you know. And, Agatha, if you have a pair of very disreputable boots, pray wear them, for our rocks cut shoe—leather to pieces most cruelly. We shall have tea in Coral Cove. Foster is packing cake and bread—and—butter, and cold chicken and lobster, for we shall be very hungry. And papa is coming to us, Rosamund; it is his afternoon for the Chine fishermen, and he will take tea with us in the cove, and we shall all come home together.”

“Is papa in the house now?”

“Yes; he is in his study. Rebecca Fyson is speaking to him. No!—there she is, going towards the lower gate.”

“I want to speak to papa;” and, without waiting for another word she went out of the room.

“That child does not look in the least elated,” said Lady Jane, mournfully. “I believe you are more of a girl than she is, Agatha.”

“I am afraid I am.”

“No need to be afraid. I am no advocate for prim, middle-aged governesses. Governesses must get middle-aged, I suppose; but, oh dear! why must they get prim? it is very good for Rosamund to have some one young about her, some one sensible, and with authority, and yet bright and girlish. You know, my dear, I preferred you to several *experienced* ladies who were wonderful for their systems and for their success in turning out girls who are models of womanhood. But now run to your room, please; I want you to help me gather strawberries when you are dressed.”

Agatha was just completing her simple toilet when she heard Rosamund in her chamber, which adjoined her own. There were three rooms *en suite*, all communicating with each other, and all opening on the broad west corridor. The centre room, which was the largest and most commodious, was Agatha's; that on the right hand belonged to Rosamund; the other was Gertie's. Little Ernest was under nurse's care when his short lesson-hours were over. “How is it settled?” Agatha asked, tapping at Rosamund's door.

Rosamund opened it, looking rather brighter than usual. “Papa wishes me to go; he will talk with me to-morrow. He quite approves of this sort of self-discipline. But he says I am not on any account to punish myself without first consulting him—not as papa, you know, but as my clergyman. Once a fortnight I am to go to him, and tell him all the wrong things I have done; and he will tell me what to do.”

Agatha thought it sounded like confession; but she was not one of those silly women who, because they think a thing, must immediately say it; so she only replied, “I am very glad you are going; and, as your papa wishes it, you may safely take the pleasure, and make the most of it.”

And then she ran down to the strawberry beds, and helped Lady Jane fill a large basket.

It was, indeed, a happy day. Long afterwards Agatha remembered it with a strange tenderness; she could recollect how the sea looked, its great waves leaping upon the weed-fringed rocks at full tide.

Looking back through the dim vista of past years she could see again the low, green hills, and the purple haze that rested on their wooded slopes, the wavy ferns upon the heath, the glorious cliffs lighted up in the roseate sun-set, the golden water far away, and the green-crested waves sweeping on the shingle. And she could hear again the grand ocean murmur, and the plaintive cry of the sea birds, and the children's happy voices, and one other voice—the voice she learnt that evening to *love* above all the voices of the earth—perhaps, above all the voices of the sky

“He that sits above,

In His calm glory, will forgive the love

His creatures bear each other, even if blent

With a vain worship: *for its close is dim*

Ever with grief, which leads the wrung soul back to Him.”

Little she thought, as she stepped into the pony-carriage, and was borne away over the breezy down, that these were the last hours of her girlish freedom; little she imagined, as she looked back upon the beautiful hone that sheltered her so kindly, that she would return to it *changed*; the same Agatha in the eyes of all around her, and yet another to her own secret thought. But so we go blindly to our doom, if I may be allowed to use so heathenish an

expression. Carelessly we meet the stranger, and he is a stranger never more! Still more carelessly, perhaps, we meet the *friend* who is not a stranger, and henceforth a new life is ours, a life which would be pale, dim, cold, and joyless, without that other life now inextricably blended with our own.

Gaily passed the afternoon; even Rosamund seemed happy as she bounded over the shingle, and clambered across slippery rocks in quest of treasures of seaweed; and Gertie, of course, was nearly wild. Agatha scrambled and danced almost as much as her pupils, but she was sooner tired, and not sorry when Foster came to call them to the cove, where the kettle was boiling, gipsy fashion, suspended from three sticks. Oh, the joy of such a meal! Oh, the sweet, wholesome, innocent pleasure of filling the teapot in such a place, with the blue sky for ceiling, and the precipitous cliffs instead of pictured walls, and the soft grass for carpet, and ledges of rock for tables and for chairs! It was such fun to watch that kettle come to the boil, to run and fetch sticks to make the fire burn a little fiercer, to help nurse cut the bread-and-butter—such bread and butter, too, as one never eats within four walls! And Lady Jane made Agatha cut up the chicken, and laughed at her for her ignorance of anatomy, *carving* never having been included in the list of Miss Frere's extras. And how delicious was the apricot jam! And everybody said it was quite a pity to eat the lobster; it looked so very much like a picture. And oh, the fragrance of the strawberries! they were very pretty, but no one thought it was a pity to eat them—the very smallest, Rosamund acknowledged, was irresistible. And nothing was left behind; neither salt nor sugar was forgotten, nor did the cream become too intimate with any of the eatables on the journey, nor was the butter melted into oil, nor any of the cups and plates broken, and there were knives and forks and spoons *ad libitum*; and altogether Lady Jane Aylmer's impromptu picnic was a success.

"It was so cosy, too," Gertie said, as she finished her strawberries and cream, and began upon apricot jam; "last time they came to the cove the Lauristons were with them, and Ada and Kate Chennery; and Kate sprained her ankle, and Ada tore her muslin skirt on a sharp point of rock, and was *so* scolded by the governess; and the Lauristons were not pleased about something, and the fruit was all mashed upon the road. Oh! it was a great deal better coming by themselves."

Agatha had heard of Kate and Ada Chennery before, and she was curious to know who they were.

"Ada is Rosie's friend," cried Gertie, for the question had not been addressed to any one in particular. "I wonder how Rosie manages to get on without her. And Kate—oh, Kate is a very fashionable young lady! And aunt likes Mrs. Chennery."

"Is there a Mr. Chennery?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. Why he is master of the hounds!"

"Is that a very proud distinction, Gertie?"

"Well, of course anybody cannot be master of the hounds; and if I were a man I would like to have plenty of horses and dogs, and I would hunt twice a week all through the season, and I would shoot. I don't think I would have anything to do with *battues*, though; and I would fish."

And oh, auntie! oh, Miss Bevan!" interrupted Ernest, with his mouth full of bread and jam, "she said last winter she would like to go rat-killing. And I told her rat hunts were not for girls."

Everybody laughed, and Lady Jane said, "I am afraid she takes her tone from Kate Chennery. Kate used to horrify poor, Miss Lawson when she talked about giving her mare a hot mash, and having the creature's feet stopped. I am sure when she was here she came out in full force on purpose; she gave us the benefit of all the stable slang she had picked up from her brothers. She declared she would like to wear top-boots, and wade in the streams, when she went fishing with John and Fred."

"And she fires a gun," remarked Gertie, "and shoots off pistols. Now, I would not like to do that; it is not ladylike, I am sure."

"The idea of your talking about being ladylike, you little romp," said her aunt, shaking her finger at her.

"Well, auntie, I know *I* am a little romp *now*, and I like it; but of course I shall be a young lady some day, and I shall not shoot, except with the bow and arrow; but I shall like to have some dear dogs, and a horse that will carry me like a cloud!"

"Where do the Chennerys live?" was Agatha's next inquiry.

"At Chennery Park, just over the hill yonder; you can see the chimneys of the house from the high knoll behind the Rectory. The family are from home now. Mrs. Chennery is delicate, and was ordered abroad; and she spent the winter at Cannes, and the spring in Paris; and now they are in town, and Kate has been presented. She

Overdale

came out this season. They will be at home again in August, and then you will see plenty of them.”

“Here is papa!” shouted Gertie; and she and Ernest rushed away down the cove to meet him, while the servants cleared away some of the *debris* of the meal, and Lady Jane examined the resources of her tea-pot.

Rosamund's face brightened. She dearly loved her father's companionship, and she always looked brighter in his presence.

“Now it will be ten times pleasanter,” she whispered to Agatha confidentially. And Agatha thought it would, though it was extremely pleasant already; she liked very much to listen to Mr. Aylmer, and, though it made her feel timid, she liked very much to converse with him, and lately he had talked to her a good deal. And yet she was sure that she did not show to advantage at all in their conversations, for she felt so shy, and she knew she talked a little incoherently; he must think her very silly, and not particularly well-bred. She would always stand in awe of him, she was positive; and perhaps that was the right feeling after all, for she was his dependent, and he was now her clergyman.

Chapter 6. GREY TWILIGHT

Yes, Rosamund was right; it was very much pleasanter after her papa joined the party. He was in unusual spirits; he was ready to pet Ernest, to rattle away with Gertie, giving her a Roland for an Oliver, as she dealt out her pretty childish wit to all around her; and he had plenty to say to Rosamund, to his sister, and to Miss Bevan. Certainly Mr. Aylmer had arrived in very conversible mood. He enjoyed his tea, and told Gertie she was a little *gourmand* for eating so much apricot jam; he had counted on half the jar for himself and behold! about a teaspoonful was all that remained. And Gertie for a moment was disconcerted, for she knew she had had the lion's share of the delicacy, though she hastened to resent the imputation of having greedily eaten it all.

"But I really never thought about your wanting any, papa," she said regretfully, at the close of her little speech. "I would have gone without any if I had thought there would not be enough for you."

Mr. Aylmer gravely contemplated the jar, and shook his head again at Gertie.

"It is too bad, papa," she cried; "I did *not* eat all, or half of it; but I believe you are only in fun. I believe you do not want any jam, for you never eat any at home; you would not even touch the pineapple preserve the other night. He doesn't care about it really, does he, Rosie?"

"No, I am quite sure he does not. Do not be vexed, Gertie; he is only pretending to be disappointed."

"Ah, I know!" cried Gertie, jumping up and throwing her arms round his neck, half strangling him, and nearly upsetting his cup of tea. "I know his ways, cunning, naughty, bad papa! he never does, and never did care about good things to eat. Papa, I often think you would have made a nice Roman Catholic."

"Oh, my dear! oh, Pussy!" interposed Lady Jane.

"Well, auntie, I mean because he would keep fast days well, and he likes plenty of prayers in the Church; and he would look grand in a long flowing robe, like Father Darner, at Hoveness. I almost wish you were a Roman Catholic clergyman, papa."

"In that case, I should not have a little Gertie to eat up all the jam. Priests of the Church of Rome have no little girls; they never marry, they give themselves entirely to the Church."

"Papa!" asked Rosamund, "cannot married people give themselves to the Church?"

"Of course they can, and must, if they are Christian men and women; but they cannot do so unreservedly. A Protestant clergyman, with a wife and children, has many things to think about; he has duties at home as well as abroad; his interests must necessarily be divided. Now a priest of the older Church is unshackled; he gives himself entirely to God and to his Church. There are no conflicting claims upon his time or his affections—he is quite free."

"No priest of Rome is free," returned Lady Jane, firmly. "You know that, Eustace, as well or better than I do! And I think an unmarried clergyman of any denomination is a mistake. God's sworn minister is not only to be a preacher, but a pastor. He is to comfort and counsel his people, to sympathise with them, to feel with them in all their household joys and sorrows. And how shall he do this if he have never known such joys and sorrows himself? How shall he, who knows nothing of the duties or the happiness of husband and father, help those who as husbands or fathers are suffering, or perplexed, or needing a salutary word of reprimand? How can the solitary man weep with the widower? How can the childless man console the parent newly bereaved? I have felt it myself! When I went to see poor Mary Brooks, and tried to comfort her, she could only say, 'All very true, very true, my lady; but oh! my lady, you never had a good man of your own, and you do not know what the parting is.'"

"Did you therefore cease your consolatory efforts?"

"No. I repeated the words of Christ, since my own words were no avail."

"And cannot the unmarried priest do the same? Should he go to the mourner, the sinner, the penitent, with his own words? That is the great mistake, Jane; that is the grand secret of the failure in the ministry of the laity; alas! in the ministry of the clergy also. They go speaking their own words, and in their own name, and they should go in the name of the Church, and under her authority, and with her words in their mouth. Once quit her safe boundaries, and you are liable to error, and to cause error in others."

"I go, I hope, to teach and to comfort in my *Master's* name," said Lady Jane, in a low voice. "And poor Mary Brooks taught me a lesson; I have tried since to keep as closely as possible to Christ's own words. With His

Divine teaching, His blessed comfort on my lips, I cannot go wrong.”

“We will speak on that subject another day. I think we are touching on very sacred subjects—subjects not to be approached save in the most earnest, the most reverent spirit, and with all humility. Besides, the children want to be on the rocks—be off, Pussy, and take care of yourself.”

The children darted away, and Agatha rose to go with them, but Mr. Aylmer interposed.

“No need for you to accompany them, Miss Bevan unless you specially wish it. They are quite safe with Foster and Sprawson; besides, Rosamund is going too, I see, and she is as steady and watchful as an old grandmother. I was going to propose that we elders should ascend yonder winding path, and sit in a hollow that I know of, high up among the cliffs. There we shall enjoy the evening, and have a good view of the cliffs and the eastern downs, and we can watch the sunset to perfection; and I have Tennyson in my pocket. What do you say, Jane? Will you elect to stay with us, Miss Bevan, or will you go and scramble for crabs, and shells, and seaweed with the children?”

“I say it will be delightful,” said Lady Jane, rising at once. “I will stay with you, please, Lady Jane,” was Agatha's reply. The path up the cliff was rather steep and slippery, and Agatha, all unused to cliff-climbing, was timid. There was a fresh little wind, too, coming in with the tide, and she was really afraid of toppling over. Lady Jane, who was on before her, had reached the top of the rock before she was half-way up. Very kindly Mr. Aylmer helped Agatha, holding her hand, showing her the right places for her feet, and interposing his arm where the path was narrow and turned an awkward corner. And so in due time they reached the promised hollow, where Lady Jane had already established herself among the blossomy wild thyme and the nodding harebells.

Agatha exclaimed with delight as the glorious prospect spread itself out before her—the deep blue sea dancing and quivering in the golden sunlight, the silvery cliffs stretching flu away both east and west, the sloping dawns near at hand, the crags piled up everywhere about them, and below the waves breaking with a deep but mellowed voice among the shingle. The nook itself was very beautiful, bright with loveliest flowers, and the rock behind them was scarred like the fretwork of a cathedral.

“What shall I read, Jane?” asked Aylmer; drawing forth his well-worn “Tennyson.”

“Read the ‘Dream of Fair Women,’ or what you like. Agatha knows scarcely anything of Tennyson beyond the ‘May Queen’ and ‘Marian,’ which she has in a miscellaneous collection.”

Mr. Aylmer read the “Dream of Fair Women,” and then the “Palace of Art,” and Agatha listened like one who, loving music, hears for the first time the sublimest strains of Handel, or the wondrous melodies of Mendelssohn. One of the verses in the “Palace of Art” made her exclaim, “That is just it!”

“What is?” asked Mr. Aylmer; but Agatha would not interrupt—she would tell him when the poem was concluded; and when he had finished he reminded her of her promise to explain.

“Please to give me the book,” was her answer. “I cannot remember. There, this verse! I *felt* this verse a night or two ago when I was coming up from the cloisters, just as I opened the churchyard gate into the Rectory—garden, and looked up at the house.”

And Agatha pointed to the lines—

“And one, an English home, grey twilight poured
On dewy pastures, dewy trees,
Softer than sleep, all things in order stored,
A haunt of ancient peace.”

“You *felt* the lines; you did not remember them, you say?”

“Oh, no. I never heard them, never saw them before. I do not mean those words exactly came into my head, and yet it was the thought. I felt it all.”

“You had the idea, but not the expression—that frequently happens with truly poetic minds. It is a great joy to find one's own silent thought beautifully wrought out by the hand of a great master. But tell me, Miss Bevan, what really were your thoughts when you came up from the cloisters, and saw the quiet Rectory among the trees in the grey twilight.”

“I thought the twilight *was* grey; that soft, deep, lovely grey, you know, that always seems to me like chastened sorrow. It was all so shadowy, and so calm, and so perfectly ordered, too. The house looked home-like; not grand, not nearly so stately as it looks in the sunshine, but just an *English home*. And I thought what a happy home of peace it was, with its sheltering trees, and its dewy lawns and slopes, and so near the church, too! And as

I looked at the pinnacles of the tower, and again at the gables of the Rectory, a real line of poetry did occur to me, though you will not think it had much connection with the scene; it was 'True to the kindred points of heaven and home.'"

"I quite understand: I perceive the connection," said Mr. Aylmer, much pleased; "and that grey, soft twilight—we shall have it presently—has always given me the idea of quiet content, of happy resignation; you know—

"Thou shalt have joy in sadness soon,
The pure calm hope be thine,
Which brightens, like the eastern moon,
As day's wild lights decline.

"Thus souls by nature pitched too high,
By sufferings plunged too low,
Meet in the Church's middle sky,
Half way 'twixt joy and woe.

"To practise there the soothing lay,
That sorrow best relieves;
Thankful for all God takes away,
Humbled by what He gives."

"That is beautiful, exceedingly," said Agatha; "better even in its way than Tennyson. Whose is it, Mr. Aylmer?"

"It is Keble's. Have you not a 'Christian Year'?"

"No, but I have seen the book, and read many of the hymns; and of course I know 'Sun of my soul, thou Saviour dear,' and 'Sweet nurslings of the vernal skies.' One of the girls at Sunny Lawn had it, but she would not lend it; only now and then on Sunday evenings she would read us a hymn or two. Where is Lady Jane?"

"She has gone up the rock; I think she was cramped with sitting in one position so long. She will be back again directly."

"There is one other verse in the 'Palace of Art' that I seem to have thought before," said Agatha.

"Which is it?"

"The one about the 'still salt pool' and the 'plunging seas.' Sometimes I have wakened very early since I came here and opened the window and listened to the tumbling of the waves, especially when the tide was going out, and I thought of the shallow pools left in the sand, or among the rocks. I saw such at Cleeve—super—Mare years ago."

"Oh, I know; you mean—

"A still salt pool, lock'd in with bars of sand;
Left on the shore: that hears all night
The plunging seas draw backward from the land,
Their moon-led waters white."

"Yes; that word '*plunging*' so exactly expresses the dull, measured sound with which the sea goes back. It is quite another sound when the tide is coming in; there is a freshness and power in the roll of the waves, there is life in the wild dash of the rising waters—an undertone of death in the murmur of the ebbing sea."

"Just so. Listen now: the tide is within an hour of flood. Hark! those mighty thunders, those grand, thrilling chords of deepest melody, as the billow dashes on the rock. It is like a glorious *Te Deum*, sung by triumphant hosts, when the fight has been fought and the victory been won. But presently, after midnight, when the tide is flowing out again, the sound of the sea will be like a solemn organ symphony, played in a wailing minor key a long way off."

"Deep calling unto deep," said Agatha, reverentially.

"Oh, yes!" he said quickly, catching at the thought. "Did you ever hear or notice that all the utterances of nature are in the minor key?—the sigh of the wind, the roar of the waves, the pealing of the thunder, even the

bleating of the lambs and the lowing of the cattle, telling us daily and hourly how the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.”

“And not only they, but ourselves also,” was Agatha's half-involuntary response. The words were familiar, and she uttered them.

“Even so. We, the Church, can only sing our *Jubilate* in fitful strains as yet. It will not be so hereafter, if only we may endure unto the end.”

There was an intense melancholy in Mr. Aylmer's voice as he spoke, and for some minutes he ceased to speak, and sat with bent brows and clasped hands, gazing out fixedly across the wild waste of waters burning and heaving now in the rich sunset light. His face was stern and sorrowful, there was mingled sadness and care on his brow, and a look of unutterable weariness. Oh, how often, in after years, Agatha saw that face again, as the shadows deepened, and the burden of secret care became intolerable in its crushing weight! Agatha thought then that perhaps something had reminded him of his children's mother; perhaps they had been wont to sit there in summer evenings and listen to the swelling chorus of the waves, and watch the sunset on the waters, and the roseate hue cast upon those huge masses of frosted silver, the proud white cliffs of Albion's southern coast. Agatha did not know that Lady Augusta Aylmer never, in all her life, heard any music in Nature's thrilling monotonous.

The sound of the sea was to her simply the noise the waves made; “almost deafening one on stormy days, and making one drowsy in the calm weather,” she complained. She never liked Overdale, because it was so very near the coast. She never rejoiced in the voices of the forests; the murmurings among the leaves had no mystic meanings for her; the thunder peal was only the sequence of certain electric phenomena, and it gave her the headache. And of course a primrose was a primrose, whether it were by “the water's brim,” or peeping forth starlike from amid the shadowy grass in the hollows of the wood. “Consider the lilies of the field” was a command she had never dreamed of obeying; and on the day of her death, after nearly twelve years of wedlock, she knew as little of her husband as when she stood with him at the marriage altar. Of all this Agatha was ignorant, only she had seen Lady Augusta's portrait in the dining-room, and thought what a very hard-featured, uninteresting woman she must have been, so very unlike what she should have imagined Mr. Aylmer's choice to be. But one thing she knew, though she thought it very strange, and scolded herself afterwards: she did not like to think that Mr. Aylmer was absorbed in remembrances of his dead wife. And yet, what was it to her—a *stranger*? “How very foolish and absurd, and not altogether proper either.”

She need not have disquieted herself. Mr. Aylmer's thoughts never once glanced towards Lady Augusta; it was quite another thought that filled his mind at that moment: a secret care, an unexpressed doubt, vague and transitory now, that was to become in the future a burden too heavy to be borne.

Agatha wished she had gone after Lady Jane; she hoped she would quickly return, and she listened for her steps; but she heard only the dashing of the waves, mingled with a faint tinkle of sheep bells, and the plaintive cry of the sea-birds wheeling about their rocky nests. And the upland breeze swept wildly round the little hollow, and died away mournfully among the solitary crags. She had been so happy only a little while before, now she felt inexpressibly sad; and the rosy light was fading from the waters, and clouds were gathering on the far horizon, and the white cliffs looked spectral in the cold grey twilight that was gathering round. It was as if an icy hand had touched her, and dissolved the golden charm that had held her in its pleasant spells ever since she came to Overdale. She began to feel, too, that she ought not to be sitting there alone with Mr. Aylmer; there was no real harm in it, she knew, not the slightest, and probably no one could know that she was so situated; still it was opposed to the creed of all her previous life; and what would Miss Frere say? And then it flashed upon her that this was what her kind old friend meant, when she had cautioned her about her behaviour on the eve of her departure from Sunny Lawn; when she had entreated her to maintain a very strict *reserve* in her intercourse with Mr. Aylmer. Agatha had quite failed to comprehend Miss Frere then; she understood her better now. How was that? Ah! we are continually rehearsing the drama of a lost Eden; we each in turn eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, and our innocence is gone.

Agatha resolved she would go and find Lady Jane, and she rose, and began to look for the juts of rock on which she might climb to the downs above. But Mr. Aylmer rose also.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Bevan; I was away in dreamland, where I have a bad habit of going very abruptly sometimes. Are you tired?”

Overdale

“It is getting cool,” said Agatha, as she drew her light mantle round her, “and the sun is down. I am going to look for Lady Jane and the children; I have left them too long.”

“The children are all right, I dare say, but we will go and look for them. It is time we turned our faces homewards. Here is the grey twilight come!”

“But not the grey twilight of the other evening. There are no warm tints in the landscape to-night.”

“You are right; it is a cold, steely grey, like the pale light of a fading wintry day; the cliffs look ghastly; the sea is dark and awful, and listen how it moans! There is tempest in that deep, sullen murmur. I believe it is the ground-swell; we shall have storm and rain to-night or to-morrow. This way, Miss Bevan: that is only a sheep-track; it ends in a yard of perpendicular rock. Here we are on the open down. Where is Lady Jane, wonder, and where can the children be?”

“I ought never to have left them,” said Agatha in penitent mood.

“Indeed, you need not blame yourself nor is there anything to be alarmed about. I have no doubt their aunt is with them, and the two servants are perfectly reliable. It is getting quite chilly. I wish you had brought a shawl.”

“The servants have some wraps, I believe.”

“Here they are, coming up from Gibraltar Cove. We call that great rock yonder Gibraltar. I am sure I do not know why.”

In three minutes more they had met the whole party from the shore, their baskets laden with shells and rare pebbles, and bits of amber and choice seaweed. And Ernest, to the great disgust of his sisters, was bringing home a violet-painted jelly-fish in the empty marmalade jar. The children were tired, but glowing with happiness; they had had a very pleasant day. They had arranged to walk home, and they set off immediately, for already the evening star was shining in the sky. Agatha had Rosamund on one arm and Gertie on the other, and Ernest kept fast hold of his papa's hand. They chatted on all the way across the downs, Gertie only wishing the way were longer when they reached the Rectory at last; but for all that supper was very acceptable, and no one cared to sit up after prayers.

But Agatha sat a long time at her window, listening to the “plunging seas” drawing backwards from the land. She wondered how it could have been that she had lived happily so long without knowing Overdale. Dear Overdale! how she loved it, and dear Lady Jane, and the dear children. And what a beautiful mind Mr. Aylmer had! and why was he so melancholy? And before everything else, what had happened to herself? For surely—surely she was not the innocent, calm, free-hearted Agatha of yore!

Chapter 7. MIDNIGHT WATCHES

Mr. Aylmer was right: even before all the inmates of the Rectory were asleep, the storm began to blow. The wind whistled eerily among the pines, and roared in the defiles of the hills, and with its wild fury mingled low mutterings of thunder. Agatha had not long closed her eyes when a terrific clap awoke her; not the grand thunder—music, like the full diapasons of a mighty organ which she always loved to hear; not the long, low, majestic peal, hushing the world into silence and awe, which seemed only another translation of those words of the Psalmist, “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth; the Lord is upon many waters;” but a long, loud crackling with bursts and crashes, as if the heavens were being split asunder, and all nature rent in the terrible concussion. Agatha's room seemed full of the blazing lightning, which played almost incessantly, leaping up as it were in forks of flame from under the laths of the Venetian blinds; and when for a moment or two it ceased, the darkness was like Egyptian gloom, rather than the shadowy half—twilight of a summer's night. Agatha bethought herself to go to the children, and just as she was slipping on her dressing—gown, little Gertie came tapping at her door. “Oh dear Miss Bevan, may I come to you? Oh, I am so frightened; and I dare not go all along the passages to auntie, or upstairs to nurse: please let me come into your bed.”

Agatha put her arms round the trembling child, bidding her not be afraid; then she opened the door between her room and Rosamund's, and saw that her pupil had lighted her lamp, and was kneeling before a beautiful ivory crucifix, which she had often noticed before as it hung over the chimney-piece; never supposing, however, that it was considered in any other light than an ornament, for it was of foreign workmanship, and most exquisitely carved. Agatha did not like to disturb the girl, who was evidently absorbed in devotion, and therefore she retreated, leaving the door ajar, that Rosamund might know that she had companionship. She sat down by Gertie, trying to still her own nerves, and hide her tremors from the child and, in answer to Gertie's inquiries about her sister, she replied that Rosamund was at prayer, and that she had not spoken to her; doubtless she would come, if she were frightened.

“I dare say she is not afraid,” said the little girl. “Rosie is not like anybody else; she is good—so good! *Pious*, I mean, you know: there are two kinds of goodness—good—good and pious—good.”

“Will you tell me what you mean?”

“I am good—good when I am good at all! I am good because I want to please papa, or auntie, or you, or just because I do not particularly want to be naughty; but Rosie is good because it is right to be so, because God requires it; because the Church tells her to do this, or not to do that!”

“The Bible, you mean: that is our only certain rule of life.”

“Yes, the Bible, but through the Church, Rosie says. I do not understand her: I never shall, I think; but she says all grace comes to us through the Church, and it is dangerous for us to look for it in any other way. And papa says so too.”

If, indeed, Mr. Aylmer did say so, it must be true, Agatha did not say so much to herself, but she felt a sort of conviction at her heart that what he taught must indeed be of the very purest and truest. All unconsciously she was setting up an idol for herself; an idol of such excellence, and wisdom, and power of mind that she would humble herself before his shrine with the humility of a little child. Mr. Aylmer, she thought, did not teach doctrines contrary to those in which she had been trained; but he brought fresh light to bear on old acknowledged facts; he made religion a reality; he gave it a power, an energy, a beauty, and a solemnity of which hitherto she had had little idea. There was life in this religion, or so she believed; and yet—yet Miss Frere *was* a Christian, she could never, no never doubt that! Well, perhaps it was the difference of temperament and education; Miss Frere was in earnest, and faithful to all the light she had; perhaps in time it would be given to her also to see Divine things under another and higher aspect.

A more terrible peal of thunder than any that had preceded it shook the house. Gertie thought some of it was falling; blaze after blaze of lightning filled the room; the roar of the elements was awful; and in the midst of it came Lady Jane, to see how Agatha and the children were faring. She had been upstairs to Ernest; but, tired out with his long day and the sultry afternoon, he was fast asleep in his little bed, though nurse, and Sprawson, and several of the upper servants, were sitting half—dressed about the room, trying to comfort one another by telling

the most dreadful stories they could recollect of persons being killed by thunderbolts, and houses set on fire by the electric fluid, and stacks of chimneys thrown down, and people suddenly struck blind by lightning.

“Where is Rosamund? Surely she is not sleeping through all this storm,” said Lady Jane, seeing only Agatha and Gertie clinging together. Agatha explained, and Lady Jane stole into her room and found her niece still on her knees; but she heard her aunt's light step and turned her head. Then Lady Jane saw that she held the crucifix fast clasped between her hands; she had not put on her dressing-gown, and she was kneeling near the open window in her thin nightdress and with bare feet.

“Child, child!” said Lady Jane, not so scrupulous as Agatha had been, “what are you thinking of? You will catch your death of cold; put on your dressing-gown this moment.”

Rosamund obeyed instantly: the most implicit obedience to the powers that be, the most child-like submission to authorities was part of Rosamund's character. She looked very pale, and her aunt could see that her fingers were trembling, as she fastened the gown.

“Are you afraid, my dear?” asked Lady Jane.

“A little,” was the grave reply. “I know it was very foolish, but I could not help it.”

“Indeed I do not think it was foolish at all; it is a terrible storm. Come into Miss Bevan's room.”

Rosamund came, still holding the crucifix; but it was so covered with the folds of her dressing-gown that only her aunt knew she carried it with her. She took no notice, however, but she resolved to have some very serious conversation with her brother; there was no knowing where these tendencies of Rosamund's might end. Only, said Lady Jane to herself, “she is such a child, and, with her strong feeling, and deep, reticent nature, she may go through half-a-dozen religious processes before she is one-and-twenty. At her age, one's convictions are so powerful and so transitory; to how many wild opinions did *I* not myself incline between fourteen and twenty years of age, and how fast I clung to each form of belief while the impulse lasted! Also, do I not know, what no one else on earth knows, what Augusta never dreamed of, that Rosamund's father in his boyhood was cruelly perplexed with infidel doubts; that at one time—it was only for a very brief period, thank God, that the horrible delusion lasted—at one time he was very near making shipwreck of himself, disowning Christ and His truths, and committing himself to the perilous mazes of an infidel philosophy. He was on the verge of the precipice, but God saved him; he struggled on bravely, and the victory was won, and he stood firmer than ever in the Christian faith.” And then the question arose, “*Where does he now stand?*” and she put it away, because she could not answer it to her own satisfaction. There was no fear of scepticism now, no danger of any rationalistic taint; there were no “Broad-Church” tendencies to make her anxious; but was he really standing on the Rock—Christ, the only Rock of our salvation—or was he resting on the rock of the Church? Did he put his faith in sacraments, and rites, and ordinances? or was Christ reconciling the world to Himself all his salvation and all his desire? She could not tell; there was so much mystery in the phase of religion professed by the party to which her brother belonged, so much symbolism, so much that to her seemed strained and far-fetched, that only bewildered her when she tried to comprehend it. For with all her might she had striven to understand her brother's creed; she had longed to be able to see as he saw, that she might conscientiously help him in the religious training of his motherless children. But she could not so discern spiritual things, and dearly as she loved her brother, ranch as she honoured him, she could not yield one iota of the truth, as she held it, knowing and feeling indeed that it was the very truth of God—the truth as revealed by God's own Word, as revealed in Christ Himself, the only sacrifice for the sins of the world, the only hope of sinners. No; for Eustace's dear sake she could not waver in her faith; nay, for his sake she must hold firm to that which, as she believed, God Himself had taught her; for surely, surely he would come back again to the simplicity of the faith, surely the days would arrive when he would be weary of a false peace, of a quiet that was not repose, of a splendid dream that would fade away, and leave him once more in all the agonies of doubt and perhaps despair.

So Jane Aylmer said nothing to her niece about the superstition she had remarked. Knowing that Rosamund was strongly inclined to her father's views, she felt much diffidence in saying aught that might tend to counteract his teaching. She contented herself with setting forth simple Bible truths in her niece's hearing; it was very rarely that she sought to combat a false notion. The days came when she would have given all she possessed to have been more faithful.

And still the storm grew fiercer, and Rosamund grew paler, but yet kept silence. Gertie at last awoke to a new terror, and cried out with much excitement—“Oh, auntie! oh, Miss Bevan! do you think—can it be the last day

that is coming?" and the child looked deathlike in her fear.

"No, darling, I do not think it is," said her aunt, holding the little girl closer to her. "I do not see why we should expect the Lord in a thunder storm; the brightness of His coming, Gertie, will not be like this, I think. But even if it were so, need we be afraid? If we are His children, He would only come to take us to Himself, that in that glorious world where He is we might be also."

"But if we are *not* His?"

And Gertie's question was Agatha's also, only it was unspoken.

"Then, indeed, it would be very sad, my child; but Christ's way is so very simple that no one need ever be perplexed to find it. He loves you, Gertie, and yearns to gather you to His bosom. He is the Good Shepherd, and He has given His life for the sheep, and also for the lambs. If you will just think how much Jesus Christ loves you—not only children generally, but *yourself*—I think you will begin to love Him; and if once you really love Him, you will no longer be afraid of death, or of judgment to come."

"I should like not to fear dying," sobbed Gertie; "and oh! so often when I wake up in the dark I think of that day when the earth will be burnt up, and the wicked destroyed, when all the dead will come out of their graves. I think—"

"Think, instead, my dear, how God loves you, how He has shown His love to you every hour since you were born. Think how happy all your life has been, how full of blessings; and think, too, from Whom every blessing flows. Oh, my child, we do not think enough of God's love, of Christ's great tenderness. 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them,' 'For He hath made *Him* to be sin for us who knew no Sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.'"

"Auntie, it always seems to me as if Jesus Christ had lived so very long ago; if it had been but a little while since, it would have been easier to love Him, I think," said Gertie; "at least it seems so to me."

"Nay, my dear, Christ lives *now*! That is one mistake very good people often make—they worship a dead Christ. They think, indeed, of Christ who died upon the cross; they remember with gratitude His precious death and burial, His resurrection and ascension, and there they stop. Christ is living now; His work is still going on. It is a Christ to whom you may talk, of whom you may ask questions, to whom you tell all your troubles, that I ask you to love, children; yes, I speak to you both. Remember, He said, 'Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.' I want you to feel this—that He is here now, though yet we may not see His face; that He is with His Church for ever and for ever; and His Church means *all* who love Him and obey Him, for the love they bear Him."

Rosamund's lips moved, but she did not speak; but her aunt perceived the involuntary motion, and said—"What is it, love?"

"Are you sure *the Church means all* people who love God?"

"Quite sure. God's holy Church throughout the world is composed of all sorts of people, rich and poor, young and old, learned and unlearned, high in rank and of lowly birth. Some worship in one way and some in another, but all are united in one common bond of love to Christ and faith in Him."

Lady Jane longed to speak more plainly, but her courage failed her. She knew that her brother did not so hold the "one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church," and she knew that Rosamund and Agatha at least would perceive the difference in her own belief. To Agatha she resolved to say more; Agatha was not her brother's child, only the children's governess, and she was deeply interested in the young girl, who evidently was very near the kingdom of God; perhaps she only needed a kindly word, a helping hand, to bring her to the happy decision which no one ever yet regretted, whatever in after years were the circumstances of his lot.

At that moment Gertie seized her sister's hand rather abruptly, and the ivory crucifix fell to the ground. Rosamund coloured deeply as she reverentially raised it. Agatha was scarcely surprised. Lady Jane felt that she must speak.

"My dear, does papa know that you make a devotional use of this—this trinket?"

"Yes, he knows."

"But surely he does not approve?"

"Not quite, I think; but he did not forbid it any more than he advised it. He cautioned me not to let my mind dwell too much upon the mere representation; but he said he knew that some people found themselves very much assisted by the contemplation of these sacred mementoes of our Saviour's death and passion. You do not think I

am wrong, auntie?"

"I do, my dear! I think you are in danger of breaking the second commandment. You will tell me that you address your prayers to the Saviour who is thus represented, not to the material figure upon which you gaze; and that you do so now I quite believe; but ere long you will cease to discriminate, and you will very possibly 'bow down to' a graven image."

"I thought you revered the cross, auntie?"

"The cross and the crucifix are not the same thing, my child; the cross is a symbol, and a sacred symbol, undoubtedly; but the crucifix is a graven image—an *idol*. I do reverence the cross; I do not like to see it worn as a frivolous ornament, any more than I like to see the Bible treated ignominiously; but Rosamund, understand distinctly I attach to it no superstitious meaning; I would not render to it the homage which I am commanded to render to God only. It would never help me in my prayers, nor even in my meditations."

"And yet you like to see it on the church; and I know you prefer cruciform churches,"

"Yes, I like the honour thus paid to Christianity; it is a sort of open avowal of our faith. But be sure, Rosamund, I regard the cross *only* as a symbol; it has a mystic meaning, I allow, and that is all. Could I behold the real Cross, I should feel awed, no doubt; but I hope I should not worship it. 'The Lord thy God is one God, and Him only shalt thou serve.' God in Christ claims all the adoring love we can give. He is worthy of it all, and He demands it all; and, Rosamund, He will not take a part; neither saints, nor angels, nor images of Himself, can have any share in the worship due to Him alone."

"I think you do not understand me, aunt, and I am not sure that I understand you," said Rosamund, gently. "Please I had rather not talk about it any more. Papa says general discussion about holy things is not right, it is not reverential. I think the storm is passing over."

"Yes, the thunder is rolling away, and I see the dawn is breaking. I think I shall go back to my own room and try to get some sleep; would you like to go with me, Gertie?"

"Oh, very much, auntie; it lightens yet, and my bed is opposite the window."

"Well, then, I will say 'good-night,' or, rather, 'good-morning.' We must not expect very punctual appearances at breakfast-time, I am afraid. You are looking pale, Miss Bevan; but no wonder, you are very tired, we had a fatiguing day, and, for my part, I had scarcely fallen asleep when the thunder awoke me."

Rosamund went back to her own room as soon as her aunt was gone; and Agatha tried to settle herself to sleep, but, wearied as she was, the sun was shining brightly upon the dripping trees before she slept. She was thinking of the evening on the shore, of the deep, rich voice that had read to her the beautiful new poetry that had given her such exquisite pleasure, of the chill that had come over her feelings with the passing away of the sunset glow, and of the conversation that had just been carried on. It was all very strange, but, on the whole, it was very sweet, if a little exciting; and a new life it was certainly! Could it indeed be only a few weeks since she had been pupil-teacher at Sunny Lawn?

But at last she slept, and dreamed that Lady Augusta had somehow come back again, and said that she must be sent away immediately. And when she heard her doom she felt as if sentence of death had been pronounced.

She woke to find it all a dream, and to rejoice thereat. No; she could never be happy again if she went away from Overdale!

Chapter 8. CLAUDE'S LETTER

It was a brilliant morning after the storm; but every one was tired and listless, and Lady Jane mourned over her beautiful June flowers, beaten down by the heavy rain. One tall Lombardy poplar near the lodge had been struck by lightning, and while Lady Jane was pouring out the coffee the old sexton came to say that one of the western pinnacles of the church had been thrown down, and the gurgoyles of the south transept seriously damaged.

The sea was still troubled, and white breakers flecked the broad expanse of the dark blue waters, and the waves thundered on the shore, while there were rumours of some small vessel having drifted on to the rocks at the entrance of the bay. It was proposed on all hands to go out and see what mischief really had resulted from last night's tempest, and the church was first to be visited. But while they yet lingered over the breakfast table, the post, which was by no means early at Overdale, came in, and all the letters had to be read and duly commented on; and Mr. Aylmer was gathering up his share of correspondence—the lion's share, of course—and preparing to go off to his study, when Lady Jane cried out, “Stay, Eustace, this letter ought to have been here yesterday; we shall have Claude home to-day!”

Gertie and Ernest set up a little shout of joy; and Rosamund, though silent, looked pleased. Mr. Aylmer turned with gratified face: “How is that, Jane? He was to have spent the first week of his holiday with the Morningtons. Ralph Mornington and he are such cronies.”

“I am sorry to say there is fever at Mornington; Ralph's little brothers and sisters are extremely ill, and the boy himself is not to return home. He was ordered off to some old great-uncle in Cambridgeshire—'a stupid old duffer,' Claude irreverently calls him—and of course proposes bringing him here!”

“Proposes! Why, even had the letter arrived yesterday, there would scarcely have been time for an answer.”

“Well, to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, Eustace, Claude proposes bringing this youth here on speculation; this is what he says:—'Relying upon my father's indulgence and his strong sense of hospitality, I have ventured to invite Mornington to return with me, and spend his vacation, or as much of his vacation at Overdale as shall seem desirable; and he has accepted the invitation, for the prospect of being shut up in a dull country town house, without society, with a cross old *hunks* of a bachelor uncle—he was crossed in love, auntie, a century and a half ago, and he has been cantankerous ever since—is far from alluring, is it not? And the stupid old duffer is as deaf as a post, and—not content with making people bawl till they break a blood-vessel, and then telling them in the most aggravating way that shouting is unnecessary, and that he can hear perfectly well if they will only speak distinctly—keeps an ancient, deaf house-keeper, and Ralph says the only fun to be had is to listen to the two screaming at each other, and playing to some purpose at the game of cross-questions and crooked answers. And there are no horses worth riding, and no dogs worth speaking of, and it is not shooting-time, and there are no nice fellows with sisters anywhere about, and what's a fellow to do screwed up, Aunt Jane, in such an avuncular dungeon? So I asked him here, and he wrote at once to his great-uncle, and said he had an engagement, and has written off home and said he was going with Aylmer, and so of course it came to be a sort of 'say and seal' affair, and there is nothing left but to bring him. And I know you will like Mornington. He is the jolliest fellow in the world, and the cleverest; he makes me feel such a dunce. My father will delight in his scholarship; he has read oceans of dry books from beginning to end for pure recreation; and he remembers what he reads, too. Oh! he is a regular *sap*, I promise you And then he boats, and shoots, and rides, and plays billiards, and whist, and cricket, and he swims like a fish, and is ever so fond of a garden, and loves music, only his voice is not settled yet. If the Chennerys will only come home in time, we shall be splendidously jolly!’”

Lady Jane stopped reading aloud, for the next sentence referred to Agatha:—“Gertie tells me the new governess is the prettiest, sweetest creature in the world! I am very glad; I like pretty girls; and that respectable and well-stricken in years virgin, Miss Lawson, with her mittens and her flat curls, was my detestation. Why, she had the impudence to lecture *me* only last Christmas, and call me 'an ill-mannered *lad!*' If I had been, I should have given her a piece of my mind, and requested her to keep her excruciating advice to herself; also to withdraw the light of her very unprepossessing countenance! But this Miss Bevan will be quite another thing; I can offer her my arm, and make up her bouquets. Of course I can't begin love-making yet; but I might get my hand in by practising on this lovely Miss Bevan. I dare say Mornington will fall in love with her in real earnest, for he is very

susceptible, and adores beauty. Of course, you need not be afraid of anything serious; he will only amuse himself; a fellow in his position would never marry the governess. A Mornington is no more likely to make a *mes-alliance* than an Aylmer. When my time comes, Aunt Jane, I shall choose the fairest in the land, and the best-born, and the most graceful and accomplished, and the most delicately nurtured; for *my wife* must be one

“Rose lined from the cold
And meant verily to hold
Life's pure pleasures manifold!”

Lady Jane burst into laughter at this peroration; she was infinitely amused at her nephew's conjugal anticipations, for Claude Aylmer had just entered upon his fourteenth year, and might certainly be voted a little precocious, and rather “fast,” even for an Eton lad.

But Mr. Aylmer, who had also been reading this private portion of his son's correspondence, looked extremely grave; and, Agatha and the girls having withdrawn, he remarked, with something like severity in his tone, and decided disapprobation in his countenance, that Claude was far too frivolous, and that his style was not improving.

“My dear Eustace,” was Lady Jane's reply, “he is full of life and spirits, and so frank—not the smallest taint of artifice about him; he is just what he ought to be.”

“I wish I could think so, Jane.”

“You have not been hearing anything to his discredit?”

“Oh, no; his masters give him the best of characters, and his dame says he causes her less anxiety than any other boy in her house; she is never tired of singing his praises. But I must confess I should like to see a little more gravity, not quite so much levity; and—and—this Mornington, if he really should embarrass Miss Bevan with his attentions, it will be very annoying.”

“You need not be afraid, Agatha is a sensible girl; besides, how old is Ralph Mornington?”

“He is Claude's senior; he must be at least sixteen.”

“And three years on the girl's side makes all the difference. A lovely girl like Agatha, if she cares about *beaux* at all, need not be left to the *dernier resort* of beardless boys. Depend upon it, if Master Mornington should begin a little amateur flirtation, by way of 'getting his hand in,' as Claude says, Agatha will only be amused; she will treat the matter as purely absurd and laughable, as she treated our little Ernest's declaration of love only last week.”

“Ernest proposing? Well, I must say I have very precocious children. Ernest will be seven years old next month!”

“Exactly. Miss Bevan is very kind to him; she enters into the question of kites and puppies, and mustard and cress grown in flannel; and, what is more, he is really learning his declensions on a system of her own, and he says he likes the Latin grammar now. Last week he told her he loved her very much, and if she would wait till he was grown up he would marry her. He actually wanted her to promise.”

“The young monkey! And did she?”

“No. She told him she must think of it; but she was afraid she could not say 'yes.' And afterwards when the child seemed disappointed, and I rallied her on her seriousness, she replied that she thought it wrong to trifle at all on such a subject, even with a child, and that it was better not to make promises in fun. The idea of marriage should be sacredly entertained from the very first, and ought never to be treated as a joke.”

“She was quite right. Well, Master Claude may find that a pretty girl can lecture as well as a precise old maid. Not that '*pretty*' is quite the right adjective for Miss Bevan.”

“No, she is *lovely*, Eustace, nothing less. I am more and more charmed with her. And I think some one else is, too.”

“What do you mean, Jane?”

The question was asked with an abruptness and haughtiness that startled the sister; that peculiar tone and look—and she knew it well—always made her feel nervous and embarrassed. There was much tenderness and sweetness in the rector's nature, but there were flashes of temper also at times, that were the natural inheritance of the Aylmers. Only flashes; for the rising ebullition was always quelled at the outset. Eustace Aylmer had had a hard struggle in his youth and early manhood with his adversary, but by the grace of God he had won the victory, and now he was remarkable for self-command and quick repression of even the smallest outpouring of his

discontent.

“I mean that Mr. Bell is very much pleased with Agatha.”

“Mr. Bell, my curate?”

“Certainly! I know no other Mr. Bell in this neighbourhood. Eustace, you seem quite displeased.”

“No, I am not; I am only astonished. Why, it is not quite a fortnight since he first saw Miss Bevan! he was visiting his friends in Ireland when she came here in May.”

“He is half Irish, you know, and doubtless of a very impressive nature.”

“But he is engaged, or all but engaged, to Roberta Roberts!”

“We have no right to conclude there is or will be any engagement between Mr. Bell and Miss Roberts. I think they are fast friends and no more; they have worked together for the last two years, and have naturally been thrown into each other's society a good deal. Roberta talks about him quite freely, and without the smallest consciousness; she is a very good girl.”

“A very active girl; yes, and a good girl too—a good young woman, I should rather say, for I know she is five-and-twenty; she told me so herself the other day. There is no nonsense about Roberta; and if Bell is really thinking of a wife, why, he could not choose a better, and all the parish would rejoice.”

“Still, we can hardly expect him to marry to please the parish, and I am pretty sure Roberta is not his choice. Nay, I am sure he is struck with Agatha!”

“Jane! you are becoming a match-maker, I fear. Take care!”

“Indeed, Eustace, you wrong me: I would not, at least I think I would not, for worlds interfere in matters of this kind. I dare not! the responsibility is so great, the issues so tremendous. But I cannot help seeing what I see, and you know I have quick perceptions; and surely I may tell my thoughts to you; you know I would not to anyone else. And, without being given to that dangerous and detestable propensity called 'match-making,' I think I may innocently and even laudably take an interest in the affairs of the young people about me; also, I may be pleased at any prospect of Agatha being so comfortably settled. It must be hard work to keep on governing from twenty to fifty, or even strike, as is the lot of many a portionless woman.”

“Hard, indeed! God help the tried and weary ones whose life is spent in school-rooms, and whose brightest prospects for the future is the hope of being able to commence school-keeping for themselves! But Agatha Bevan is very young yet, and she is happy with us, and we do not wish to part with her at present. If Mr. Bell has been making demonstrations, I am very much annoyed with him; I will not have him coining into my house, and paying attentions to my daughters' governess.”

“Eustace! You are both cross and unreasonable this morning! Mr. Bell has paid no attentions, save such as every gentleman renders to a lady; and if the curate should fall in love with the governess, I cannot see that we need disquiet ourselves. To me it seems quite in the fitness of things; it was only last winter you were wishing you had a married curate.”

“I am not sure now that I wish anything of the kind. I am not sure but that the clergy are best unmarried.”

“My dear Eustace, why should clergymen remain single any more than lawyers or medical men?”

“He that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.”

“That was written when great tribulations were coming upon the church; there is a time to marry, and a time to refrain from marriage. Living here, in our own quiet England, with happy peace encircling us around, such admonitions have no force. It must be well to stand alone, free from the ties that clasp one so closely when there is persecution to be endured. But situated as we are, surely it is good for man to participate in God's holy ordinance of marriage.”

“There may be exceptional cases.”

“There may be; there are! But such easements are not confined to one class of the community. For conscientious reasons a man may renounce the blessings of wife and children; but I cannot see that any one class of men can be called upon to make such renunciation. Eustace, you are not going to advocate the celibacy of the clergy?”

“It would ill become me to do so, seeing that I married myself as soon as ever I became the priest of Overdale; and yet—”

“And yet what?”

“Do not worry me, Jane! I do not choose to be drawn into a discussion on the subject. We were talking of Mr. Bell and Miss Bevan. I do not wish their names to be coupled; it might be most injurious to the young lady.”

“You are so disagreeable; you make me wish we had Miss Lawson back again. Mr. Bell talked to her by the hour, and you never objected.”

“He might as well have talked to his mother. Besides, I always assigned him to Roberta. There she is, Jane, going round to the front door.”

Lady Jane stepped out of the French window, and the young lady crossed the lam to meet her; and the rector caught the words, uttered in tones the reverse of subdued—

“And I met Mr. Bell, and we went on to the schools, and settled it all with Mrs. Hawley at once, and all we want now is the rector's sanction. Can I see him, Lady Jane?” Mr. Aylmer was on the point of fleeing to his study, and shutting himself up there; he was not partial to conversations with Miss Roberta, he preferred rather to turn her over to his curate; but hearing that some kind of appeal was to be made, he remained in duty bound, and prepared to face the foe.

“Well, Mr. Aylmer, and how are you?” was Miss Roberta's salutation.

She was a fine young woman, tall and well formed, with energy in every glance and movement, with determination marked in every feature, and with a sparkle in her bright, laughter-loving hazel eyes, that told how very angry she could be, if only due occasion presented itself. She was a valuable person in the parish; she had leisure at her disposal, and she spent it in doing good; she had a very comfortable income of her own, and she spent much of it in acts of kindness and beneficence, doing it secretly as her Lord commanded. She had plenty of good sound sense, and a spirit that would carry her through any difficulties, and it was said of her that she stood in awe of nothing and of nobody in the world. And Mr. Aylmer respected her, and knew that of all the lady-workers in the neighbourhood she was the most useful, the most thoroughly efficient; but he could not like her: his tastes were fastidious, and her loud tones and manly tread jarred upon his sensibilities. Then she had a terrible habit of speaking her mind, and she bit the right nail upon the head very often with a precision that was both startling and amusing, but not exactly entertaining to the person who happened to have the worst of the argument.

“You wish to consult me on some point?” said Mr. Aylmer, when he had assured Miss Roberta that he was in health, and not affected by thunderstorms, and that his children were well, and that there would be service in the church on the 24th and the 29th of the month.

“That's it,” returned Roberta, in a deep, masculine chest-voice. “Mrs. Hawley said the 29th would not, do, on account of the service, so I came here at once.”

“Do for what!”

“For the school-feast. The ladies' committee had fixed it for the 29th.”

“The 29th is St. Peter's Day. I am surprised at your forgetting that.”

“Bless you, Mr. Aylmer! I never trouble myself about the saints' days: I am no Papist. I honour St. Peter, of course; in fact, I admire him extensively, he was a fine, out-spoken sort of a fellow, all warmth, and energy, and impulse; but I am not going to keep any particular day for his sake.”

“The Church commands it, Miss Roberta.”

“The Church does not, Mr. Aylmer, though some of her parsons may. I am not going to encourage them in such nonsense; we shall be having the whole calendar laid upon us presently, and we shall have to keep the feast of Holy St. Bridget, and the fast of the blessed St. Winifred, and there will be no end of it.”

“I will speak with you in my study,” said Mr. Aylmer, gravely. “We are trifling on very serious subjects.”

“Are we? How nice to think I have made you trifle, Mr. Aylmer! Positively you will have to do penance. I follow you, sir, for I promised Mrs. Hawley to settle about the school-feast. I will not say good morning; I shall see you again, Lady Jane.”

Chapter 9. ROBERTA'S CONFIDENCE

“All right,” said Roberta, an hour afterwards, as, with her very sauciest air, she came out of the study. “I have carried the day.”

“How about the service?”

“That will be at ten o'clock, and it will be over by eleven, Happily we cannot have the Psalms and responses chanted, because the choristers are busy hay-making or carpentering, or otherwise doing something secular. Oh Lady Jane Mr. Aylmer has been scolding me terribly; he has been charging me with insubordination, and irreverence, and self-dependence, and obstinacy, and presumption, and several kinds of heresy. And he finishes up by granting all my requests, and asks me to accompany you in the walk you were going to take when I interrupted you, and we are to talk over matters, and settle everything for the 29th. Is it to be an affair of trains or waggons?”

“Of waggons I say decidedly; but what says the ladies' committee?”

“The ladies' committee, as usual, says nothing to the point; it never does say anything sensible. When nine women get together, seven of them are bound to talk all at once, and five of them to have distinct and separate opinions to offer, and four of them to have no ideas to speak of, so they chime in with their neighbours.”

“Well, we must do as we have done before, arrange everything, and then consult the ladies, and talk over the refractory ones.”

“Have you any plan in view?”

“Yes; Mrs. Chennery offered the Park, with liberty to view the gardens, and conservatories, and the picture-gallery.”

“The children could walk there, all but the very young ones.”

“They had better all go in conveyances, or they will be too tired to enjoy themselves in the park. If you think the ladies will agree, I will write to Mrs. Chennery to-day, and she will give the housekeeper all proper directions.”

“The ladies will demur, of course, they always do; it is part of the inevitable programme, but they will be very glad to be relieved from the *onus* of decision. Ah! Chennery Park will be charming, and save us a host of difficulties. Of course Miss Bevan accompanies us?”

“Of course; we wish to make her quite one of ourselves; she is as sweet in mind and temper as in looks, and the children are very fond of her.”

“I do not wonder at that; everybody seems to be very fond of her. Mr. Bell talked to me about her for a good two hours the other evening. He actually sketched her profile from memory, and it was very like, I assure you “I hope he did not show it!”

“I do not think he did, except to myself; you know, Mr. Bell and I are cronies; he tells me all his secrets.”

“You are rather young to be his *confidante*.”

“Perhaps I am; but then you see we understand each other. Of course I know that Overdale says we are engaged, and he knows it too; and we laugh at Overdale, and think how we will astonish it some of these fine days.”

“And there is really nothing of that sort between you?”

“Nothing! absolutely nothing, Lady Jane. He wants youth, and beauty, and grace; the first I have lost, and the two last I never had. And I want—well, *not* a curate! So, knowing each other's minds, we are not afraid of each other; he is not terrified lest I should take every attention as the prelude to a proposal; and I am not always in a shiver lest he should be on the verge of making a declaration; and we agree on most points, and are excellent friends.”

“And you really think he is taken with Agatha?”

“I really think he is; but, hush! Miss Bevan is coming up quite close behind us.”

They had reached the church now, and very beautiful it looked as it stood up in its fair proportions against its leafy screen of limes and beeches, and goodly sycamores, its tall, grey tower resting as it were against the summer sky, so soft, blue, and flecked with fleecy clouds that the wind bore in from the open sea.

Overdale

They passed through the deep porch into the gloom of the church; after the brilliant sunshine it was like twilight cave—a sea-cave, Agatha thought, where the lights were always dim, and shadowy, and faintly green; only through one gorgeous window in the south transept poured in a flood of richly coloured beams, falling aslant the slender cluster-pillars, and tinting with intensest lines of rose and emerald, and gold and violet-blue, corbel and capital and fluted shaft.

Lady Jane saw the verger busy about the vestry door, and she went there to speak to him. Gertie and Ernest stole back again into the sunshine, and to look at the shattered pinnacle, and Rosamund wandered away by herself, so that Agatha and Roberta were left alone. They were standing close by the newly-erected monument of Lady Augusta Aylmer, and Agatha was mechanically reading the inscription for the fiftieth time.

“You knew Lady Augusta very well, I suppose?” she said, turning to Roberta; “you have lived here all your life?”

“Ever since I was a very little girl; my parents died when I was almost a baby, and my Aunt Judith took me to live with her. Overdale has been my home ever since I can remember. Bonnie, happy Overdale!”

“It is bonnie, and happy too, I think.”

“You like Overdale?”

“Indeed I do; it is the fairest place I ever saw. Cotswoldbury is very pretty, but it is not half so fresh, and bright, and sparkling; and the Woldscote Hills are not to be compared with those grand silvery cliffs; and everybody here seems to be so kind. I never thought a governess's life could be half so pleasant; I was bracing myself up to a terrible extent of stoicism and endurance for the last half-year of my stay at Sunny Lawn.”

“Ah! but all governesses do not find a Lady Janet or a Mr. Aylmer, and few children are so nice as the little Aylmers. Now, the Chennery governess—they are kind enough to her, but her situation is very unlike yours; she could never forget that she was the governess. She is a nice, clever, lady-like woman, and she is grateful for the kindness she receives at the Park; but she is often extremely dull and disconsolate. We are friends, and I cheer her up as well as I can, but she is weary of the monotony of teaching. She is rather over thirty, and she has been at it ever since she was fifteen. And governesses seem to me constitutionally dyspeptic or consumptive, they are nearly always delicate, and they grow old earlier than other women. I suppose it is the trying life they lead,”

“I do not find it at all a trying life.”

“Wait till you have had half a dozen situations,”

“I hope I shall never have so many.”

“You have begun so young that you will have plenty of time for varieties of experience, unless, indeed, you marry, as you probably will; then, of course, your governess life comes to an abrupt and delightful termination.”

“That would depend upon the sort of person one married. The English governess at Sunny Lawn, about five years ago, married, and I do not think she at all improved her position. She has a husband, certainly, and such a possession is supposed, you know, to impart a certain dignity to one's standing.”

“A very absurd supposition! An unmarried woman who can stand alone, and fend for herself successfully, deserves more respect than she who, in every small emergency, leans upon another.”

“Still, I suppose God meant the woman to be dependent on the man—that is, the married woman, of course; but poor Miss Flecker had to work as hard as ever after she became Mrs. Sutcliffe; and the man is rude, coarse-natured, and, I am afraid, not quite respectable.”

“Agatha, do you not wonder how women—educated, refined women—can marry men who, in all save station, are their inferiors?”

“I wonder, indeed,” replied Agatha, emphatically. “I have always wondered. Even as a mere school-girl, knowing nothing hardly of life, I have wondered at the marriages some people make; but now that I begin to comprehend the world and also myself a little better, my astonishment is greater than I can express to you. I seem to have grown much older since I came to Overdale.”

“You look more of a woman, certainly.”

“And I feel more of a woman.”

“Association with a woman like Lady Jane naturally expands the mind. I never spend an hour or two with her without feeling a little wiser on some point or other. And Rosamund is such a strange child! Young as she is I never talk with her without gaining new ideas. I am not certain that they are always correct ones, but they give one something to think about.”

“They do, indeed! Rosamund is my greatest anxiety. I feel myself often so unequal to my position as regards her. She asks questions that I have never in all my life asked myself, and that I cannot answer without much reflection; on some subjects she knows a great deal more than I do, Such a strange, self-contained, grave sort of life hers seems to be! I am always forgetting her age and talking to her as if she were years older than myself You will not be offended if I say that in some things she is older than you are, Miss Roberts.”

“I am never offended, unless, indeed—but call me Roberta. I am not Miss Roberts, you know; that style and title belongs rightfully to my Aunt Judith. I am only Miss Roberta to the servants and the school-children—Roberta to my friends. As to Rosamund being my senior I quite agree with you. But Agatha—I may say Agatha, may I not?—it is a thousand pities! If I were you I would try to make her more of a child; it is high time she began to enjoy her early girlhood: there is something terribly unnatural in her reticence and grave composure, and almost oppressive steadiness.”

“But one cannot but respect her deep religious sentiment. She puts religion first and foremost always: it is with her such an abiding, ever-present reality; she practises so much self-denial, she exercises so much self-discipline.”

“Which would be all very well for me, or for you. I am no girl—have been for a full quarter of a century in the world; and you, though still a girl in years, are called to fill a woman's place; but one fears something wild and exaggerated by—and-by from a child whose life is shaped, and clipped, and squared to a certain ideal, when she is only just entering on her teens. There are two things to be feared: either Rosamund Aylmer may rush hereafter away in another extreme, and become a mere woman of the world—”

“She will never do that; her nature is too pure, too deep.”

“Pure and deep natures turn out very oddly sometimes, when their early expression is of so singular and exaggerated a character. But I agree with you; I do not believe Rosamund will ever become heartless and fashionable; I only said it *might* be so: it might be the reaction of an overstrained youth. The other thing to be feared is, that she will fall into error—into religious error, I mean, so that devotion becomes superstition; she may—mind I only say *may*, Agatha, and I say it in confidence—she may end her days in a convent.”

“I have not seen any tendency to Roman Catholicism,” said Agatha, catching herself up, however, as she remembered the crucifix only the night before.

Certainly there was something very Romanish in saying prayers before a crucifix—not even a simple cross, but an actual *graven image!* But then Rosamund had said that her papa did not forbid it, and he would be sure to interfere and check any tendency to a false system like that of Popery. Still, Agatha could not but confess to herself that the crucifix was, to say the least of it, un-Protestant. But she was not going to say a word to Roberta about it. Roberta was a friend of the Aylmers, but she was without the sacred circle of domestic privacy. Agatha was within the charmed enclosure, and it behoved her never to betray confidence, even in the smallest particular. It gave her a deep and silent pleasure to feel herself really one of the family, and as such bound to a certain reticence.

“Agatha,” said Roberta, in a low voice, “it seems to me that there is a very real tendency to Romanism in Rosamund's religion; nay—shall I say it?—in Mr. Aylmer's religion!”

“Roberta!” And Agatha's face flushed with annoyance. “How can you say such a thing?”

“I dare say I ought not to say it, for I am sadly outspoken, even to impudence, Aunt Judith says; but I am honest, for I do not say to you what I have not said to Mr. Aylmer himself. Also, I hope you believe that I would not say such a thing in common conversation, or in promiscuous society.”

“You do not mean that you *told* Mr. Aylmer that he was in danger of going over to Rome?” asked Agatha, with extreme consternation.

“I did, indeed! It was very impertinent of me, no doubt”—Agatha thought it was—“but I could not help it, and it came out. We were talking, and we differed on some points, as we always do differ, and I said what I thought.”

“And what did Mr. Aylmer say?”

“He smiled, that grave, melancholy smile of his, that is at once so beautiful and so sad; and, as I proceeded to say some very severe things about the Church from which we severed ourselves three hundred years ago, he recited some lines—I dare say you know them:—

“And oh! by all the pangs and fears
Fraternal spirits know,

When for an elder's shame the tears
Of wakeful anguish flow,
Speak gently of our sister's fall:
Who knows but gentle love
May win her at one patient call
The surer way to prove?"

And then I began to wonder whether the Church of Rome were really a sister-Church."

"It was a pure Church once."

"Ah, yes! but that was long ago; it very soon after apostolic times declined from its pristine purity. Constantine, when he wedded Church and State, did more lasting harm than he could ever suspect; and the mischief begun then was fully completed in the days of Hildebrand."

"You would not call Romanism an unmingled evil?"

"I suppose it is not. Aunt Judith, who is the wisest as well as the most deeply religious woman I know, says that there is a vast basis of truth underlying the mass of error which succeeding ages have heaped up about the apostate Church of Rome. They have either turned the cross into the crucifix, or else they have heaped up so much rubbish of tradition, of carnal ordinances, and of man's inventions about it, that it is nearly hidden from the view of those who, troubled in conscience, or tossed about on this world's stormy waves, are seeking peace and rest!"

"Mr. Aylmer thinks there is no peace or rest save in the ark of the true Church."

"He is right; but the question occurs, What is the true Church?"

"The Church of England."

"The Church of England is split up into rival factions. But it is part of the true Church, no doubt, even as the Church of Rome may be part of the true Church. Agatha, the Church of Christ is the only true Church; it has endured through all ages; it is apart from any system of theology or Church government. It is founded on a rock, and nothing can destroy it. Part of it is on earth, but the greater portion of it is in heaven. Christ is its Head and Foundation, and He is its sole point of unity. Agatha, I am afraid there will be trouble here some day, the trouble that comes of forgetting the Centre of one's faith, and leaning on creeds and systems that are but fallible, however holy."

Long afterwards, standing on that very same spot, where now the purple light fell upon her flowing summer dress, she remembered these words, and in unutterable anguish of heart knew that those nearest and dearest to her had indeed forgotten the Centre of the one true faith.

Chapter 10. PASTORAL COUNSEL

“Suppose you were to come and drink tea with us tonight?” said Roberta, when she was parting with her friends at the end of the lane in which old Miss Roberts's cottage stood. “Aunt Judith want to know you, Agatha, and if Lady Jane does not object—”

“Of course Lady Jane does not object,” replied the rector's sister. “And as Claude comes home this evening, I suppose we must consider that the holidays have commenced, so Agatha is quite at liberty. And I, too, want her to know Aunt Judith. You had better accept, Agatha.”

Thus kindly urged, Agatha did accept, and she promised to be at the Walnut Cottage by five o'clock. She was quite willing to be absent when the hour of arrival came. It would perhaps be better to be away till all the bustle and excitement of welcomes had subsided; but she felt some degree of curiosity about Claude Aylmer, and wondered whether he would resemble his father.

As to Ralph Mornington, whose name she scarcely remembered, she did not think about him at all, except to hope that he, in conjunction with the heir of the Aylmers, would not make changes in the household, and so mar the bright, calm happiness which had been her portion for the last few weeks.

The afternoon she had all to herself, for Gertie and Ernest were busy with tinsel and gay calicoes and the paste-pot in the nursery, intent upon banners that were to grace the procession on the day of the much-anticipated school-feast.

Rosamund practised diligently in the dining-room, so Agatha spent a very pleasant hour, sitting by her own window, and reading Tennyson, and pondering on what she read. How new and delightful it was! How charming was the prospect without! How comfortable, and even luxurious, the view within! How quickly she caught the ring of Tennyson's gold, and knew it for the genuine thing itself; and with what pleasure she went through the “Palace of Art” and the “Dream of Fair Women” again, recalling the scene of the previous evening—the glittering sea, with its golden sands, and silver-winged birds, and its fretted cliffs, and the little hollow among the rocks, where the blue harebells rang their fairy chime in the soft, fluttering breeze that came in with the tide, and where she had listened for the first time to the music of those wondrous picture-verses. Ah! how sweet life was! Life and youth, how fair they were! how well worth the having, and the holding with a jealous care. She, too, could

“Wake to a whisper self-murmured and fond,
Oh, life, Oh, beyond,
Thou art strange, thou art sweet!”

The quiet hour soon passed, and it was time to put on her hat to go to Walnut Cottage. Miss Roberts took an early tea, and one of the servants would come for Agatha at nine o'clock. A little way along the road she met the rector, and, finding whither she was bound, he turned back and walked with her to the end of the lane, and she told him how she had been reading Tennyson that afternoon, and how pleased she had been with several of his minor poems. He saw that she *really* cared for what she read. Of course, it is the fashion to admire Tennyson, in spite of his perversely standing on “a tower in the wet,” with a roaring and a blowing refrain. But to admire in set phrase is one thing, and to feel in one's own heart the echo of the poet's thought is another. Every lispng dandy and every sentimental young lady can “dote” on Tennyson, and quote such lines as have come to be stereotyped in men's minds; but it is given only to the few, in truth, to appreciate fully, to taste the hidden beauty, and to drink in the pure, exhilarating draught which the bard offers in the costly chalice of his noble verse. Mr. Aylmer was of such, and he was deeply read in the poets of all ages, and, moreover, he honoured and studied our own English poets, as they deserve to be honoured and studied. Much as he loved antiquity, he had a healthy admiration for the good which the present day brings forth; and, scholar as he was, he never sympathised with those learned simpletons who can see no Divinity in the genius that has not been embalmed for centuries, nor count as treasure aught that does not bear the stamp of at least the medieval ages. And Agatha's quick appreciation of his favourite authors charmed him; it was not only that she admired them, but that she entered into them with all her soul, and rejoiced in the new and beautiful ideas thus presented to her.

Mr. Aylmer did not offer the governess his arm, but he walked by her side deep in converse on some of the

themes he loved best. I think it pleases men when women, especially superior women, are ready and willing to learn from them. Superior men like talent and culture in the women with whom they associate; but they care more about their possessing the power of appreciation. They would rather be comprehended, and know at the same time that they are interesting and *teaching* the fair listener, than discourse with one who lays claims to vast erudition, and all kinds of knowledge, and who is really “well up” in all sorts of lore, literary and scientific.

I believe it was the discovery of Agatha's fine mind, coupled with her naïve ignorance of the best literature of the day, that first roused Mr. Aylmer's interest in her. Her beauty, no doubt, made an impression upon him. No man with poetic tastes like his, with his mingled reserve and enthusiasm, with his chivalric temperament, could gaze upon so much and such rare loveliness unmoved; but mere beauty would never have tempted him to be false in his heart to vows which, since Lady Augusta's death, he had silently pronounced. He had resolved that he would never marry again; never regard any woman in any other light than a mere acquaintance, or at the most a useful, estimable friend. He had formed a peculiar ecclesiastico-Platonic theory of his own, and if Agatha had never come in his way he might possibly have followed it out to his life's end with all consistency. Both the rector and the young girl were attracted towards each other, and every hour of their association increased the attraction, which, however, neither of them confessed, and which Agatha herself never once suspected. She only knew that she liked Mr. Aylmer's society, that it was very pleasant to talk to him, and that it would be a sorrow greater than she could bear if she were obliged to go away from Overdale Rectory.

She was very young and very innocent, and she had read few novels, or she might have guessed her danger when she half admitted to herself that any future in which Mr. Aylmer bore no part would be scarcely worth the having. Only she classed them all together as being dear to her—the rector, Lady Jane, and the darling children, yet feeling in her heart of hearts that she could bear life better without Lady Jane, or without her pupils, or without both, than without the head of the family of which she now felt herself to be a member. A change had come over her in all respects; she was changed even since yesterday, since she had sat among the harebells in the hollow of the cliff, listening to the music of the voice that was speaking to her in tones so grave and calm, and yet so rich, and sweet and gentle, but the exact nature of the change she could not define, only she felt that the world was very bright and beautiful, that never before had the skies been so blue, the earth so green, the flowers so radiant, the sea so grand, the very air she breathed so pure, and light, and balmy. How grey was the quiet, uneventful past! how rosy—fair the present!

And the future? Was it not one long golden vista stretching away in loveliest perspective right up to the gates of heaven? a happy land of promise—a land flowing with milk and honey—a land of veritable pure delights? But of the future Agatha did not pause to think: she was quite content to live on from day to day, knowing no other, no deeper happiness than that which was already hers—so mysteriously hers that she had no idea how she came by it, yet perfectly conscious that it was hers, her very own, her secret joy, in which no stranger or alien might intermeddle.

“Foster shall come for you at nine,” said Mr. Aylmer, as he turned away. “Will you walk or drive?”

“I would rather walk, the evening air is so delicious.”

“Very well; but of course you can have the pony carriage if you like. Present my kind regards to Miss Roberts; and, Agatha—Miss Bevan—do not let her win you over to her own laxity of opinion.”

“Is she, then, *unorthodox*?” Agatha had probably never used the word before in her life, but it came glibly enough now. Of course “orthodoxy” was represented by the doctrine and teaching of the rector of Overdale, and heterodoxy was that which he contemned.

“I can scarcely call her a Churchwoman,” was the reply, “and I am sorry to say Roberta has imbibed some of her notions. Miss Roberts is an excellent woman—in fact, a *most* excellent woman, but quite mistaken in her views, which tend to the increase of the sects and to latitudinarianism. I foresee that you and Roberta will be friends, and I need not tell you that I respect and esteem Roberta; but I wish to give you one word of pastoral counsel. Do not be led away by her peculiarities; you have accepted the teaching of your mother, the Church, and if anything is brought before you which militates against that teaching, or in any way clashes with it, reject it. Do not resort to controversy, controversy is not for the laity, and a woman may be easily deceived by the specious arguments of a sophist. A sound rule of faith is provided for you; hold to it, and you will be safe. Simply refuse to entertain opinions which your conscience tells you are *unauthorised*.”

Agatha would have liked to ask how she might certainly discriminate between the authorised and the

unauthorised; but Mr. Aylmer courteously took leave and walked back towards the village, and in three minutes she was under the great walnut-tree which gave its name to Miss Roberts's pretty residence. Such a lovely garden, small, but exquisitely kept, and boasting of many choice shrubs and newly-introduced flowering plants. Roberta was a practical horticulturist and a botanist as well. Splendid roses and rare climbing plants covered the trellis-work on the cottage walls, and the air was perfumed with the fragrance of the sweet-scented clematis. Roberta herself came to the door, and led her guest into the tiny hall, where were the tiniest of umbrella-stands, and a tiny marble-topped table, just holding a gigantic fuchsia-fulgens in all its glory. You could stand on the door-mat and shake hands with any one at the foot of the stairs. It was very like a pretty doll-house, Agatha thought, and might have been placed under a glass case to be exhibited as a model cottage *ornée* on the smallest scale.

But the drawing-room was altogether charming; it was long and low, and had French windows opening on a miniature lawn, all ablaze now with a ribbon border of Mrs. Pollock, of silvery cerastium, of golden calceolaria, and intensely blue lobelia, while beautiful rock-plants clustered about the steps leading down upon the grass. Inside was brightness and good taste and comfort, plenty of pretty things, and a faint, agreeable odour of *potpourri* in immense dragon-china vases.

Agatha had never yet spoken to Miss Roberts—she had seen her regularly at church once every Sunday, and she knew that she was a great invalid, and so infirm that she went everywhere in a Bath chair of peculiar construction. She was wheeled into church, and helped out into her pew, before the congregation arrived, and service being over she remained till all her fellow-worshippers had dispersed, and then she was again assisted into her chair, and wheeled away through a side gate of the churchyard, of which she was permitted to keep a key. The morning service was all she was equal to: in the evening she stayed at home; but unless she was very seriously indisposed she would not allow her niece to remain with her.

A sweet old lady was Miss Roberts—"a real, dear, lovely old thing," as Roberta called her, "not a would-be young old woman in a fashionable cap, with artificial curls, and perhaps a little artificial bloom!" Aunt Judith was in her seventy-second year, and she wore a pretty close tulle cap and a black silk dress; no one ever saw her in any other costume in afternoons. In mornings she wore fine black alpaca and a net cap. Her hair was white as snow, her complexion still delicate—it had never been brilliant, so it had not grown coarse—and her hands were small and very beautiful. Her blue eyes were full of gentle sweetness, and over her whole countenance was spread the light of a happy heart—a heart at peace with God, and loving with a great, wide, and almost perfect charity her fellow-creatures. It might have been to her that Wordsworth addressed his sonnet—

"Such age, how beautiful! Oh, lady bright
Whose mortal lineaments seem all refined,
By favouring nature and a saintly mind,
To something purer and more exquisite
Than flesh and blood."

Agatha was at home at once. Roberta took her upstairs to her own charming little maiden bower to take off her hat; then they had tea in the drawing-room, out of tiny cups of Sevres china and an antique silver teapot, with a silver strainer fastened on to the spout; and Agatha enjoyed the delicious bread-and-butter and the excellent cake with her old Sunny Lawn appetite. She was on her guard, looking out for something "unorthodox," expecting hostile demonstrations whenever the conversation took a fresh turn, and determined, should occasion rise, simply to announce her own convictions, and decline the smallest approach to controversy. Already, poor child, she was considering how best she could comport herself as a dutiful daughter of the Church, and coming to the conclusion that she must in all respects meet the wishes of her pastor.

But all sorts of subjects came before the little party at the cottage; and tea was over, and Agatha had been shown the garden and the small conservatory, and the "very wee-est vinery in all the world"; and she had done a long piece of tatting, sitting between her friends, and talking all the time, yet had heard no word of which she could disapprove; and she told herself that if Mr. Aylmer *could* make a mistake—and she was not at all clear that he could—he had somehow made one when he pronounced the Misses Roberts—*aunt and niece*—"unorthodox."

Much of Roberta's parish work, it seemed, went on under the supervision of her aunt. A book was kept in which were entered the names, ages, and in some sort the histories of the families she visited; and this book was frequently consulted, and a course of wise, systematic beneficence was carried on, the extent of which was never

suspected till the day came when it ceased altogether. Once the conversation seemed drifting away in doubtful channels, for Aunt Judith was speaking of religious training among the children of the poor, and the necessity of giving them as early as possible *the truth itself*. And Roberta replied rather sadly—“How in these days shall one know the truth?”

And the answer came—“My child, you know it; you *know* you know it. The truth is just the simple faith of the New Testament.”

“I suppose God will always show us the truth if we ask Him,” said Roberta.

“Always. Light will be given to the humble, sincere seeker after truth, however thick may be his darkness—Heaven's own light, the light which comes to us from Jesus Christ Himself. If we follow Him we shall not walk in darkness, but we shall have the light of life. His own word has spoken it.”

“And I suppose,” continued Roberta, “when one gets old, one is never rocked about on the sea of rival creeds? It is only in youth and in middle age that one is liable to be carried away into error?”

“My dear, every Sunday—nay, every day of my life—I pray the prayer of St. Chrysostom, the blessed prayer which the wisdom of our fathers embalmed in the precious Liturgy of our Church 'Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of Thy servants as may be most expedient for them, granting us in this world knowledge of Thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting.' And then, children, I feel as if I needed to ask no more. All possible good for time and for eternity is contained in the answer to those requests, and I bow my head for the benediction which follows, knowing that I am indeed blessed, since the grace of my Lord Jesus, the love of the Father, and the communion of the blessed Spirit, will abide with me for ever.”

And Mr. Aylmer had said that he could not call Miss Roberts a Churchwoman! What could he mean? Agatha thought she would always value that prayer of St. Chrysostom as she had never valued it before; it would come with new significance and fresh beauty as she joined in it Sunday by Sunday, morning and evening, and on Wednesday evenings and Friday mornings, when there was always service in Overdale Church. Surely that word of pastoral counsel was unneeded!

Chapter 11. RALPH ENLIGHTENS HIS FRIEND

Brightly as a happy dream glide away the summer days—days of sunshine, and flowers, and song, and innocent gaiety. Claude and Agatha became fast friends at once: the boy inherited much of the chivalric spirit of his ancestors, and he often declared he would take for his motto the ancient, half-heathen inscription, “For the love of God and the ladies.” He absolutely worshipped Agatha's radiant beauty; and when he discovered the sweetness of her temper, and found out that she was extremely sensible withal, his admiration was openly declared, and he gave it as his opinion that Agatha Bevan was the very jolliest girl that ever existed.

“No nonsense about her, you know,” Claude said to his friend, Ralph Mornington. “She's as beautiful as the morning, and she doesn't know it, or if she does—ah! you think she does, do you?—well, then, she never thinks about it! she is as natural as a daisy, and as queenly as a lily, and as sweet and fresh as rosebuds before the dew is off them; and then she is obliging, and will help you with your fishing—tackle, and sew a button on your glove, and does not expect attentions or compliments; she's always just the thing, now, isn't she, Ralph?”

But Ralph Mornington professed himself to be in love with Agatha, and the rough—and—ready miscellaneous tribute of praise rendered to the young lady's perfections scarcely pleased him. Ralph was Byronic, and wrote sonnets sometimes; and having attained the mature age of sixteen and a hail; he deemed it his duty to be provided with a lady—love, as well as with a horse and a groom, and other agreeable belongings, to which an eldest son, with a liberal—minded father, may aspire. He had had one or two devoted attachments before: his tutor's youngest sister, a charming young lady of five and twenty, who thought Mornington “a very troublesome and conceited boy”; and—I am almost ashamed to record it—his laundress's rosy daughter, a pretty girl with a saucy tongue, and on the eve of marriage with a stalwart young butcher; also a fair nymph with floating hair, fresh from a bathing—machine on the sands of some fashionable watering—place—a sweet girl, whose name Ralph never could find out, and whom he called “*L'Innominata*,” and whose charms were chronicled in scrappy verses to Claribel, to Eucharis, to Miranda, and other mythical young ladies, till one morning he made the unlucky discovery that his goddess answered to the name of Sarah Jane, and he became immediately disenchanted, convinced that her patronymic was neither De Courcy nor Percy, but probably Smith or Jones, or at the best Robinson, and he haunted Sarah Jane's localities never more.

But Agatha was quite a different affair; she was a veritable lady, though she wore the disguise of a governess; and she was good and sweet as she was beautiful, and precisely his ideal, only she was three years older than himself, and that, he was fain to confess, was somewhat of a disadvantage, for she was certainly marriageable, and might be wooed and won any day; while he, in spite of all his self—assurance, felt that he only ranked as a boy, and that seriously to make an offer would be to expose himself to all kinds of ridicule, and the disappointment of rejection.

So Ralph answered Claude's rhapsody somewhat coolly, and replied that a girl might be just the thing to one fellow, and nothing at all to another.

“You mean she's nothing at all to you, I suppose?” said Claude, with an air of vexation.

He wanted his paragon to admire all that he admired, and Ralph's *nonchalant* and rather supercilious manner nettled him.

“Well, every one to his own taste, and I say she's just the ticket. She is as good as a grown—up sister; she got a thorn out of my hand yesterday, and this evening she is going to make me a fishing apron. I wonder if she would mind getting a fellow a few fine worms for bait, eh, Ralph?”

“Do not think of such a thing! you ought not to presume on Miss Bevan's kindness.”

“No more I ought; after all, she is not quite our own property; governesses are not expected to make themselves universally useful, I suppose. Old Lawson never made herself useful at all beyond the schoolroom, though she took upon herself finely, and magged at me as if I were a child. But I wish Rosy were like Agatha, she is so dreadfully grave and solemn; rather, I wish Agatha were my own sister—or, better still—I say, old fellow, wouldn't it be grand if the governor fell in love with her?”

“I do not understand you,” said Ralph, coldly, puffing away at his surreptitious cigar.

“You are very dull, then. Of course, I know he is sure to marry again some day; he is only just forty; and if I

am to have a stepmother I hope it—will be a young and pretty one, a little bit of goodness and sweetness, like this Agatha. We should have awfully jolly times together if she were my mamma, and I should be the most dutiful of sons, and give my consent to the matter at once.”

“I never heard that sons were required to consent to a father's marriage, so probably you will not be consulted in any case. But you had better not rattle on so fast; Miss Bevan could not fail to be seriously displeased were she to know that her name and your father's were thus associated—most *improperly* associated, let me remark,” said Ralph, with absurd sententiousness.

“But I am not going to let her know; surely a fellow is safe with his own chum. You won't go in for a split, I suppose?”

“Not I! I have too much respect for Miss Bevan, and also for Mr. Aylmer, to hint at such a thing. Such an entirely absurd and unsuitable alliance.”

“Well, of course, she is a governess, and it sounds awkward marrying the governess, and, as a rule, I would set my face against anything of the sort. But this is an exceptional case. Miss Bevan is poor, but not of obscure parentage. I have heard all about her. Her father was a beneficed clergyman, and her people are of some standing; and, after all, though I am an Aylmer, I must confess there is a good deal of bosh in all this fuss about pedigree. I am disposed to think we make too much of it. Bell says we do, and Bell is a very sensible fellow. If a girl is pretty, and amiable, and educated, and downright good, and has no relations to be ashamed of, I don't see why one should not please one's self—I mean to, I know, when my time comes.”

Decidedly Mr. Aylmer's children were alarmingly precocious.

Ralph drew a long whiff—he was smoking against his principles, for the good of Lady Jane's choice geraniums— and replied,

“I was not considering the question of rank and position. I was thinking what an awful sacrifice it would be for the young lady.”

“Sacrifice! cried Claude, turning very red, “a sacrifice to marry my father, to be the honourable Mrs. Aylmer! We Aylmers have matched with the proudest in the land Ralph, and I tell you—”

“There now, *composez vous*—as my sister's French governess says, when there is battle-royal in the school-room. I am not hinting anything against the claims of the Aylmers; they are older in the land than the Morningtons, and I can't say more than that, seeing I count my lineage as well worth having. What I meant is this, Claude, your father is old enough to be Miss Bevan's father; she cannot be more than seventeen, and he is in middle life, you know.”

“Agatha Bevan is turned nineteen, and I fancy she would not mind about age; she has a great respect for the governor—and she is very fond of me.”

“So you think she may accept a man twenty years her senior for the sake of being your mother! oh, you conceited puppy!”

“Don't be so Crusty, Ralph; you are so glum and tart, I declare I think you must be intending to go in for her yourself, only you are quite a boy; we are both boys, you know: it is only ridiculous to pretend to be men before our time.”

“Speak for yourself, please; but remember that I am three years older than you are, and three years count for something; and a lad who has seen the world is quite equal to a girl a few years older who has passed all her life in the cloister of a ladies' boarding-school. And speaking of cloisters brings me to quite another subject. I say, Claude, it seems to me that your father is more likely to wed himself to the Scarlet Lady than to Miss Bevan, or to any other piece of mortal womankind: you had better look out!”

“Look out! what on earth are you driving at?”

“Don't you know that the proclivities of the Hon. and Rev. Eustace Aylmer are beginning to be discussed over tea-tables, and talked about at magistrates' meetings when business is over? Don't you know that already people are speculating about the probability of his perversion, or conversion, or whatever it is, and wondering whether he really will 'go over' or not?”

“Go over to France, do you mean?”

“No, my boy, go over to Rome—spiritual Rome, that is—and profess himself a devoted son of his Holiness!”

“Ralph, I think you ought not to talk so about my father. He is a real good fellow, and will never be a turncoat. I do not go in much for religion myself—I had an overdose of infant piety, and I have never quite recovered from

its effects: it was my mother's fault—but I respect my father's religion, and I am sure he will never, no, never, be false to his principles.”

“Certainly not; but principles may change and opinions alter, and then—whew, my lad, you would have to look out! The Church of Rome is a very greedy Church, and she likes to disinherit heretical sons; she is not even very particular about orthodox descendants. She does not think it good for the souls of her most obedient children that they should possess either too much power or too much gold and silver, so she kindly keeps it for them, promising them excellent interest for their investment in the next world if not in this. The Scarlet Lady would like to finger a little of the Aylmer wealth, I promise you. Your father had better marry the kitchenmaid than pledge himself to her: it would be better for him in the end, and for you, too.”

“I say, Ralph, you are saying very peculiar things.”

“I have heard some peculiar things since I came here.”

“That Roberta has been talking to you!”

“Not on this subject. Also, Claude, I have seen with my own eyes, and heard with my own ears, and I form my own conclusions.”

“Which are wrong, doubtless,” replied the boy, haughtily. “I tell you what it is, Mornington, you and your people are sadly irreligious, half heathen, in fact; and your own pastor, who you put into the living, follows the hounds, and cares more for foxes than for people's souls. You told me so yourself. Well, coming here, you find a devout, consistent clergyman, and you put his devotion down to mere superstition. I tell you my father is a true son of the Protestant Church.”

“Don't be furious; but I'll lay any money that he would say he was *not*. He does not call himself a *Protestant*, I am sure.”

“What the—Ralph, you'll make me swear; and suppose my father, or my aunt, or the girls, heard! But what *can* he call himself—a Papist, eh?”

“No; a Catholic.”

“Well, Aunt Jane says we are all Catholics, and don't we say every Sunday, 'I believe in the *Holy Catholic Church*'? and auntie says that means Christ's Church all over the world, even including Dissenters, and such-like cattle, if they are sincere.”

“My Lady Jane's charity is very broad! She patronises Dissenters, does she?”

“Well, no; but she counts them all in as Christians. She would go in and sit mum with beastly Quakers, or howl with vulgar Methodists, or consort with those creatures that go and get themselves *dipped*, soused in a pond, you know, or half drowned in a cistern; it is the only fault I have to find with her.”

“I thought you did not mind about religion at all.”

“Not much about *the thing* itself, I am afraid, but I like what religion I have to be respectable; and I do hate Dissenters, don't you?”

“Why, no! Why should I?—they don't hurt me. It's very bad taste of them to be Dissenters, of course, and very stupid. They lose a lot of good things by their asinine obstinacy. But still I must say, Claude—and if ever I am in Parliament I mean to say it there—a man has a perfect right to his own religion, and I think he ought not to labour under social or political disadvantages because his conscience makes him a Jew, or a Ranter, or a Swedenborgian, or an absurd Plymouth Brother.”

“The Dissenters are such a confounded stupid, ignorant lot; their ministers have no right to be ministers; they cannot even speak their own language; they never receive any education, and they are incurably vulgar.”

“Claude, my boy I admire your superb patrician exclusiveness, but do you know you are talking a precious lot of nonsense? This is the age of progress, my young friend; one must be liberal and unsectarian, and open to conviction. The Dissenters *are* educated, some of them very much so; they have some splendid men among—them, men of learning and eloquence; my father says so: he knows them, and bows to their claims. Mind! he is no Dissenter himself, neither am I—mother Church for me, provided she don't intermarry with the Scarlet Lady; but let's give every one his due. And I tell you what, Claude, I hear a great deal of these things at Mornington. The time is past for despising Dissenters: I think rather we should try to conciliate them.”

“Conciliate them, indeed! 'What for?'”

“Your inquiry proves your ignorance. They have great power in their hands. I am not sure but that the time will come when they will be *the* power of the land. No laws will be passed without their assent; they will outnumber

the upholders of the Establishment: indeed, I am not sure they don't know, Claude, for *our* Church takes into her bosom all who have no religion at all, all babies without lawful protectors, all sullen fellows, all idiots, and madmen, and drivelling paupers. Folks who never enter any church at all, who scarcely know they have souls, whose chief acquaintance with God is to swear profanely by Him, are classed as *Churchmen*, and go to swell the ranks of the orthodox. Ah! I have heard plenty of it; I have heard queer things, but true, at my father's table."

"I suppose your father does not carry his liberal notions to the extent of inviting these Dissenters to his table?" said Claude, with a sneer. He was fast losing patience with his guest.

"Indeed, but he does!"

"Is an M.P. *obliged* to do such things?"

"I cannot tell how far an M.P.'s obligations may extend; but my father invites these guests quite irrespectively of his constituency. He likes the company of enlightened Dissenters quite as well as that of enlightened Churchmen—or *Episcopalians*, to speak more correctly. Indeed, he says he finds more vigorous thought and fresher ideas with the Dissenters; he gains more from them, in fact; there is so much expansion about them."

"But," said Claude, earnestly, "supposing they are clever and scholarly, which I had no idea was the case, how do you get over the vulgarity?"

"What vulgarity, man?"

"These Dissenters' vulgarity, to be sure! they are not accustomed to good society, they cannot know how to behave."

Ralph burst into a loud laugh. "What! you think they put their knives into their mouths, and snivel, and don't know the use of dinner-napkins, nor the merits of French cookery! Oh, my dear Aylmer, you have a great deal to learn; but you are young, there is plenty of time. Of course there are vulgarians among the Dissenters, plenty of them, too; but I never heard or saw that the Establishment cured any one of vulgarity and bad breeding. Take an example: that charming old pensioner you introduced me to yesterday. He was really quite the patriarch, with his white hair and portly figure, and he talked in the most edifying way about the daily service your father proposes, and the saints' days, etc., etc., but his wiping his nose on his coat-sleeve—and he had a very bad cold—was far from pleasing—not genteel, in short."

"Who expects an old fellow like that to be genteel?"

"No one, that I know of. I only wish you to perceive that adhesion to the Establishment does not necessarily make low-born, low-bred men gentlemen; and the same thing is to be remarked with Dissenters. I wait you to see that this fault of vulgarity occurs within as well as without the pale of our own Church, Of course fly father doesn't invite men only because they are Dissenters; he asks to his own table those only who are his equal"

"His *equals!* You compliment him, Ralph."

"He would consider himself complimented, I promise you. There are two or three of those Dissenters with whom he would scarcely venture to compare himself."

"Have Dissenters universities—colleges?"

"They have colleges, of course; and surely you know that the London University is open to them?"

"But they cannot matriculate at Oxford or Cambridge?"

"They will before long. These seats of learning are intended for the nation, not for any particular denomination. They should be open to all, without limitation of creed."

Claude began to be positively frightened, and to wish he had never brought Mornington to Overdale, and his regrets were really assuming a very serious character, when the luncheon bell rang, and he became so much absorbed in cold beef, and salad, and iced claret as to forget all about Ralph's astounding statements. But he resolved that at the very first opportunity he would ask his father if he called himself *a Protestant!*

Chapter 12. CHENNERY PARK

The children's *fete* had, after all, been postponed. The Chennerys were coming back to the Park earlier than they had at first intended, and the girls were anxious to be at home when the school festival occurred. And then when the day was at last named it began to rain; the long dry season broke up, and incessant wet kept everybody very much within doors, and it was preposterous to think of making arrangements for a treat, the success of which depended so much upon dry weather and sunshine. And one day in July the Chennerys actually arrived, and the following afternoon Kate and Ada rode over to the Rectory.

Agatha was in the drawing-room when they came in, and she was immediately introduced by Rosamund to the sisters. Kate rather haughtily responded to the governess's civilities; but Ada greeted her with the warmth that might have been expected from Rosamund's friend, seeing that Rosamund had written several letters full of the praises of Agatha, promising Ada much satisfaction in the society of Miss Bevan. Roberta had come up that afternoon also, so that there was quite a bevy of young ladies gathered about Lady Jane's embroidery frame, and a great deal of harmless fun and innocent gossip was going on; Roberta and Miss Chennery seeming rather disposed to try which could say the cleverest and most laughable things, and all but Ada and Rosamund were helping to make mirth.

"And so you have been introduced?" said Roberta at last, when the conversation became a little more rational.

"Kate, how do you like the gay world?"

"It is glorious if one does not have too much of it. I enjoyed it wonderfully at first; I thought I should never be tired of balls and parties, and in one way I enjoyed them always; but delightful as they were, after the first three weeks I began to feel like a child who has unlimited sweetmeats at command, and mourns that his appetite is not also unlimited. Moreover, as the weather grew hotter, and the days grew to their full length, I began to pine for the country. I wanted to hear the rustling of our own elms, and to listen to the roll of the waves upon the shore. I was not sorry when mamma said she must come home; I had had about enough of it, and here I am, right glad to feel the Channel breezes once more, and to exchange Rotten Row for our own downs, and the lanes sloping to the shore. Aunt Laura was vexed that we came away so early, for the season is scarcely past its height, and there were no end of delightful schemes and charming festivities in prospect when we left Hyde Park Gardens; and then she says 'I have done nothing!'"

"In what way?" asked Roberta.

"I am come back Kate Chennery, and disengaged; I could not get up the slightest shadow of an attachment. I tried to be sentimental, but it would not do. I only flirted awkwardly, and the result is I return to Chennery Park in 'maiden meditation, fancy free.' And, all things considered, I think it is quite as well it should be so; but Aunt Laura is positively cross, and next season she offers to *chaperone* me herself. I really think conscientious *chaperones* must have a hard time of it, do not you, Lady Jane?"

"That depends upon the young ladies who have to be *chaperoned*. I really do not think I gave much trouble myself. I am not quite so sure I should like the charge of Miss Chennery."

"Ah! that is too bad, Lady Jane. You never forget what a wilful girl I am, and what mortal trouble I used to give poor Lauder; but I assure you I am rapidly reforming. A girl's first season tames her a little, if it does nothing else for her; the conventionalities of society act as a check upon one's wild, romping propensities, and it does not do to set the world at defiance."

"I am glad you have come to that conclusion, my dear. I begin to think London has done you some little good after all."

"It does every one good, I think; it rubs off one's rusticities, of course, and also, I think, it helps to cure one of whims and peculiarities. Rosamund will be quite another creature when she is fully 'out.' How she and Ada will laugh at their present ideas when they are half-a-dozen years older!"

Rosamund looked up gravely when she heard her name mentioned, and a faint tinge of colour dyed Ada Chennery's cheek; they both knew to what ideas Kate was referring. They were not a religious family, the Chennerys, and poor Ada had very frequently a weary time of it.

At Chennery Park devotion was confused with fanaticism, and a conscientious discharge of religious duties

was interpreted as superstition and singular weakness of mind. Ada's happiest hours were spent at Overdale Rectory. She was a gentle girl, of grave tastes and womanly preference. Religion was the one absorbing theme which occupied her mind, almost to the exclusion of every other subject; and her friendship with Rosamund Aylmer had considerably strengthened what Kate called her sister's "Methodistical proclivities." Not that Kate meant to charge her with any tendencies to actual Wesleyanism, for she knew well that Ada was deeply imbued with the spirit of that portion of the Church which has since developed itself into Ritualism, as we have it in the present day, but she called all people who were at all in earnest about their souls "*Methodists*" quite irrespective of the creed which they actually professed; she used the term in derision, no doubt; but she surely paid the Methodists an involuntary compliment.

"Rosamund," she said presently, "are you as busy as ever with your old women and your dirty children?"

"They are not dirty," replied Rosamund, mildly; "auntie stipulates for their being quite clean; they are often badly clothed, you know, but they cannot help that."

"Of course not; there must always be shabby, wretched people in the world; but why in the name of all that is sensible should one consort with them? I would help them, you knew, give them garments if they deserved it, and all that, and I think it is everybody's duty to be charitable; but it cannot be required of any one to go into close rooms, and be surrounded by stupid children, and perhaps catch all kinds of infectious maladies. I call that being righteous overmuch. Still, I suppose the clergyman's family must take some part in such matters, and that is why you go yourself to the schools, Lady Jane, and allow Rosamund to occupy herself in the same way. One thing I am resolved upon: I will never marry a parson—not even a bishop!"

"Indeed, Kate," replied Lady Jane, gravely, "with your present views it is to be hoped you will not; you would make a very bad clergyman's wife; you would find yourself in a thoroughly false position."

"Ah, you think I am such a sinner!" said Kate, lightly; "and I really do not pretend to be over and above pious; religion is not my line, you *know*." Then seeing that nearly all her auditors looked shocked and pained at her levity, she added: "I respect piety in others, you know, but I cannot go in for it myself; after all, though, I may some day like to have a little of it: just yet I cannot find pleasure in extra church-going and Gregorian chants, and catechisms, and primers, and crosses, and working altar-cloths, and all that *trash*, which is only a sort of Romanism, you know." And she gave Ada a good-humoured nod and laugh, not unmingled, however, with satire and rebuke.

Unheard, Mr. Aylmer had joined the party. Kate was talking so loudly—for loud talking was one of her accomplishments—that she had not heard the door gently opened and closed again, nor was she at all aware that the rector was quietly listening to her flippant tirade. She looked up when she ceased speaking, and saw Mr. Aylmer's tall, erect figure before her, and noticed his grave, sad looks.

"Oh, Mr. Aylmer!" she cried, half annoyed with herself, "I did not mean you to hear that speech. I am aware you disagree with me, and I should not have spoken so freely had I known you were present. I beg your pardon."

"I grant it," replied Mr. Aylmer, almost sternly.

Kate looked vexed; she had expected that the rector would say that no apology was needed, though she was wrong to speak so lightly upon serious subjects; but she had not supposed he would really consider her to be an actual culprit, and treat her accordingly, though it must be confessed she stood somewhat in awe of him.

"But," continued the rector, "your offence is not only against me, though as a minister of the Church I have a right to receive your apology. Such levity of tone in speaking of holy things is altogether inexcusable; I warn you, Miss Chennery, that you are standing upon very dangerous ground."

"I do not think so," said Kate, boldly.

"I trust you are not meaning precisely what you say," was the answer; "but I must trouble you not to take this tone in the presence of these young people. I will speak with you in my study before you go."

"If it is all the same to Mr. Aylmer, I had rather not be scolded. I have a womanly aversion to being found fault with; therefore, if you please, I decline an interview. I cannot take a scolding with a good grace. I am Kate Chennery!"

"And Kate Chennery must listen to the minister of the Church, to the priest whom God has set over her. I do not wish to scold you, but I must reprove you."

"And I do not care to be reprov'd," was Kate's sturdy answer.

She had fallen under strange influences in London, and she was not the Miss Chennery who had listened to

many a rebuke from her pastor in days that were gone by with outward deference if with inward impatience. Mr. Aylmer was considerably astonished, as his young parishioner intended that he should be, but he was not silenced, as she had expected him to be, when he found that his words made not their wonted impression.

“Will you do me the favour to step into my study?” he persisted. “I must say a few words to you.”

A saucy answer was on Kate's lips, but his look awed her, and his manner compelled obedience, and, after all, as she sometimes was, she had the instincts of a lady down in her heart, though unhappily they were not suffered to rise to the surface; and she felt that could not with a good grace contest the matter any longer. Resolved not to yield, however he might preach, replied;—

“Well, Mr. Aylmer, if you will have it so, I suppose you must take your own way, though I have been accustomed of late to issue rather than to receive commands. I will follow you.”

And looking comically pathetic at the silent group she left behind her, she passed out of the drawing-room, while those who remained scarcely knew what to say, especially as Ada was present.

It was nearly an hour before Kate came back again, and when she did, all her haughty defiance was gone; traces of tears were on her cheeks, and she looked humbled if not penitent. She would not stay to tea, and was in haste to be gone; but she shook hands cordially with the rector, and appeared to cherish no resentment against him. Agatha wondered greatly what spells he had exercised to tame the young lady so effectually and so speedily, and Lady Jane was lost in astonishment; for to subdue Kate Chennery, and repress her natural sauciness, if it might not be called impudence, was a feat of which few people were capable. Even her parents stood a little in awe of her, and her governesses had generally been obliged to succumb. She kept up a sort of guerilla warfare with her brothers, and in the end of all contests she was the victorious one. And now she was brought to penitence! she had struck her colours, and had very much the aspect of a chidden child, who feels his naughtiness, and is content to take the just reprimand his conduct has provoked.

As Kate was mounting her horse, she said,

“Oh! Mr. Aylmer, I forgot till this moment: mamma said she would like to see you.”

“How is Mrs. Chennery?”

“Very poorly indeed. She gets so weak. The physician she consulted said she must not stay in town another week. Papa was very anxious to get her home; he thought she would be better at once, but she a not. I think the journey was too much for her.”

“Very probably. When would Mrs. Chennery like to see me?”

“To-morrow, if you can come; it does not matter for a day or two, if your time is occupied.”

“I will ride over to-morrow to luncheon, I had an engagement, but it can easily be adjourned. Or, if you will be so good, Miss Bevan, you can pay several visits for me; I will give you your proper messages, and I will show you what to read. I was to go to the Chine Cottages; you can tell the people I will not fail them early next week.”

Agatha was only too pleased to be of use to Mr. Aylmer; he had given her one or two little commissions of late, very much as if she had been his daughter, and she had felt a strange delight in doing his will, submitting herself even in thought to his smallest expression of judgment. And he felt that he could trust her; she would never exceed his commands, nor would she leave unfulfilled one iota of the duty he imposed. Roberta Roberts worked well, but then she would not submit to much restraint, and if her opinions and his clashed, as was most frequently the case, she was apt to be restive, and somehow he never cared to have an altercation with her, for she was not to be subdued as Kate Chennery had been. Roberta was frank and fearless, but there was no impudence in her composition, and unless she felt herself to be in the wrong it was quite impossible to bring her to repentance. Agatha was exactly what he wanted, what every clergyman might want, and he prized her accordingly.

The next morning Mr. Aylmer took his way to Chennery Park. The girls did not appear: Ada was in the schoolroom, and Kate had driven to Blackmoor. But Mr. Chennery was at home, and he welcomed the rector with his usual urbanity, and pressed him to take luncheon before he saw Mrs. Chennery.

“Is Mrs. Chennery entirely upstairs?” inquired Mr. Aylmer.

“She has not been down since our return; the journey was quite too much for her, though it was taken as easily as possible. I hope, however, when she has that she will improve. It is nothing but debility—nervousness and debility, Armstrong says. I had his advice, for he understands that sort of thing better, perhaps, than any other man in England, and he knows something of my wife's constitution. She will soon be better now that she is in the country again. It was quite a mistake getting her up to town, but she was so anxious to do her duty by Kate; and

Kate was wild to be presented, she would not hear of waiting till next year, though I wanted her to put it off. A very self-willed girl is my Kate, and her Aunt Laura has done her no good. Which wine do you prefer?"

"I never take wine in the middle of the day."

"That is a mistake. A glass of good claret freshens one up wonderfully at luncheon time; but I was going to say I want you to cheer my wife up. It is a strange freak of hers, wanting to see you, but I thought it best that she should have her own way. Armstrong said she must not be crossed; but cheer her up, you know."

"Is she, then, depressed?"

"Terribly! She thinks she *may* die, you see. Her complaint tends to lowness of spirits, and she has got queer notions about herself. I wanted to speak to you: it will not do to encourage her in her opinions."

"What notions? You must tell me more plainly."

"I hardly know how to put it; she says she is depressed with a *sense of sin*. Her sins stare her in the face, she says; she cannot forget them; she is always thinking about them night and day. So absurd, you knew; but then it is part of the complaint. My poor Catherine a sinner! Why, I never knew her do a wrong thing since I first knew her and fell in love with her at Harrogate twenty years ago! She has the temper of an angel, and I've tried it, too. I confess I am not the meekest of men, and I have been exasperating enough at times, and Kate takes after me; but, bless you! she never got angry; she might look pained, but she never said a word that had been better left unsaid, and that is more than most men can say for their wives after twenty years' marriage, Mr. Aylmer."

Mr. Aylmer thought it was; it was more than he could say of his wife, but of late he had scarcely thought at all about poor Lady Augusta. He looked grave, and ate his luncheon, saying very little—so little that Mr. Chennery rallied him upon his abstraction; but his last words were, as he stood on the stair with Mr. Aylmer, "Cheer her up now, whatever you do. Tell her it's all right, say some prayers, and read something consoling, but do not let her talk about herself."

Mr. Aylmer passed on to Mrs. Chennery's dressing-room, and her husband, as he paced the gallery alone, said to himself, "I almost wish I had not let him come; but she would not have been satisfied. I don't like his looks—too solemn by half. I only hope he may not make her worse. My Catherine a sinner indeed! If it were myself, now!"

Chapter 13. IN THE CLOISTERS

“So you had Mr. Aylmer this morning, mamma?” said Kate Chennery, when late in the afternoon she came into her mother's dressing-room. Mrs. Chennery reclined on the couch by the open window. Before her languid eyes lay the beautiful lawns and glades of her own park; all the land as far as she could see on either side belonged to Squire Chennery; within all was luxurious comfort, elegance, and grace. The boudoir was not large, but furnished with exquisite taste; delicate lace draperies mingled with filmy folds of rosy gauze; a carpet, on which the heaviest footfall would be noiseless; tables scattered over with costly toys; rare flowers and feathery ferns in priceless vases; two or three lovely statuettes, miracles of beauty; a solitary picture, a perfect gem of art; low chairs, embroidered cushions, and downy, silken couches, all grouped and arranged with that seeming carelessness which really requires so much care, and the eye of an artist to boot, to combine into one harmonious whole.

But there was no satisfaction on the face of the mistress of this charming retreat, no rest, no cheerfulness, only the traces of a deep-seated melancholy and profound weariness, a sorrow long brooded over and not to be repressed. Yet the face was still very lovely, the sharpened features had lost little of their perfect outline, the tints, though no longer fresh and glowing, were pure and delicate, and the expression, though thoughtful even to sadness, was eminently sweet. Mrs. Chennery had been a beautiful woman, and but for the general ill-health and the fatal disease which day by day slowly but surely developed itself, she might still have outshone many younger and brighter women who took their place among the fairest of the fair. She was only forty, in the very flower of her age, and but for the wearing effects of pain and weakness, would have been yet in all the bloom of her ripe womanhood, far lovelier than her daughter Kate, whom many people called handsome, and whom all acknowledged to be piquant and fascinating after a certain fashion. But Ada promised to be her mother's own daughter, and her worldly Aunt Laura was already looking forward to the anticipated triumphs of her youthful niece's first season; but Ada had far other aspirations. Her beauty, though the transcript of her mother's, was of a far higher order; an angelic serenity was in the girlish face, instead of sadness and restless weariness; there was only a light shadow of pensiveness in the calm, clear-cut features, and the dewy eyes were full of deep thought and dreamy, sweet imaginings. Ada Chennery was a lovely child now; in a few years she would be that rare thing, a perfectly beautiful woman.

“Yes, Mr. Aylmer came to luncheon,” said Mrs. Chennery, in answer to her daughter's question; “and papa brought him up to me, as I requested.”

“And I hope he did you good?”

“Oh, of course; a clergyman must do one good.”

“I really don't see that, mamma. Mr. Aylmer nearly always does me *harm*. I have to give in. If I strive with him I am invariably defeated, and however humble I may be at the time I get furious afterwards; it is so aggravating!”

“Kate, my dear, I wish you would not speak so! There is something terrible in the idea of striving with a clergyman—your own clergyman, too. Oh! my child, if you cherish this spirit of irreverence, you may be led into any kind of error,”

“I reverence you, mamma, and papa also. I know I am a very saucy, wilful girl; but I hope I do not altogether fail in respect towards those to whom respect is surely due.”

“Respect, and more than respect, is surely due to your clergyman.”

“You mean obedience?”

“I do, Kate.”

“Well, mamma, obedience was never one of my predominant virtues. And as to obeying a man just because he happens to be the clergyman of the parish in which I live, it is altogether out of the question. I tell you fairly that I will never submit myself to Mr. Aylmer. While I was in town I heard a good deal about the set to which he belongs, and I made up my mind to withstand him.”

“Oh, Kate, my child! you pain me.”

“I am sorry for that, mamma, for with all my faults, and I know they are great and many, I do not wish to vex you or papa. But all this assumption of authority that Mr. Aylmer has been professing for the last year or so is

simply absurd, and I am sure it is to be resisted. You may call it what you will, but I call it *priestcraft*—the very thing we dread and detest in the Romish Church. And it seems to me that all this nonsense about the clergy tends to Romanism. Aunt Laura thought so too!”

“My dear, your Aunt Laura is a very worldly woman.”

“Mamma! what on earth do you mean? You never used to talk in this way.”

“I have too long been careless about the best things, Kate. I wish to confess to you that on this point I have sadly failed in my duty to you. I have not brought you up as a faithful daughter of the Church; I have been a very worldly mother, thinking only of your temporal advantage. I have not trained you to ways of piety and usefulness, and now it is too late; I can never repair my error.”

“My dear mother, do not worry yourself! Nothing on earth would ever have made me an amateur sister of mercy; I hate parish work; going about among snuffy old women and dirty children is not at all to my taste. I like to be kind to poor people, but then I like to show kindness in my own way and at my own convenience. I should be sorry not to give anything away, and I think the best part of Christmas is the universal charity that comes with it. Also, I am glad that the children are coming here for their treat next week. But what I do in this way I do because I like it, and because it is good to see people happy, not because I think it necessary to keep a sort of debit and credit account with heaven, counting up as so much merit all the good works I can possibly heap together. That is Mr. Aylmer's notion, I am quite sure!”

“How wildly you talk, Kate!”

“We had better talk about something else, mamma, for I cannot enter into your new way of thinking. Ada will rejoice to discuss such matters with you; she is altogether *devote*, and it has been her great trouble that hitherto no one has thought with her; she has always had to go to Rosamund Aylmer for sympathy.”

“Poor child! it shall be so no longer. Possibly, I may find a teacher in my own child.”

“Mamma! what is it you want to be taught?”

“*The way of peace*, Kate; I am very, very wretched! I want rest, and all is confusion and distraction; I want light, and all is darkness. My days on earth are drawing to a close; all that is sweetest and brightest to me is fading from me; my life is fading away, and I know nothing of that which awaits me in the world to come.”

“Mamma! mamma! you do not mean it? You are not really so ill?”

“I am, Kate. I saw a physician—not Dr. Armstrong—unknown to your father, and I forced the truth from him. I am slowly dying, and nothing can save me. The end is coming—slowly, indeed—but still coming, and I must face it; there is no escape.”

“The end is coming to us all, mamma; you are quite young yet. Dear me, grandmamma and grandpapa are both alive, your own father and mother, and you to talk of dying!”

“Death has no fixed season, my child; it matters little to him whether it be morning, or noon, or eventide. When the decree goes forth he comes, and none can hinder him, none delay his progress. And oh! Kate, it is terrible to listen to his footsteps, to hear them sounding afar off through the darkness, and know they are ever coming nearer and nearer. It is so sad to hear a voice calling you always, a voice that calls you from joy and all earth's happiness to a cold, dreary, unknown future, a voice that you cannot disobey. A hand beckons and you follow; but oh! with such a sinking of the heart, such a sense of pain, and loss, and utter hopelessness!”

“Mamma, did you tell Mr. Aylmer all this?”

“Yes; I said to him more than I have said to you.”

“And what did he reply?”

“I can scarcely tell you. He told me not to fear; that I had been baptized into Christ's Church; that the ordinances of the Church would help and comfort me. And I hope they will; he will come to talk to me every week.”

“I do not see what you have to trouble yourself about; I really do not. Mind, I am not accepting one syllable you say about yourself. I think you are very poorly and weak, and your nerves are affected; perhaps you may never be quite so strong again as you used to be, but you will live many, many years, I am persuaded. But supposing it were really true that you were going to die soon, what need is there for so much distress of mind? I am quite sure of one thing, mamma, if anybody ever deserved to go to heaven you do. I never remember your doing a wrong thing in all my life, and as for right things, you have always done them.”

“Oh, Kate, you little know; the mere prospect of facing death makes one look upon all things in so new a light.

Peace is what I want—peace and *certainty*. I want to know that it surely will be well with me when I come into the swellings of Jordan. I would pray, but I scarcely know what I should ask for. Oh, if one could see within the veil! If one could but get one glimpse of that awful, unknown world!”

“It seems to me,” said Kate, slowly and sadly, “that Mr. Aylmer has done you no good at all. If I were you, mamma, and if I really felt in this way, I would talk to Mr. Bell.”

“Mr. Bell? He is only a curate!”

“Well, mamma, perhaps curates may know as much about the Bible as rectors; and I am certain Mr. Bell is a very good young man. Roberta Roberts says so, and she knows him thoroughly.”

“I tell you what, Kate, I should like to have some conversation with Miss Roberts—with Roberta's aunt, I mean; but then she could not come so far, and I am not sure that I could get to her.”

“Oh, yes, you could, if you downright wanted to. You could go in the little brougham quite comfortably—it runs so easily. Or if you were not afraid I could drive you over with the ponies. But Mr. Aylmer does not quite like the Roberts's views, you know.”

“Does he not? Are you sure?” And Mrs. Chennery's face became doubtful and sad. Kate wished, as she often did wish after she had spoken, that she had held her tongue; she was always saying something in a hurry that immediately afterwards she wished had been left unsaid. She had little faith in Mr. Aylmer's pretensions, simply because she was a girl of independent, fearless spirit, as frank and outspoken as she was rash and hasty, and because she had more sound sense of her own, when she chose to use it, than many young ladies of her age could command. She determined that her mother should see Miss Roberts; she would undertake it herself, and she was not accustomed to fail in any enterprise she took in hand. What all this disquietude of mind meant she could not imagine; this restlessness and weariness of mind was something which she failed entirely to comprehend; but she saw and felt that it really existed, and she resolved that if anything could be done to relieve it it should be done. And speedily Kate's conscience smote her, too, when she remembered how, early in the spring, she had been perverse, and refused to put off her “coming out” to another season. Perhaps, after all, her mother had really been much more than languid and depressed; perhaps this journey to town, taken principally for her behoof, had been too much for her, and she wished heartily she had yielded to her father's first remonstrances, and consented to remain quietly at Chennery Park, where indeed she was always so happy, and for which, in spite of gaieties and a certain measure of success, she had begun to yearn at a very early period of her Belgravian sojourn. So she resolved to make amends by being particularly gentle and attentive to her mother, and by carrying out her wishes in any way desirable. But Kate quite echoed her father's sentiment that the invalid “needed cheering”; and Aunt Judith being of the very brightest at all times, it seemed highly probable that she might in some occult way impart a measure of her own serene satisfaction and radiance of spirit to one who needed it so sorely.

That same evening, while Kate Chennery, after her conversation with her mother, went and walked up and down one of the bye-paths of the shrubbery, meditating more deeply than was her wont, Agatha was finishing one of her beautiful water-colour drawings in the cloisters. She wanted to catch the sunset light on one of the shattered mullioned windows, and she worked with all her zeal, and with all her skill, while the red, golden rays fell aslant the grey, lichen-tinted stones, and the large-leaved ivy that had wreathed itself about the tracery work of the low arches. She finished her task just as the rich glow began to fade, and after gazing on it with unusual complacency she began to pack up her portfolio, intending to return home at once. Once more she was regarding the scarcely dried colours, and observing with pleasure how exactly she had caught the hue and tone she wished, when a footstep at hand startled her.

Only for a moment, though; she knew that footstep now from all others in the world, and the sound of it ~ always gave her a thrill of secret, half-unconscious pleasure. She turned round, her drawing still in hand, to face Mr. Aylmer. Of course it followed that he should examine and criticise it; and when he had looked at it fully, and compared it with the original, he pronounced it to be the best of the views which she had yet taken.

“Will you give this to me?” he said at last with some hesitancy; “I should like it for my study.”

“Of course I will give it to you, Mr. Aylmer,” was the ready answer. “But would you prefer it to the south transept, or to the perspective drawing of the nave? I think those are the best of all; the sketches are more faithful, and the light and colouring are good.”

“I will have this one, if I may.”

“Certainly! But I suppose in fact they are all your property; they were taken by your request, if you

remember.”

“Yes; for the general benefit, and that good copies might be multiplied. This one I want for myself; it will be a memento of this summer—this very bright and happy summer. Agatha, when you are far away from Overdale, you too will remember this pleasant summertime?”

“Far away from Overdale! The words struck upon her heart like a knell; what could he mean? Did he intend her to leave Overdale? She looked up pleadingly; all the rich colour faded from her face, and her sweet eyes were full of a nameless apprehension.

“What is it, my child?” he asked kindly, drawing her to him.

It was only by a strong effort that Agatha kept back the tears that longed to overflow.

“Am I to go away? I have been so happy here and I hoped—I have tried—I thought—”

Here her voice failed her, and she dared say no more; she could only twist the pencil she held in her hand, and look upon the lozenge-shaped stone at her feet that covered the dust of some long-forgotten Aylmer of Overdale. But what were a thousand dead Aylmers compared with the one living, breathing one who stood beside her?

“You thought you were going to stay with us? and so you are, my child, I trust, for a long time yet. My children love you, and I believe you love them; they would grieve if you were parted from them. But I was thinking of a far-off time—a time that may be very sorrowful.”

She looked at him now quite reassured; she did not in the least know what he meant, only she longed with a vehement longing to keep away from him all grief and pain, or, if that might not be, to comfort and soothe him—perhaps even help him to bear it. He caught the glance, and the arm that was around her tightened.

“Agatha, I believe you would be true to me always; you would never misjudge me; when others who misunderstood me scorned me and reviled me, I think you would still be my little friend—would you not?”

“I would.”

“I believe it. I trust you, my dear child, so remember, I count upon you from this time henceforth! You are my own faithful little friend. You and I will have some talk another day, for here come the children. I have much to say to you, Agatha.”

Chapter 14. THE RECTORY INVADED

"I suppose you know Aunt Caroline is coming?" said Claude to Agatha one morning; "she is coming to-morrow evening, worse luck."

"Hush, sir!" replied Agatha; "you know I have told that I will not assist you in the denunciation of your relatives. I shall be very happy to make Lady Caroline's acquaintance,"

"By the powers, though—that isn't swearing, is it?— will not be happy long, Agatha. My Lady Caroline has a strong aversion to governesses, and snubs them all on principle; and then she is bringing with her a whole troop of cousins, noisy, hateful little cubs, that are my detestation. What on earth the governor lets them come here for, I cannot think!"

Perhaps Mr. Aylmer thinks some hospitality may be due to his own sister; he may even have a brotherly regard for her, you know!"

"Oh, of course, he is brotherly, and all that; but when one's sister has half a dozen or more horrid, spoilt children, one need not be bored much with her, I suppose. I shouldn't so much mind her ladyship if she didn't bring the whole menagerie with her; but I hate a whole tribe of cousins! And Aunt Jane will be worried, too, and Sprawson will be out of temper, and nurse will go nearly frantic with the Swiss *bonne*, and the other creatures that come in train."

"We must try to amuse and interest the *enfants terrible*, and take them as much as possible off Lady Jane's hands. Mind you do not plague them, Claude, nor let Mr. Mornington plague them either."

"I know I shall plague them, though. I always begin with the best intentions; but Louis, the eldest boy, is such a prig; and Carrie, the eldest girl, is such a conceited little wretch; and the younger children quarrel, and scream, and fight, and exchange doubtful civilities incessantly; and I cannot resist the temptation to pay them out now and then."

"They are older than when they were here last, and they have become better behaved."

"Vain hope! infatuated delusion! You don't know them, Agatha, or you would dread the incursion of the Fripps, as the old Romans dreaded the coming of the Goths and Huns and all the other barbarous tribes. We always call the invasion of the Fripps the descent of the barbarians!"

"And who is *we*?"

"Oh! Sprawson, and I, and Gertie; and nurse never says anything, only shakes her head and sighs. Why on earth can't they go somewhere else?"

"Perhaps they like Overdale very much."

"Of course they do: it saves house-rent, and carriage-hire, and all other expenses. If Aunt Caroline carried her brood to any watering-place, and lived at an hotel, or took a furnished house for the autumn, as most people do, it would cost money, which she saves by coming here, you see! She's an awful screw."

"You should not say such things."

"Oh, yes, I should! You will understand before you are a week older. Oh! how Miss Lawson did dread the annual visit. I never liked old Lawson—indeed, we were generally daggers-drawn; but I always took sides with her in any fray with the young Fripps, or the lady-mother. And if you and they come to issues, as you are quite certain to do, I'll stand by *you*, of course. Mind you, don't let yourself be put upon."

"I shall try to avoid anything approaching to collisions; it takes two to make a quarrel you know."

"It doesn't take two to make mischief, and to torment and oppress. Mind what I say, Agatha; don't be too meek! look out for yourself; and don't let my lady trample on you."

This conversation left an unpleasant impression on Agatha's mind, the more so as the hours passed on, and she found that the boy's outspoken sentiments were but the echo of the secret thought of others of the family. And that evening, when they all sat together in the twilight, Agatha, in a pause of her playing, heard some one—Claude—say, "It is our last evening of peace;" as, indeed, it proved to be.

The next evening all was bustle; there was to be a late dinner, and the whole household was in unwonted commotion. Two carriages were going to Blackmoor Station, and the fly was hired from the inn to accommodate the extra luggage and the servants, for Lady Caroline was to bring seven children, three nurses, and a footman.

Agatha had begged to dine with her pupils in the middle of the day, but Lady Jane would not permit it, and she was to appear at the eight o'clock dinner with the rest; Claude and Ralph Mornington were also included in the grown-up party.

Soon after seven Agatha came down in her usual evening dress of simple white muslin, and while she sat in the drawing-room busy with her needlework—which was something Roberta had given her for a poor family at the Chine—Mr. Aylmer walked in, and silently presented a lovely rose, a “rose celestial,” one of the fairest blooms of the season.

“Will you wear it in your hair?” he asked, quietly, and in the same matter-of-fact tone as that in which he would have asked Lady Jane to put her bonnet on. But yet there was a certain something in his voice, a slight hesitancy, almost a little tremulousness, which betrayed to Agatha some kind of emotion that he was experiencing. If she had only known with what irresolution he had gathered the flower, and how he had lingered with it in his hand, not daring to present it, and yet not willing to forego the pleasure! It was an exquisite rose, of pure and full tint, and its petals perfectly cupped; it accorded well with Agatha's rich bloom, and contrasted brightly with, the dark masses of her luxuriant hair. How fair an image it was of her youth and beauty, and innocent happiness! And how little he, who stood gazing so tenderly on that radiant vision of girlish loveliness, dreamed of a time when his hand and his will would crush out all the brightness, and shadow all the sunshine of that gentle, trusting nature! Why should he not take the happiness that lay within his grasp? he asked himself, as he watched the delicate fingers twining his flower among the braids of rich, dark hair. Why should not he, who loved, woo and win the woman of his choice, and wed her, and be happy? He had seen enough of Agatha to know that she was worthy of the best man's profoundest love; he had seen, too, that she suited him, that their minds were in unison; and he felt sure that if he made her his own her character would become as the reflex of his own. Why should he not marry this woman, whose nature harmonised with his, such harmony being the basis on which a true and sacred marriage must be founded?

A man who seeks in marriage a *perfect* woman is sure to be disappointed sooner or later, since perfection belongs not to the daughters of Eve; also, being necessarily imperfect himself, his union with a perfect being could only produce inconvenience. Instead of seeking all manner of attributes, either real or fancied, which to his idea make up the sum of perfection, he would be wiser if he sought only a nature which harmonised with his own, the complement of himself, the woman who, through all joy and all sorrow, through youth, and through middle life, and through age itself, would be his second and dearer self.

I think Mr. Aylmer would have answered his own question in the most satisfactory way if he had not been interrupted; but just as he had resolved to say something that should express to Agatha the real feeling of his heart, the sound of wheels was heard; there was a great tramping of horses on the gravel, a tumult of voices, a din as of Babel echoes, and Overdale knew that the Lady Caroline Fripp, her husband, her children, and their attendants had arrived.

Mr. Aylmer hastened to the hall-door, as in duty bound, and Agatha remained alone in the drawing-room, her cheeks wearing nearly the same bloom as the flower in her hair.

Agatha heard a silvery little voice pattering out a shower of little sentences:—“And I assure you I am thoroughly worn out, being kept awake all night with baby's cough, and then early this morning Flopps came to say she thought Charlie looked as if he were sickening for something; and it couldn't be measles, you know, for they all had measles last March, and I felt quite sure it was not scarlatina, but I did not know what to think about smallpox; some children in the Mews had had it, I know; and so I had to get up and go to the nursery a full hour earlier than I had intended to rise. Yes, indeed! I thought we should hardly have got off in time. Flopps left the packing of one of the trunks till the very last; and I am persuaded something is left behind. I had a sense of something missing the moment the carriage drove away from the door, and I felt the same all the way to Maudsley. Hot? I should think it was, and Janie had toothache, and Arthur was sick—he was over-excited, you know, with the journey, and that always makes him sick and fretful. Charlie, don't pull my skirt so! What is it, Arthur? Oh, he is sick again, poor darling! Rosamund, my love, take him to the nursery, will you? I'll come and give him a James's powder presently. Flopps, carry Miss Jane; do you not see how tired she is! Oh, Louis! what are you doing?—not pinching Carrie, surely!”

Louis certainly was engaged in this very improbable occupation, for Carrie set up a howl, followed by a succession of shrieks that rang through the house. Louis was heard to jeer at his sister, and call her a cry-baby;

Janie and Arthur added their shrill pipes to the concert, and mamma made a woeful lamentation.

Somebody came and swept away the whole herd of children; Agatha heard Sprawson's voice saying, "*Our* young ladies never do so, I assure you, Miss Fripp! They are bidable, and behave themselves as little ladies, that are born ladies should!" Then the noise receded, and at last died away in the uttermost parts of the house, and in the lull the musical little voice began pattering again:—"No, I have not brought Miss Crofts; I have discharged her, or, rather, she discharged herself; she called my Carrie names, indeed she did! And she scolded Janie till her nerves were so shaken I had to give her a drop of red lavender on sugar! I am most unfortunate with governesses—a dreadful set they are, much worse to manage than household servants. So, as I was coming here, I would not engage any one; I thought you might tell me of some one, and I knew you had a young person, and of course she will not object to taking charge of my elder children. She can have so little to do, and it ought to be a pleasure to her! You regularly spoilt old Lawson, you know; I hope you are keeping this young person in her place!"

By this time Lady Caroline had reached the drawing-room, where in the firelight, for the evening was chilly, stood Agatha, rather flushed, rather confused, and rather stately in her manner. Lady Caroline took up her eyeglass to inspect the white-robed figure on the hearthrug, then bowed in gracious style, and flashily remarked to her brother—

"Really, my dear Eustace, I must ask you to introduce me. I did not know you had any other visitor than Mr. Mornington."

"This lady is not a visitor," replied Mr. Aylmer. "I am happy to say she regards Overdale Rectory as her home. Allow me to introduce you to Miss Bevan. Miss Bevan, my sister, Lady Caroline Fripp."

"The governess?" piped Lady Caroline. "Really I must be excused for taking her for a lady visitor; she does not look as young people in her position generally look. I hope I see you well, Miss Bevan. I bring you two or three more little charges, a delightful accession to your numbers in the school-room."

"This is holiday-time," interposed Lady Jane, "and Agatha is free of her charges altogether. Will you go to your room now, Caroline? the first dinner-bell will ring in a few minutes."

Lady Caroline floated away. She was very unlike her sister and brother; her figure was *petite*, her face *mignon*, her draperies light and flowing; crinolines were just beginning to be the rage, and she wore one of ample dimensions, which, covered with many fluttering flounces, seemed literally to float her along as she moved from place to place. She was really very pretty, with sparkling hazel eyes, and a certain *spirituelle* expression which some people were inclined to think illusive, and which others deemed a mere affectation or clever trick of gesture. She had not an unkindly disposition, but she was rather apt to overrate her own claims and those of her family; and she exacted a wonderful amount of respect and submission from those whom she considered as her inferiors. Claude spoke truly when he assured Agatha that his aunt Caroline had a special aversion to governesses. It might almost have been added that governesses had a special aversion to her ladyship; such of them, at least, as had been unfortunate enough to find themselves under her especial patronage, for as a mother and mistress Lady Caroline was altogether unreasonable.

Mr. Fripp accompanied his wife; he was a mild, young-looking man, with grey, dreamy eyes, and indolent mouth, and a benevolent forehead. He was held in certain circles to be a model husband; he was not rich, but he permitted his wife to dispose of his income exactly as she chose. As regarded the children, he never interfered and very seldom complained, though their claims were constantly being preferred to his own, and he was compelled sometimes to suffer considerable inconvenience in order that his offspring might receive what their devoted mother held to be a proper amount of attention. He thoroughly believed in his wife, and knew that her powers of mind were superior to his own. He was quite content to relinquish to her the reins of authority, and so the pair got on charmingly. I cannot say the household was any the better for this reversal of the mutual position of husband and wife, for I do not believe that any family really prospers, or can be in a morally healthy state, where the true head renounces his prerogatives, which of course involve also his responsibilities. At Overdale he was regarded as a very kind and amiable gentleman, but sadly under the dominion of his wife; and Mr. Aylmer's servants paid him a deference he never received under his own roof; partly because he was a favourite with them, and partly because the Lady Caroline was greatly disliked and her annual visits looked forward to with anticipations the reverse of satisfactory.

"My dear, who *have* you got into your house?" asked Lady Caroline, with emphasis, when she found herself

alone with her sister.

"I really do not understand, Caroline."

"That young woman, the governess, whom you absurdly call by her Christian name."

"Miss Bevan is a very charming girl, and a very good girl too. For Rosamund's sake, I determined not to have another elderly person in the schoolroom; she is exactly what I wanted, she suits us so perfectly that I often say she might have been made for us. Eustace, too, is quite satisfied, and the children are growing quite attached to her."

"I dare say. Jane, there never was a person born more lacking in worldly wisdom and common prudence than you are. Can you not see that this girl is pretty, far beyond the prettiness of ordinary girls?"

"Of course, I see it. Do you think I have no eyes? Agatha Bevan is not simply pretty, she is loveliness itself; the moment I saw her I was struck with her beauty."

"And you did not send her back again whence she came, pack and package? Oh, Jane! Jane!"

"Lest Claude should be inveigled into calf-love some four or five years hence?"

"Claude, indeed! She flies at higher game than Claude, if I mistake not. Jane, if you do not take care and watch her moves, she will give you checkmate. I tell you I saw a look exchanged between her and Eustace at dinner-time that meant something. Ah! you may look incredulous, but I have remarkably acute perceptions, I may say intuition, when the interest and honour of the Aylmers is concerned, and I assure ye it is as I say. Eustace is bewitched with the girl's beauty, and if she be not circumvented she will be mistress of Overdale Rectory before she is one year older!"

"You are mistaken; Eustace does not think of a second marriage."

"He never cared enough for poor Augusta to remain a widower for her sake. Besides, men are fickle beings! I have known one who seemed to have buried his heart in his wife's grave, and to exist only to cherish her memory and to bring up her children, startle all his acquaintances by getting married before the twelve months were out. I have, indeed; and a pretty girl is always a temptation, especially to middle-aged men, who have had one wife, their senior in age!"

"It is not on Augusta's account that Eustace will remain as he is. I am sorry to say he has some very popish notions about the celibacy of the clergy."

"Ah! He has gone so far as that? I had no idea he was so high, so very high, I may say. But do not look distressed, Jane; I dare say he does not really go quite as far as the expression of his sentiments would lead you to imagine—people rarely do, you know. Of course I should be terribly annoyed if there were any chance of *perversion*. I do not think the *éclat* of going over to Rome is at all in good taste; but I assure you it is quite *ton* now to be *very high*! In the best circles there is just a certain clique that is Low Church, but the people who compose it are nobodies, absolutely nobodies, I assure you! one may as well be a Methodist or a Plymouth Brother as one of those dreadful, vulgar-minded Evangelicals! Eustace ought to be 'high'; it is due to his rank that he should be so. It is the natural development of his aesthetic tastes and his Oxford training, and I should be very sorry to see an Aylmer anything but what is stupidly called Tractarian or Puseyite. Still, I should not care for Eustace to 'go over,' you know, neither would you, I suppose."

"Caroline! how can you speak so lightly of what would be a terrible catastrophe?"

"I am not speaking lightly. I think it would be a thousand pities; and if, while I am here, I see any symptoms of going *too far*, I shall feel it my duty to speak very seriously to Eustace."

"What do you call going too far?"

"Going beyond what the Church sanctions."

"What is 'the Church'?"

"You amaze me, Jane! The English Church, of course, as by law established; the Anglican Church—our 'mother Church,' as we were early taught to call it. There can be no other Church; the other persuasions are mere sects, and ought not to be tolerated."

"Is the Church of Rome to be accounted a mere sect?"

"By no means. It is a true branch, though an erring one, of the Holy Catholic Church. The one true Church is the Anglican Church to which we belong."

"In England, I suppose; but if we come to a State religion, as such, we make the true Church a question of geography."

Overdale

“Now, really, I never thought of that,” replied Lady Caroline, ingenuously. “But I tell you what, Jane, it is admitted now in the best society that the Church ought to be free of the State; she is above it, and ought to rule herself, choose her own bishops, and all that sort of thing.”

“Like the Nonconformists?”

“No, indeed, not at all like them, poor misguided schismatics! Do you know, I got a Baptist kitchenmaid into my house the other day, but I soon dismissed her. However, I am too tired to talk any more to-night, and I have to give the children their medicine; but I shall keep a keen look-out, I promise you. I shall watch Eustace's proclivities, and judge for myself; and I shall keep a close eye on that governess. Wearing that rose in her hair, indeed! what impertinence!”

Chapter 15. EUSTACE AYLMER'S FRIEND

Eustace Aylmer had a certain friend named Herbert Vallance, who had gone so very "high" in the Anglican movement that it was a wonder he did not, as Anthony Trollope puts it, "topple over into the cesspool of Rome!"

He had sympathies with the Ultramontane Church, of course; he corresponded with several Oratorians, and he had a bosom friend domiciled at Upcott. He liked to be in Rome during Holy Week, and men of eminence in that grand old besotted city looked upon him as an extremely promising subject, and anticipated his conversion speedily. He was worth converting, too, for he belonged to an ancient family, and was highly connected in France as well as in England. He had a large fortune, most of it at his own disposal; he had brilliant talents, fine aesthetic tastes, and a perfect passion for church music, and he was as much distinguished by his perseverance as by his earnestness and enthusiasm—a union of the elements of success in any race.

But still Vallance remained a member and a priest of the Established Church of England, and a fellow of his college. It was whispered about from time to time that he was "going over," that he had "gone over," that his reception was arranged, and no one was very much surprised there—at; but months passed on and became years, and Herbert Vallance still professed the faith in which he had been educated. He enjoyed no preferment, though valuable livings had been offered to him—livings which always led to better things, to a place among the spiritual hierarchy of the country. He held several good appointments at Oxford, which left him quite free at Christmas and at Easter, and during the long vacation, and that suited him better than the care of a parish, which he never could conscientiously have delegated to a curate. He frequently had business on the Continent, and it was rumoured that diplomatic affairs engaged much of his attention; and there were those who hinted at a secret embassy, the interests of which could not be divined; but this might have proceeded from his wonderful facility in speaking foreign languages, well enough in many cases to pass for a native, and also from the singular reserve and the air of self-repression which distinguished him even upon the smallest occasions.

He and Eustace Aylmer had known each other at Eton; had matriculated together at Oxford; they had been bosom friends as undergraduates; and they had taken very nearly the same degrees and the same honours, and were both fellows of their colleges. They were ordained at the same time and place, and both accepted curacies in the same diocese; then Eustace succeeded to the family living and married, and the lives of the two men necessarily drifted somewhat apart, Aylmer settling down at Overdale as a country clergyman, and Vallance remaining several years longer the working curate in a densely-populated parish in a large seaport town, and then connecting himself more closely with his university, and forming those vague associations abroad, the precise nature of which no one but himself could determine.

But ever and anon Herbert Vallance came to Overdale and paid long visits. "He was always backwards and forwards," Lady Augusta said while the church restorations were going on, very much to her secret annoyance, for she felt that her husband's friend could never be her Mend; he did not like her, and though he paid her all due respect as his hostess, he never showed any preference for her society, and seemed well pleased when he could get Aylmer all to himself. Moreover, Lady Augusta hated him for what she called his monkish ways, and she did not hesitate to declare that he would be infinitely more useful and respectable if he maimed and settled down with wife and children in some comfortable country rectory, or in some dignified cathedral city. And truly in this case the Lady Augusta was right. Her womanly instincts, for once, were not at fault. The last time, however, he came to Overdale in her ladyship's lifetime, he offended her so much by his taciturnity and mysterious conversations with the rector, and his equally mysterious foreign correspondence, that she declared her conviction that he was a Jesuit in disguise, and that he ought not to be received by honest Englishmen, either clerical or lay.

For the last year or two the friends had not met; Vallance had been chiefly abroad, sometimes in Paris, sometimes visiting the Cardinal Archbishop of Rouen, sometimes in Brussels, and occasionally in Rome. His time in Oxford had been short, his stay in London brief and most uncertain; now and then pamphlets and *brochures* appeared, which the initiated knew for his, though his name never was appended; references were made to him in high quarters, as to a man of mark; and yet he held no office, nor sought any definite appointment either lucrative or honorary; in one way or another, Herbert Vallance certainly occasioned a great deal of perplexity, and furnished the source of an unlimited curiosity.

But though not meeting face to face, the friends corresponded regularly, though not, perhaps, very frequently; and while Lady Caroline Fripp was discussing with her sister her brother and his probable intentions, he was shut up in his study, writing to his friend, then a guest in the Archbishop's palace at Rouen. After some preliminary remarks, his letter ran thus:—"You tell me that I am changed, that you can perceive in the tone of my letters a difference in sentiment, or rather, as you put it, In fixity of purpose. Oh, Valiance, how did you acquire this strange insight into men's souls? How did you learn so to interpret trifles as to make them the way to the cipher in which one would desire to write one's own life history? You are right! something has happened to me, which casts a sort of glamour over all my hours. If I were Byronic, I should say a change has come over the spirit of my dream. Yes; I confess it, I am in love, as the world puts it! I thought my heart was dead to every kind of emotion; even my parental affections, I believed, were held in strict abeyance, when lo! I find someone, without whom I cannot live and be happy; missing her my life will be incomplete, a mere tangle of ravelled threads, a broken mass without purpose or continuity. Do not smile at me, Valiance; to you alone I open my heart, secure at least of counsel and of being understood. You know the history of my first marriage; you know how a sort of engagement came to pass between the Lady Augusta de Kew and myself, and how to please my family rather than myself I consented to become her husband. It is true I wished to marry; it seemed to me then that a parish priest should have a wife; and the match was a fitting one, or everybody at least thought so.

"A most unfitting one it proved, as you also know; for Augusta and myself; between whom there was from the first a certain discordance, never grew into harmony. We were always and essentially different, and the longer we lived together the further we grew apart. For a long time I strove in vain to *cultivate* the regard I had for her. I tried to love her with the ardour with which other men loved their wives, but I never could; either I never found the key to her heart, or she had no heart to speak of, or else mine was closed to her. Anyhow, I failed miserably, and at last gave up the attempt, resolved to content myself with the decent *regard*—it was nothing more—which I had always entertained for her. Years passed on; she was the mother of my children, and in that light, perhaps, I looked upon her with more affection than if she had been merely my wife; but we were never drawn together; we respected each other's wishes, and paid each other all those outward attentions the absence of which society is so quick to remark and comment on, and people thought we were a moderately happy couple.

"That it was so with her I quite believe; she was not capable of a deep tenderness; it was no more in her nature to love profoundly than it was to associate herself with those who were her inferiors by birth. I do not believe she required more than she received, or thought she received; she believed that our wedded love was 'give and take' in pretty equal proportions, and she was satisfied; more would have encumbered and annoyed her; she hated sentiment, and the slightest approach to anything like enthusiasm of expression would startle her, and cause her to assume a certain prim stateliness, which was about as amusing as it was chilling and disagreeable. I could have borne with much coldness had our tastes been at all similar, had we not upon near~ every occasion found ourselves in antagonism. I could have been content to miss all the romance of love, which one looks to find once in our life, had we had any sympathies in common; but it seemed to me that that which I prized most was most indifferent to her; what I sought she avoided; what I proposed she invariably objected to, though always with a demeanour that somehow appeared to place me always in the wrong. Outwardly she appealed to me and professed to hold herself in all wifely subjection; really and truly she never even agreed to meet my wishes except under protest, so that there was always, to my apprehension at a sort of jar in our daily intercourse.

"Understand me, Vallance, I am not wishing to exonerate myself. I blame myself for many things in this matter, but most of all I blame myself that I made the choice I did, for I never loved my poor Augusta, and a man who marries without love commits sin against God, and against his own soul. Alas! he places himself in a position, for if wedded life does not exalt him, it is almost certain that his higher and better nature will be deteriorated. Well, Herbert, though in those days I never made you the confidant of my troubles, you know well enough how restless and unhappy I continually was; how I threw myself into my duties, into my studies, into church architecture, into anything and everything that absorbed my thoughts, and drew me off from myself and my own individual interests. Then I had those conversations with you, in which you showed me what, indeed, I had long suspected—how fatally we had erred in the so-called Reformation of the Tudor age; then I began to own to myself that I had done wrong in fettering myself at all with earthly ties, that my grand mistake was not in the sort of marriage I had contracted, but in the act and deed of marrying at all. I began to see, or to think I saw, that the Church alone should have been my bride; to her my best affections should have been pledged; in her service I

ought to have found abundant recompense for all my toil and for all my self-sacrifice. Do you remember that sermon to which we listened together in the glorious old cathedral of Rouen—that sermon on *La vie Angelique*? It made on my mind a deep and lasting impression, but I was bound, and it was too late to choose the high alternative that might have been.

“A little while afterwards release came. I say it advisedly, *it was release!* no man, till he has felt it, can know the weight of such a burden as mine, the burden of an unequal, unloving yoke. And yet I would have called my poor Augusta back again, as I stood by the white-covered bed where she lay cold and silent with our babe in her arms, both sleeping the long, solemn sleep of death. I would have called her back, that I might show her more affection, that I might be more tender, more considerate, that I might make one more effort to make her really and truly my own. My poor Augusta! she might have been a better woman in other and gentler hands—a wiser and more loving husband might have developed some gentle instincts, some sweet impulses, that my coldness and hardness prevented from coming into play. It is vain to speak of marriage to you, I know; you have vowed yourself to a life of holy celibacy, and you will keep your vow; but if it were otherwise, if there were the remotest chance of your ever taking a wife, I would say to you earnestly, as it were with my last breath, Never marry any woman who cannot be your second self, on whose perfect sympathy you cannot depend, whose soul cannot be as your soul, who does not fill up the void that a solitary man feels when he yearns for a full and true companionship of heart.

“But to what does all this tend? you are asking. Much of this you knew before, and it is all over now, and I am free to vow myself to the Anglican Church, or *to take an earthly bride!* There, Herbert, is my perplexity. You will, as you read this, recall the many conversations we have had on this subject; perhaps even you will recur to former letters. But I *never* uttered any solemn vow; I never pledged myself to perpetual celibacy as you have done, and yet I feel as if I had covenanted with myself to renounce all earthly ties, except those already existing, and which I may not put aside during the minority of my children. I cannot but fear that I am compromised, that my heart has vowed things *my* lips have kept silent—aid then I had such a dream of the high career before me. I saw the needs of my Church, and I acknowledged her awful claims. I saw that wisdom, learning, rank, wealth, time, one's whole energies, one's inmost heart, were what she required—ah! and I see it now, Vallance, and *yet I falter!*

“Nearly three months ago my sister Jane engaged a governess for my little girls, and for Ernest, who is still too delicate to be sent from home. I knew I could depend upon her judgment, and I left the choice entirely in her hands, stipulating only that our new inmate should be, in the truest sense of the word, a *Churchwoman*. With the flowers of May came to us Agatha Bevan, and we *all* quickly learned to love her. At first I only regarded her as a refined and beautiful girl, with an amiable, affectionate nature, and a mind of the highest order, and capable of any amount of culture. I soon learned to respect as well as to admire; with all her sweetness and sprightly girlishness there was a steadfastness about her that won my esteem. And I found that she soon acquired a most happy influence over the children, winning their love, and reverence, and obedience quite naturally. I cannot tell when a warm regard passed into a deeper and tenderer sentiment. I know only that one day I awoke to the knowledge that I loved this woman as I had never loved any one on earth; that my future life without her would be a void, a blank; that I must make her my own, or suffer as I did not know was in my nature to suffer. I should hesitate, oh! more than hesitate, to say this to any one but you, my time-tried, life-long friend. I should keep silence utterly. But though you may smile at love's rhapsodies from a man of my age, I am not afraid of calling forth your ridicule or your contempt. You will write to me kindly and dispassionately, though you may well feel disappointed at my yielding thus far to what I fear me you will deem a temptation. But tell me, Vallance, can I not serve God and his Church as a married man, as well as if no such sweet ties bound me? Is not love *His* gift; is not marriage *His* holy ordinance? Is the ancient Church infallible on this point?

“I tell you, Herbert, that my whole nature has risen been spiritualized since I loved this girl. Never have I loved God so much: may I not love the Giver for the gift? Never have I felt so earnest in my work, so kindly disposed towards my neighbours, so full of love to all with whom I am associated—nay, to the whole human family. The world is to me a new place; it wears a beauty I never dreamed of till now; all things have a fresh joy for me; nature is fairer, art is nobler, literature is purer, and, best of all, my work is dearer, and God is nearer to my soul.

“I have found a rich treasure, a costly jewel that no one claims; why should I not make it my very own? Why should I not sun myself with the very brightness that warms my heart and invigorates all my powers? Why should I not drink of the waters flowing at my feet—of the spring that God has said man *may* drink of and be blessed? I

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have not spoken yet; and yet—yet I fancy she knows I care for her, and I cannot help thinking she cares for me. I know I could make her happy, sweet child as she is, and true-hearted woman all in one; I know, too, she would be a mother to my children, and they would rejoice in the knowledge that she was to be thus bound to them for ever. They love her, she will be good to them; more than good, she will be their true *mother*, and I shall be a happier, and I trust and do believe, a better man, and a more efficient clergyman, than I have ever been.

“The world, doubtless, will sneer at me for falling in love with my daughters' governess, but that matters very little, or not at all, if my own heart do not condemn me. Meanwhile Agatha is of good family, though she was left a portionless orphan at a very early age. She is related to the Galbraiths of Sutton Magna. I think you know something of them. I would not wrong my children by marrying any but a thorough gentlewoman, and Agatha is one most completely. A sweeter, purer, more perfectly wrought creature cannot be. She is all that the most fastidious nature could require, *and I love her*. And that, you will say, is more than equivalent to all the rest. It may be so, but I think not. Love at twenty may be blind, but it is scarcely so at forty; but I confess now to the truth of what *La Bruyère* says, 'Love is like the small pox, the later you take it the worse it is.' Write to me as quickly as you can; I shall proceed no farther, if I can help it, till I have your letter.”

In as short a time as posts could travel between Overdale and Rouen came Mr. Vallance's reply. It was very short; it merely said, “My advice is superfluous; you will judge for yourself, however I may differ from you, and—you *will please yourself*. With all my heart, dear friend, I wish you happy. If you have not the vocation for the higher, holier, and purer life, do not attempt it, but—

“Is this a time for moonlight dreams
Of love and home by mazy streams,
For fancy with her shadowy toys,
Aerial hopes and pensive joys,
While souls are wandering far and wide,
And curses swarm on every side?

“No; rather steel thy melting heart
To act the martyr's sternest part,
To watch with firm, unshrinking eye
Thy darling visions as they die,
Till all bright hopes and hues of day
Have faded into twilight grey.’

Also read what St. Paul saith: 'Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? 'seek not a wife.' . . . 'He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: but he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.' My friend, bless you, and His Holy saints aid you! Be prayerful, be watchful, be not over hasty to clasp an earthly good.”

Chapter 16. BEFORE THE FETE.

The day for the Chennery Park fete came at last—a brilliant September day, and all sunshine, and mirth, and flowers. Mrs. Chennery was so much better that she would be able to receive her guests; for it was going to be something more than a mere school festival; all the people in the neighbourhood were to be invited, that is to say, all the people who were on visiting terms at the Park, and some others who were asked because they interested themselves in the schools. There was to be a sumptuous luncheon spread in a large marquee, and in another tent tea, coffee, cakes, lemonade, and ham sandwiches were laid for the children from the village, and the little Chennerys procured themselves no small pleasure in waiting upon them. Also there was to be archery and croquet, which was then only just coming into fashion; and balls and skipping-ropes were provided for the school girls, and cricket and ninepins for the boys, and everybody was to have plenty of amusement and good cheer, and be as happy as the day was long.

All Overdale and Chennery and the outlying villages studied the weather anxiously; the glasses were consulted every hour; people watched the sunset, and the weather-wise few looked out seaward with more than ordinary emprossement, and prophesied fair weather with trembling, for if the wind changed who could say whether the calm might not be broken up, and the equinoctial gales come sweeping over the broad blue waters of the Channel, to the utter destruction of all out-of-door enjoyments?

But the weather held up bravely; it was warm and bright, and the atmosphere marvellously clear, just such lovely weather as September in its most gracious moods can give us; and the morning of the 18th rose as promisingly as any other morning of the month. Agatha had looked forward to this day; it had all been planned so long, and it had been so much talked about; and from a mere school gathering it had come to be an affair of great importance, and Mr. Aylmer had taken a lively interest in it, and little else had been talked about for at least a week beforehand. But Agatha dressed that morning with a cloud upon her spirit. The early mists rose and cleared away, the dew sparkled on the grass as the vivid sunshine shone through the openings in the trees, the sea glittered beneath a cloudless sky, and the deep murmur of the incoming tide sounded like distant organ music as in measured chime it rose and fell on the soft, still morning air; and yet the brightness seemed all without, while within was an incomprehensible sadness and discontent.

The truth is, Agatha had been sadly snubbed since the arrival of the Lady Caroline; her ladyship highly disapproved of the status which the governess had acquired in the family circle. She had evidently grown to consider herself as one of them; had she been born an Aylmer or a De Kew, she could scarcely have seemed more thoroughly at home. Not that she ever presumed exactly; Lady Caroline could not say that she was forward or intrusive; but somehow it appeared to be an understood thing that the governess should share in all the pleasures of the family, be admitted to all their confidences, and be treated almost as if she were a daughter of the house. Lady Caroline chafed at all this. She was a very kind woman, she flattered herself, and she liked to make her dependents happy and comfortable; but then she was not so absurd as to wish to put them out of their proper places, for it was no real kindness in the end, only unfitting the unfortunate young people for the duties they were called upon to discharge, and for the humble station in which it had pleased Providence to place them. Indeed, Lady Caroline Fripp was not quite sure whether it was not a sort of wicked and presumptuous fighting against Providence to endeavour to overleap the barriers which respectable society had imposed. She admired Pope's couplet

“Order is Heaven's first law; and this confest,
Some are and must be greater than the rest.”

People of rank were people of rank; it was God's will that they should be born to station, and dignity, and position; and governesses were governesses, and it was equally God's will that they should be subservient and humble, respectful and obliging, receiving all favours with thankfulness, and all necessary reprimands with meekness and due reverence. Lady Caroline's own governesses always went about with a subdued air and a deferential manner; they were always content to be overlooked, and so grateful to be noticed; and they never dreamed of giving an opinion unasked, or scarcely of hazarding an observation without a sort of preamble by way of an apology. And here was this Miss Bevan quite at her ease, moving about as if she had equal rights with her

pupils, joining in conversation, expressing herself without reserve or timidity, and taking kindness as a mere matter of course, nor seeming at all impressed—and this was the most vexatious point of all—with the superiority of her ladyship herself.

But the worst part of it was that everyone admitted Agatha's claims, or rather they never thought of disputing them. Mr. Aylmer treated her as he would any other lady in his house—a peeress in her own right, for instance; Lady Jane behaved to her precisely as if she were an equal; the children loved her and respected her; and the servants, of course, caught the tone of their employers. From the very first, therefore, Lady Caroline had thought it her duty to treat Miss Bevan *de Ithut en bar*. She had quietly snubbed her, or else coolly ignored her presence and her words. She had let her see that she at least was un fascinated by her charms; and in many little ways, unperceived by those around her, she managed to make herself extremely disagreeable. That her brother was, in her own parlance, making a fool of himself about the girl, she very quickly determined; of course it was her beauty, which could not be disputed even: any candid person must confess that Agatha Bevan was very lovely; but, then, how absurd of a man of Eustace's age and position to concern himself about a fair face, a sweet low voice, and a graceful style! Of course it was a mere flirtation; he never could mean to make such a very ridiculous marriage, for no Aylmer had ever been known to forget himself so far as to ally himself in marriage beneath his actual rank. King Cophetua and his beggar maid were a marvel to the Aylmers, and never, no never, would they have dreamed of following even remotely an example so equivocal. Helen of Troy herself, in a situation at fifty pounds a-year, might have been condescendingly admired, but would never have been preferred by any one of them. Therefore, it was not likely that Eustace Aylmer would think seriously of Miss Bevan; and yet—and yet, if he did not think seriously, he was acting in a way the very reverse of honourable; he was amusing himself with a mere flirtation, equally derogatory to his clerical calling and to his standing in society; for it is certainly not to be permitted that middle-aged widowed clergymen of High-Church proclivities should fill up their leisure moments with flirting. Also it might happen that Agatha's happiness should be endangered; but then she must take care of herself, and of course she had no right to accept the rector's attentions for more than they really meant.

But as days passed on, Lady Caroline felt herself more and more puzzled. No, it was not flirting! Eustace was guiltless of any such culpable frivolity; neither did Agatha flirt, or demean herself in any way that could call for actual reproof. Her ladyship began to be afraid that it was very serious indeed, that she might be called upon at no very distant period to receive Agatha as a sister-in-law; for she had quick perceptions, and she saw much which Lady Jane had failed to see; moreover, she had once been very much in love herself, and she knew all the symptoms, and was quick to discern a hundred little traits and signs that would have escaped an inexperienced person, or one less gifted with the power of intuition. She was prudent enough not to remonstrate with Eustace, as she had at first intended; she did not even mention to him Agatha's name, save in the most casual way, and as connected with the children and belonging entirely to the schoolroom. She knew very well that opposition would only intensify her brother's feelings, and strengthen his determination, if he had as yet formed any; and if he had not, she would probably only succeed in embodying into an actual and definite idea all sorts of floating fancies, vague hopes, and dreamiest desires.

But Agatha herself! She might be counted upon, she might even be persuaded to go away, as a matter of honour and duty; and to this task, with all good intent, Lady Caroline addressed herself. Foolish, foolish Lady Caroline, to think of managing matters in this wise! Might she not have known that Eustace, with his temperament, if indeed he were in earnest, would care little for the girl's withdrawal; would probably follow her to the ends of the earth, if, acting upon Lady Caroline's suggestion, she retreated thither; and would triumph over every obstacle, and bring her back exultingly as his bride and the honoured mistress of his household. Men are not so easily turned from a cherished purpose as some women, when they plot and scheme, seem to imagine.

But then if Eustace Aylmer were in earnest, why did he not speak out? What was to hinder him? He was his own master; he was one to whom no one dared to dictate. And Agatha was continually about him; he was meeting her every hour of the day, and a private interview—and five minutes would be as decisive, if not as satisfactory, as five hours, as Lady Caroline very well knew—a private interview might be contrived or coolly demanded at any minute!

Was it the pride of the Aylmers with which he wrestled? or did he hesitate to expose himself to the ridicule of his compeers, who would doubtless laugh at his infatuation for a girl so few years older than his eldest son? or had he really any scruples about the lawfulness of clerical marriages? Oh, no! that could not be; it was too absurd.

High Church he might be, and certainly was; and his opinions on certain heads were far-fetched enough; but anything so essentially Romish as embracing a life of celibacy, as obligatory on purely religious grounds had surely never occurred to him.

Altogether Lady Caroline was puzzled; and being puzzled she was cross, and revenged herself on Agatha after her own fashion; while Agatha, having no idea of the source of her ladyship's discomfort and ill-temper, found herself in no very enviable position. So slight were the blows she received, so tiny were the pricks, so apparently sent off at random were the thrusts that sometimes pained her most severely, that she could not complain; she could not even tell herself very often why she was disappointed or depressed, or why the life that had been so bright and calm should suddenly have become dim and overclouded. Such was the state of affairs when the day of the Chennery Park festival arrived—a day that Agatha was always to remember.

She had meant to be so happy, poor child! and now she found herself dressing listlessly, and almost willing to remain at home, if that might be permitted.

How often that which we long and fondly anticipate turns to disappointment when actually reached! How often the slowly ripened fruit, gathered with pains and patience, turns to dust and ashes in the tasting! Though afterwards we find that the disappointment worked out for us a great and certain good, and the bitter flavour of the Dead Sea apples acted as a healthy tonic to quicken the appetite for better things, and to brace and invigorate the whole moral and spiritual being.

At breakfast-time Mr. Aylmer seemed more than usually preoccupied: the post came in and brought a letter having on its envelope the Rouen post-mark. Latterly he had been receiving letters from Rouen, and they never seemed to raise his spirits, but rather to make him moody, silent, and depressed. Lady Augusta had not been at all reasonable when she had wished the close intimacy between her husband and Herbert Valiance to cease to be. Lady Caroline knew next to nothing about him; Lady Jane disliked what she did know, though on no very definite grounds; and there came a time when Agatha shrunk from the sight of the well-known and very peculiar handwriting, when she dreaded the arrival of the post lest it should bring one of the epistles that always worked her misery. As yet she knew nothing; she only saw that Mr. Aylmer was not in his usual spirits, and she longed to be able to comfort him.

After breakfast all was bustle. Mr. Aylmer was in his study; but every one else was running upstairs and downstairs; and bells were ringing, and servants were rushing hither and thither, and the whole household was in a state of charming bustle and distraction. Lady Caroline and her brood were going, of course, and the nursemaids seemed almost beside themselves as they endeavoured to the toilets of their rampant charges. There was more screaming and struggling than usual, and mamma had to be summoned more than once before the belligerent Carrie and the sulky Jane could be appeased, and brought to submit themselves to the be-sashing and be-ringleting process which was considered necessary before presentation in society. The Aylmer children were quiet enough, only Gertie was a little wild with the excitement of the coming pleasure, and Ernest, infected perhaps by evil example, had just the smallest tendency to tantrums when nurse called him to be dressed. But a look from Lady Jane hushed Gertie, and a gentle word from Agatha made the little boy submissive and repentant. Lady Caroline, who was present, could not help wishing that she had the same mysterious power over her own unruly offspring, the power of quelling disobedience and calming evil tempers by a pleasant whisper and a kindly glance. But then the Aylmer children and the Fripp children had been trained quite diversely, and the régime of their respective nurseries was about as different as could be imagined; and Lady Caroline Fripp, clever as she was, had not the smallest talent for education, neither would she allow anyone a fair field where her children were concerned.

When at last every little Fripp was ready, the carriages were drawn up before the hall-door, and Lady Caroline was very busy arranging who should go with who, and how the juveniles should be disposed of. She looked up to her brother, who was standing dreamily near her.

“Eustace, you will drive Jane and myself.”

That was not at all what Eustace had intended, but he only replied— “How does Fripp go? I thought he would drive somebody.”

“My husband rides; there is the horse being led out for him. Of course you will go with *us*?”

“Very well. And the children?”

“They go with Miss Bevan, certainly, in the large waggonette. Claude and Mr. Mornington have walked over.”

“Can Miss Bevan manage so many, Caroline?”

“She must manage them. I never ask my governesses what they can or cannot do. I just assign them their work, and they get through it to the best of their ability.”

“But, Caroline, is Miss Bevan willing to take your children in addition to her own pupils?”

“I never asked her. *The idea!*”

“What idea?”

“Of asking the girl whether she was willing to do as I requested. What is the use of paying people if you cannot make them generally useful?”

It was on Mr. Aylmer's lips to say that he paid Agatha, and that his sister should have brought her own governess if she required the services of one during her visit at the Rectory, but he wisely refrained himself, only saying that for the chive it did not much matter.

“Of course Agatha would not concern herself with the little Fripps, when once Chennery Park was reached.”

“Indeed!” was Lady Caroline's curt reply. “I intend her to take charge of the elder ones all day. Eustace, you are really spoiling that young woman. When she leaves you she will be quite unfit for any other situation. Her care of Rosamund out of lesson-hours is a mere farce, your eldest daughter being as steady and well-conducted as if she were thirty, and Gertie and Ernest require no management. She has literally nothing to do but to enjoy herself.”

“Should we not rejoice, then, in her enjoyment? Carrie, there is so little happiness in the world that I think when we find any we need not try to mar it. For myself, I would not even take the bloom off the enjoyment of the young and untried. One always seems to see the shadows and cares that are stealing after them. Let them be lighthearted while they may.”

“Ah! now you are sentimental. And well, yes, I agree with what you say generally. Only it is a bad policy, indeed it is not right, to indulge young people in Miss Bevan's position too much. Depend upon it, discipline is good for young governesses. Kindness, of course, they should receive, and a certain amount of consideration; but they are all the better for being kept strictly to their duties and in their proper station. And I am quite sorry for this young thing, she has so little idea of her real position.”

“Caroline, I wish you to understand—”

“No! I don't want to understand. Pray do not say anything in the heat of the moment that you may regret, Eustace. Be wise, be reasonable, and leave Miss Bevan to me for to-day at least.”

Without another word Eustace Aylmer walked away, and so far Lady Caroline had carried out her plan.

Chapter 17. TWO PEOPLE EXCHANGE IDEAS

Not a very charming drive had Agatha that bright September morning. The large waggonette was the scene of incessant altercation, for the Fripp children quarrelled without intermission all the way, and even Genie and Ernest began to be naughty, and gave their governess more trouble than they had ever given her before. She had no idea that her pets could really be so tiresome. By the time Chennery Park was reached, Agatha was beginning to wish the long anticipated day were over; but then she hoped she would be presently free of the charge of these provoking little Fripps; and her own children, as she called them to herself, would regain their normal state of goodness and docility, as soon as they were separated from their cousins. In the meantime she sat between Louis and Carrie, doing her very best to keep the peace, while the amiable pair of juveniles tried to keep up a sort of kicking match, which interfered sadly with Miss Bevan's personal comfort. Rosamund took cross Janie in hand; and the crosser little Arthur, feeling himself rather overlooked, vented his temper in wrangling with Gertie and Ernest, whose patience was speedily exhausted; so that the result was a considerable fracas on the floor of the carriage, and Agatha was in terror lest the naughty little things should overbalance themselves, and tumble into the road, or receive some serious bumps as they flung about, quite regardless of all danger.

At last the lodge was reached, and there were the carts and waggons, with the school children in their very best, their faces radiant with present and fast-approaching delights, and many of them bearing gay banners, inscribed with mottoes suitable to the occasion. Roberta and Mr. Bell headed the cavalcade, and all the teachers, and the teachers' special friends, and the national schoolmistress and the schoolmaster, and everybody who could at all claim connection with the Overdale Sunday and day schools, followed in their wake, surrounded by all their pupils, who had not failed to muster pretty thickly on this auspicious morning.

The children set up a shout and waved their flags when they descried the rector and his family. Then they commenced to sing a harvest song with a very noisy chorus, which they had been taught by Roberta, Mr. Bell acting as conductor; and so they entered the park, other carriages following quickly upon their rear.

Arrived at the house, the children were led away to the place prepared for them, while Mr. and Mrs. Chennery, and Kate, came forward to welcome their various guests. The young men, the sons of the family, were also at home Mr. Frederic, a tall, handsome fellow of nineteen, and singularly like his brilliant sister Kate; and John, little more than fifteen, a pale, pensive-looking youth, the pet and darling of the gentle Ada. Mrs. Chennery was better than could have been expected; something like partial restoration was indeed hers at last, and she rejoiced in her renewed vigour and freedom from suffering as only they can rejoice who have borne the discipline of a long and weary illness. She was very pale and shadowy, but Kate had taken great pains with her dress. She was very proud of her beautiful mamma, and liked to deride her own brunette charms as compared with her mother's delicate bloom and perfect though attenuated features. Mrs. Chennery sat to receive her guests, for her husband had established her in her own luxurious invalid chair, bidding her keep her seat if all the peeresses in the realm should present themselves. She was not to rise for any greeting, unless, indeed, Her Majesty should unexpectedly arrive. She was wrapped in a costly white Chinese shawl; her lovely auburn hair hung in abundant curls; her sweet, dreamy blue eyes were lustrous with excitement, and a soft carnation flush was on her hollow cheeks. The Squire was very proud of his Catherine that day, and he told everybody "that his old woman was wonderfully better, quite getting up her strength, and would soon be in stronger health than ever." And he whispered to Mr. Aylmer that "she was quite in spirits again; all that miserable depression had passed away; all that strange religious despondency, the mere result of physical debility, had happily disappeared. Yes, she was going to be better and brighter than she had been for many years since her health first began to fail after little Harry's birth."

But Mr. Aylmer, looking into the lovely violet eyes, saw that their brilliancy was feverish, and that the clear white eyelids were still heavy as with the weight of unshed tears. And he knew that this fair woman, this idolised wife and well-loved mother, was still standing in the lengthening shadow of the grave; and, meeting her soft, almost reverential gaze, he thought of some lines he had read with Agatha an evening or two before the incursion of the Fripps:—

"A passing lustre—shrouded soon to be,
A soft light found no more,—no more on earth, or sea!"

Alas! he never read with Agatha now, either pose or verse.

But Mr. Aylmer turned to another lady, Mrs. Chennery's sister, Beatrice Leveson, who had just arrived at tie Park, intending to remain all through the winter months. Miss Leveson had neither the beauty nor the perfect race of her elder sister; but she was a very charming woman, intellectual, sweet-tempered, and so generally attractive that the marvel throughout her circle was, how she hid contrived to remain Miss Leveson so long. That it was her own fault that, verging on thirty, she was yet unmarried, no one ever doubted; for women, as well as men, agreed to admire Beatrice Leveson, and to sing her praises; and the Squire grumbled and declared that Bee was "absurdly particular, and that she would go through the wood, and pick up a crooked stick at last." He was very fond of his sister-in-law, and he wanted to see her well and happily married, for he had no opinion of single women, even his favourite Lady Jane coming in for censure occasionally because she persisted in her spinsterhood. And one day it struck him that Bee would make an excellent clergyman's wife, and how nice it would be for her to be located in the neighbourhood, and how 'sell she would suit Eustace Aylmer, and how satisfactory if tie families at the Park and the Rectory were connected! And so the Squire, in the solitude of his own den, popularly called his *study*, gave a great chuckle, and resolved to do a stroke of matchmaking before he was much older. And he meant to be very wary and cunning, keeping his own counsel, not even admitting his wife to his little secret till he saw some prospect of success. The result was that Beatrice came down to Chennery, ostensibly to nurse her sister, and help Kate in doing the honours; really, and quite unwittingly on her own part, that she might be seen and admired by the Hon. and Rev. Eustace Aylmer, and in due time enter with him into the holy and honourable estate of matrimony. Not but what the rector had seen Miss Leveson before, and talked with her, and to some extent appreciated her, but that had been in the lifetime of Lady Augusta, when her perfections could not possibly matter to him. Now he might be supposed to have got over his loss, and to be wanting another wife; and the Squire thought he was doing him a real service in putting Beatrice Leveson in his way. He never dreamed of the two obstacles with which he had to contend: the rector's semi-Popish proclivities, and—Agatha!

Lady Caroline did not hesitate long in separating Agatha from the others, and in saying to her in her own peculiarly soft, sweet, but dictatorial accents: "Miss Bevan, will you go with the children on to the lawn? They are anxious to join in the games, and they must not be alone. And when you go into the tent, take care that Louis and Carrie sit apart; they are such nervous children, they excite each other; and Janie must not have any plums or pears; and if Arthur cries for too many sweets, you must pacify him somehow—you must not let him have more than one piece of cake, or one sandwich, or something of that sort; but you must not let him cry on any account, or he will have the headache. And if Louis and Carrie want wine, they had better not have it, or only just a sip; and don't let any of them get tired or overheated, and let me hear of no disputes between them during the day."

For a moment Agatha felt indignant, and inclined to tell her ladyship that she was not her hired nursemaid, and that she would only be responsible for Gertie and Ernest, and for Rosamund if need were; and she tried to quell the rising anger, and almost before she knew that she was going to do she found herself led away on the terrace, and thence by the lawn to the croquet-ground, where the children and their attendants were assembled; and before she had time to frame what she considered to be a respectful remonstrance Lady Caroline was gone, and she was left in charge of all the children from the Rectory, Rosamund excepted, who was with Ada, entertaining the school children, and helping them to the coffee and buns, which were provided by way of luncheon. A nice prospect, truly, to spend the day in managing unmanageable children, for whom she would be responsible to an unreasonable mother!

Satisfied with her own admirable diplomacy, Lady Caroline was returning to the drawing-room when she encountered Mr. Chennery, who offered his arm for a stroll through the shrubberies; and being at some little distance from any of the parties who were now beginning to wander about the grounds, he thought it an excellent opportunity to win her ladyship's ears and interest her in the manifold virtues and attractions of Miss Leveson. Good, simple soul as he was, he never dreamed that he was disclosing his cherished wishes and his plans as plainly as if he had said, "Lady Caroline Fripp, I want your brother to marry my sister-in-law!"

But Lady Caroline caught at the idea at once. "Of course it was not to be expected that her brother should remain a widower for the rest of his days; a second marriage would be for his good, it might cure him of some of his absurd notions, for really he was going too far, quite too far, in the religious movement that was convulsing the Church of England. Yes, marriage would be very good for him, and, all things considered, Beatrice Leveson was the very woman for him! Without being exactly a beauty she was very charming, her tastes were intellectual,

and she preferred a country life. Then she was moderately High Church, and her age suitable. Nothing could be better, and a sensible attachment would be the thing to put any nonsense about that girl out of his head.”

All this and far more passed through Lady Caroline's busy brain, while the Squire talked about Beatrice's sense and wit, her love of literature, her fondness for young children, her archeological tendencies, the sweetness and evenness of her temper, her great kindness towards her nephews and nieces; and, lastly, he touched, but very lightly, upon his sister-in-law's warm appreciation of Mr. Aylmer's sermons, and her sympathy with his views generally. Of course the Squire did not know that an enforced celibacy was one of the views with which, for several years past, and at that moment, Mr. Aylmer was dallying. Lady Caroline listened attentively, and then she said, with an appearance of the utmost *naïveté*, “My dear Mr. Chennery, it has come into my head—don't breathe a word of it, but I cannot help just mentioning it!—what a charming thing it would be if we could become related; that is, if your sister-in-law could be also mine. Now, between ourselves, don't you think she would just suit Eustace? and don't you think Eustace would be exactly the husband for her? I know she is fastidious, extremely so, or she would not be Miss Leveson at this moment; but then, impartially speaking, my brother is a most superior man, and, I should say, would satisfy all her requirements—what do you say, Mr. Chennery?”

“The very idea I had in my own mind,” replied the Squire, his countenance flushing with pleasure, little imagining that he had himself just originated the notion in his companion's mind; “but it would not do to mention it to either of them—eh?”

“Certainly not; a word would ruin all. If my brother suspected us of any scheme of the kind, he would feel as if he were going to be entrapped into a second marriage, and he would be prejudiced immediately, while, if the least hint were dropped to Miss Leveson, her delicacy would be alarmed, and she would be unnecessarily reserved.”

Mr. Chennery quite concurred in her ladyship's opinion, and it was, agreed that matters should very much be left to shape themselves, only lending them a helping hand when obviously expedient, and throwing the lady and gentleman into each other's society as much as possible. Mr. Chennery began to think himself quite a man of tact, and lie almost regretted that he had not earlier addressed himself to the study of diplomacy. Yet, through all the conversation, he had not really started a single idea, save the one he had so innocently disclosed; all had come from Lady Caroline, only she ingeniously contrived to appear to be rather carrying out his thoughts than expressing her own.

Presently they came back to the croquet-ground, whence Lady Caroline had started, and where a great number of young people were now gathered together, among them Mr. Bell, Claude, and Ralph Mornington, all swarming round Agatha, and entreating her to take a mallet. But Agatha declined, for it was quite enough to have four little Fripps and two little Aylmers in hand, without taking any interest in the game; more than once Mrs. Chennery's French governess, a strong-minded woman, with a nose like a beak, and a will like wrought iron, had been obliged to come to the rescue, very much to poor Agatha's relief, for she had not the smallest control over the Fripp children, and coaxing and reasoning seemed equally in vain, and she had a great dread of saying or doing anything which would cause them to indulge in what their mamma prettily called “giving way to their feelings.”

“Giving way to their feelings, indeed!” said the Chennery *Madame*, when she heard this phrase for the first time; “*ma foi*, but they should give way to dere feeling for something, if only I had the chagement of them, littel vat you call *wretches!*” And, without doubt, Madame St. Just would have shaken and whipped them soundly, and then resigned her situation, had it been her ill-fortune to reign or to be supposed to reign in the Fripps' school-room rather than in that of the house of Chennery.

For a few minutes the Squire and Lady Caroline stood watching the group upon the grass; and both perceived that Agatha was not playing, and that Mr. Bell was hovering about her, very much as a singed moth hovers round a candle.

“I wonder, now, if Mr. Bell means anything?” said Mr. Chennery, looking knowingly at the young people; “that, too, would be rather a good sort of match, eh?”

“It would do very well,” replied Lady Caroline, with emphasis, in her turn taking an idea from the Squire. Caroline Fripp was not an ill-natured woman, and she had no objection to governesses getting married. “Every girl ought to have her chance,” she said to herself; “and here was quite a proper and eligible chance for Agatha; curates and governesses naturally assimilated—rectors, especially those who were men of family, were quite another thing, of course! And Mr. Bell was nobody in particular—highly respectable, and moderately clever, and all that, and hardworking, and a credit to his cloth. That little affair must be looked to, for Mr. Bell was certainly

stricken with Agatha's charms, and Agatha must be taught the wisdom of the old axiom that 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'; that is to say, a curate who actually proposes is to be preferred to a rector, who, if he ever propose, will do so against his better judgment and to his own exceeding detriment. And Agatha must be instructed to moderate her expectations, and to take the good that Providence sent her and be thankful."

And in outward seeming all went merrily as a peal or marriage bells; the day was lovely, and the park and the gardens were in beautiful array, the foliage wearing its richest tints, and the autumn flowers being in all their glory. Moreover there were no mischances; the school children enjoyed their treat, and the teachers and the village people were quite contented. The more distinguished guests were likewise happy enough; and the *fête* seemed going off, Kate said, "most brilliantly." The Squire wandered back to his wife when he left Lady Caroline, and he found her scarcely at all fatigued, and somehow, without any interference, Mr. Aylmer and Miss Leveson paired off, and seemed to have a great deal to say to each other.

But the day wore away heavily to poor Agatha. The children were still very troublesome; Mr. Bell wearied her, and Ralph Mornington's pertinacity began to be more annoying than amusing; the society of Madame St. Just, and of several other governesses in charge of their pupils, did not interest her. Roberta was too busy with the girls of her class to come near her; Lady Jane was mostly with Mrs. Chennery, and Rosamund and Ada were inseparable. Even Gertie and Ernest deserted her after awhile, the little Chennerys, of whom there were four younger than Ada, carrying them off on some special expedition. Agatha was presently left alone with Madame, who had no inclination to run after her pupils, and with the unruly little Fripps, who persisted in all kinds of turbulent naughtinesses, and quarrelled so furiously with the other children that they all ran away from the croquet-ground, attended by their governesses and their *bonnes*, and sought their happiness elsewhere.

It was three days since Mr. Aylmer had held any sort of conversation with her; all yesterday and the day before she could not help thinking he avoided her, only it was surely but her own imagination. Now, however, she felt certain. He had not even spoken to her since he bade her "good morning," as they sat down to breakfast; twice or thrice he had crossed her path since their arrival at the Park, once when she was struggling with Master Arthur Fripp, and once, if not twice, while Mr. Bell was chatting confidentially at her elbow; but he had not noticed her, there had been no word of recognition, nor even one of those kindly glances he had taught her to prize so well. She thought she must have offended him, and she became, poor girl, more and more unhappy, and she was longing to leave her charges and hide herself in some secluded spot, and, perhaps, indulge in a hearty fit of crying, when Lady Caroline came up to her, and in her most winning style pressed her to come away and take some refreshment. Sprawson was there, and she would mind the children; Miss Bevan must be tired of them, and she must come and have a slice of chicken and a glass of wine at once!

Like one in a dream Agatha went, not knowing in the least how to interpret Lady Caroline's civility.

Chapter 18. FERNYDELL

Into the tent walked Agatha and Lady Caroline Fripp, and they regaled themselves with cups of coffee, lobster patties, and ripe peaches. Her ladyship, indeed, made quite a hearty meal, and took a glass or two of sparkling Moselle by way of finale; but Agatha, though she drank her coffee with avidity, and enjoyed her peach, could not manage to dispose of her patty, the truth being that her appetite just then was quite unequal to anything at all substantial. And while Lady Caroline was trifling with her last glass of Moselle, Agatha helped herself to a copious draught of pure iced water. She felt fevered and thirsty, as if she had been journeying in the Great Desert for the best part of a week—as indeed she had, poor girl, since, in the absence of the sympathy and the intercourse that had insensibly grown so dear to her, her pleasant paths became arid and overclouded, while all around her lay a parched and dreary land.

As she sat in the tent with Lady Caroline, peeling her peach, and half-listening to the conversation of those about them, she began to understand herself better than she had ever done before. She began to suspect—nay, more than to suspect—the nature of her regard for Mr. Aylmer; she had been telling herself that she loved them, all these dear friends at the Rectory, Lady Jane, the children, Claude, and Roberta. But the love wherewith she loved them was so different from that other love which was given to one, and one only; and now, when all things seemed conspiring to show her how foolish she had been, she acknowledged to herself how it really was, and her cheeks glowed with shame as she thought and thought, and she wished some kindly fairy would bear her away to some distant shadowy spot where she might hide her confusion, and be as wretched as she pleased, with no eye to behold her wretchedness and humiliation. Or would it not be best to go away, to return to Sunny Lawn, and strive there to regain the old calm content and the quiet cheerfulness of other days? She was just in the frame of mind in which Lady Caroline wished to find her.

Her luncheon, or *dejeuner*, or whatever it might be called, being over, Lady Caroline rose up and began to draw on her delicate primrose gloves, while Agatha prepared to return to her charges on the croquet-lawn. But she was not to escape so easily; the worst was yet to come. Lady Caroline had been ministering to her creature comforts very much in the same spirit as that in which a Red Indian feeds his conquered enemy, whom he is just going to put to death by lingering, cruel tortures! Her ladyship knew that she was going sorely to torment Miss Bevan, and she thought she would need some refreshment to enable her to sustain the attack about to be made upon her, with anything like necessary fortitude. For she wanted to incite her to a certain purpose, and a lachrymose or hysterical state would be prejudicial to success. There was a sort of kindness, too, about her, which made her desire that the girl, presumptuous as she had been, should not suffer more than was absolutely needful, and at the last moment, just as they were leaving the tent, Agatha was made to drink the best part of a glass of La Rose claret. “There, now she will do, and she must make the best of it,” said Lady Caroline to herself; and they went out again into the pleasant sunshine, and bent their steps towards the archery-ground, where the school-children were now assembled to witness the shooting for the prizes. Beatrice Leveson won the silver arrow presented by the squire.

“Do you care for this?” said Lady Caroline, after she had watched the contests for a few minutes. “The sun is very hot, let us turn into one of those shady walks.”

“Shall I not go back to the children?” remonstrated Agatha, not at all liking the prospect of a *tête-à-tête*. She very much preferred battling with the incorrigible little Fripps to conversing confidentially with their lady-mother. Oh! where was Lady Jane? And why did Rosamund keep aloof, and surely Roberta might have spared a few minutes from the village children! As for Mr. Aylmer, she knew where he was; she had seen him not a minute before examining the arrow which Beatrice had won. It seemed a very toy, for it sparkled with emeralds and crystals, and the workmanship was exquisite. Agatha could see how Mr. Aylmer smiled as he spoke to Miss Leveson, and Lady Caroline noted it also, and she too smiled in triumph, seeing how all things tended to the wished-for end. But Agatha's poor, foolish heart was torn with jealousy—“and yet what right had she to be jealous! Oh! she must go away—she was becoming exceedingly wicked, as well as weak and senseless.”

“This way,” said Lady Caroline; “I am going to take you to Miss Chennery's fernery; you like ferns, do you not? And she has nearly all the British ferns growing in this dell; it is full of natural rock-work lower down, and

there is a beautiful clear spring, forming a glassy pool, on which white and yellow water-lilies used to grow when I was a girl. There is, or there was, a summer-house too, built of poles and dried moss and heather; I have not been there for years. Kate will like to know I visited her pet Fernydell; come along, Miss Bevan."

"Indeed, I think I had better return to the children," pleaded Agatha, almost in agony, some strange intuition revealing to her the ordeal to which she was going to be subjected in that lovely little glen.

But Lady Caroline replied—"I have told you that the children will do very well. Sprawson is in charge." Then, changing her tone to one which Agatha knew very well by this time, and which always reduced her auditors to submission, "I desire you to come with me, Miss Bevan. The truth is, I have something serious to say to you; and I choose to say it now without any more delay."

Silently and with beating heart Agatha followed Lady Caroline down the narrow zig-zag path which led to the spot indicated. Never, to her dying hour, did she forget the half wild, half-tutored beauty of the place. Without seeming to note it at the time, all the features of the path and of the ferny dell itself were stereotyped upon her memory. When afterwards she remembered that scene and all that it included she could see again, even in minutest detail, the straggling fronds of large fern, the male fern waving its gigantic plumes, the more delicate lady fern clothing the dripping surface of the rock, and the graceful hart's-tongue, and shield, and buckler ferns grow—in unrestrained luxuriance. She could see the dead leaves of the spring hyacinths and the seeded primroses still hanging on their stalks; the purpling briars blossoming and berried all at once; the wreaths of wild briony, the straggling sprays of the dog-rose, with their coral hips, and the mosses and the ivy twining about the roots of the larger trees and shrubs. She could see, too, the bottom of the glen, where at last they halted: the clear pool, with the large lily leaves floating upon its translucent surface; the grey rockery, only half-artificial in its character, where Kate Chennery's choicest ferns were sheltered from the winter's blast and shaded from the summer's heat; the little tangled brake, where yet the white convolvulus flowered, and whence a dark-eyed robin redbreast contemplated them with a grave and solemn air, as if questioning their right to invade his quiet territories.

They sat down in the heather-built hut of which Lady Caroline had spoken. It had been enlarged and improved, she said, since her last visit, and there were cushions on the seats, which were formed entirely of strips of unbarked boughs of trees. They sat there for a few moments in silence, and then Lady Caroline commenced in her most winning style.

"My dear, I daresay now you know quite well what it is that I am wishing to say to you. I have remarked that you have unusually quick perceptions; is it not so?"

Agatha was too truthful to utter the straightforward denial that would have been upon less scrupulous lips; she could only falter something that her companion might, if she pleased, interpret as assent. But she thought it was a heartless way of putting it. Lady Caroline should have had more womanly feeling than thus, at the very outset, to extort from her that which might pass for a sort of general confession. Her ladyship resumed—"I am sure, my dear, your own sound sense will tell you that I speak only for your good—just, indeed, as I should speak, were it requisite, to a daughter of my own; as I may speak, perhaps, though under different circumstances, to my darling Carrie or Janie in the years to come. I have perceived that you are unhappy."

"I was happy, very happy, till lately," replied Agatha, with some bitterness. She would have liked to add the precise date of the period of the commencement of her unhappiness.

"Exactly! there is always in these cases a prior season of abandonment, when all is forgotten, save the present delight, when the passing hour is everything, the future uncared for, the past a sort of void, or counting, at the best, for very little. But conscience will speak, prudence will reawaken, stem realities disclose themselves and the dream is over."

"Does your ladyship know that you are speaking in riddles?" asked Agatha, a little impatiently. If the worst must come, and she felt assured it must, it would be better to have it over without more ado; and she would rather be addressed plainly and intelligibly than in this high-flown yet covert style, which might lead her to admissions she had no idea of making.

"You are not quite sincere, Miss Bevan," was Lady Caroline's calm reply; "I am convinced that you are solving my riddles, as you are pleased to call my matter-of-fact propositions, almost before they are propounded. Still, if you wish plain-speaking, you shall have it. In brief, then, I am concerned on your behalf respecting my brother."

"On what account?" asked Agatha, striving for composure. There came to her a sudden resolve that she would

not, if she could help it, betray her miserable secret to this woman, who had so little compassion for her youth and loneliness. She would speak no falsehood, but there was no reason why she should declare the truth to her self-elected judge and counsellor! How could she tell that Lady Caroline would keep faith with her? What was to prevent her retailing all that passed, possibly with variations, to Mr. Aylmer himself?

Still, in the same soft and sweet but inflexible voice, Lady Caroline replied—"Of course I refer to your attachment to my brother! It is so very apparent, my dear Miss Bevan, I could not help discovering that you had been so very foolish as to fall in love with—with—shall I say *your master?*"

"If you like," returned Agatha; "I am not ashamed of my position in the household; though by the great kindness of the family I am treated rather as if I were a child at home. I know that I am a servant, for I am hired to perform certain services for which I am duly paid; I am also liable at any time to be dismissed, therefore I am in point of fact a servant. Yes! call Mr. Aylmer my master, Lady Caroline; I am ready to acknowledge the relationship."

There was so much more spirit in the tone of Agatha's reply than Lady Caroline had expected that she felt rather startled, and began to fear it would not be the easy task to deal with her that she had anticipated. And if Eustace really did care for this girl, how would he relish his sister's unasked-for interference? Even Jane might resent the whole affair, for, gentle as she was, and forbearing, she could yet be deeply offended upon occasion; and, certainly, Lady Caroline was arrogating to herself another person's duties. Lady Jane was the mistress of Overdale Rectory, and if Agatha were to be called to account, it should surely be by her; not by a visitor, even though she were a near kinswoman!

All this flashed rapidly through Lady Caroline's busy brain as she noted the young girl's quick gesture of displeasure, and saw her flushed cheek, and watched the sparkle of her lustrous eyes. And how beautiful she looked! Her ladyship was obliged to own to herself that her brother had some excuse for his infatuation, whether it implied serious design or a mere temporary flirtation. Agatha sat there like a young queen, rather than a convicted culprit; she might have been the Egeria of the fountain of the dell, a veritable incarnation of the spirit of intellectual loveliness. And for a second Lady Caroline told herself that this girl was worthy to be her brother's wife, that he would find in her the comfort and the sympathy he had sought in vain in the stately, high-born partner of his earlier days. And who was she that she should come between Eustace Aylmer and his happiness? And if Agatha suited him better than the aristocratic, well-portioned Beatrice, why should not he please himself? Also, Agatha herself—was it not cruel, unwomanly?

But there Lady Caroline stopped, and hardened her heart, and told her restless conscience that she was doing the right thing after all, and it would never do to be misled by mere sentiment. She glanced keenly at Agatha, who was looking a little more subdued now.

"My dear Miss Bevan, I can quite forgive you for misunderstanding me. I see you are angry, but that is not wise. Had we not better, as women of sense, converse calmly, and rule our tempers? Mine, indeed, has not been ruffled."

"Would it not be better to say out boldly all you meant to say, Lady Caroline, rather than beat about the bush so long?" asked Agatha, with some vehemence.

Her spirit was flashing up again, and all the while she felt a curious sort of self-pity, compassionating herself as she would have compassionated any small creature caught by some stronger animal; for it seemed to her that her companion was treating her as a cat would treat a mouse already pounced upon, and safe within her grasp, and whom she would devour presently when she had derived all the amusement possible from her helpless prey. But in this conviction Agatha did Caroline Fripp some injustice. Her ladyship was not quite heartless; she pitied Agatha while she tortured her, and pitied her yet more as she thought of all that she must suffer; but then it was her duty to inflict this pain—it was her bounden duty to be relentless, nor shrink from making the girl miserable for a time—only for a time, for one always forgets such pangs in after-years, or, remembering them, one smiles to think how weak it was to be so wounded, and for such a cause.

"Agatha," said Lady Caroline at last, "do you not think you ought to leave Overdale?"

"I do not know. I give satisfaction, I believe; and the children love me."

"For your own sake, it seems to me you ought to go away. You have not guarded your secret so well as to escape my notice. Think you it will long escape Mr. Aylmer's?"

Agatha's face and neck were all one fiery glow. Lady Caroline spoke as if the regard were on her side only, as

if she had given her affection all unsought, as if, like a raw school-girl—and she was really little more—she had “fallen in love” with the first man who had paid her the common attentions due from a gentleman to a lady.

Poor Agatha! she was sorely humiliated, for indeed Mr. Aylmer had never asked her to love him. And yet there were passages that might mean so much. She remembered that evening in the old cloisters, when his arm had been round her, and he had asked her if she would be his friend whatever might betide. She remembered the gift of the celestial rose, and the look and the tone with which it was presented. She recollected, too, their many readings, their pleasant interchange of thought, when she had been a pupil sitting at her master's feet. She recollected a hundred things, all of which might mean so much or so very little. Agatha might have quoted the old ballad—

“I may not say that you were false,
I never had one vow from thee,
But I have often seen thine eye
Look as it loved to look on me.”

And yet, after all, the more Agatha strove to recall Mr. Aylmer's exact words the more she felt assured that his feeling towards her, though tender, was simply paternal. He had called her “my child,” his “faithful *little* friend.” He was more than twice her age. How absurd to suppose he could entertain for her any other than a purely fatherly affection. Yes, he had loved her; he had been so kind, he had counted her as another daughter; he had pitied the orphan cast upon the world at an age when other and more fortunate girls were safely sheltered in their own happy homes, and he had tried to make her feel less desolate; and in her folly she, not knowing at the time that she did so, had mistaken this kindly regard for a far deeper sentiment, for she loved him not at all as daughters love their fathers, but as women love the men to whom, in all joy and confidence, they give themselves for the remainder of their days. “And yet,” said poor Agatha to herself, “if he had not seemed to care for me I should never have so cared for him—at least, I think not. Oh why did he make me care? But he could not know what a foolish girl I was!”

“I will go away,” she said at last; “it will be best. But I thought—indeed, Lady Caroline, I did think—”

“My dear, I know you thought; I know all about it. But you are inexperienced—you were mistaken!”

“You are sure I was mistaken?” said Agatha, almost pleadingly.

Lady Caroline shrank from the mute distress in her dark, tearful eyes, and for a moment she hesitated; but no! it was best not to falter; it was more merciful to slay at one blow the hope that must not be fulfilled. One heavy blow was better than slow pangs of long-torturing suspense. So Lady Caroline soothed her conscience, which persisted in annoying her.

“*You were mistaken*, Agatha! Mr. Aylmer has been very kind to you—he is always kind to young girls—but he has only treated you as a daughter. He feels for you only as your pastor and friend, and for the time being, perhaps, your parent.”

“Has he ever told you so?”

“My dear, why ask such questions? But his intentions, which I think ere this you must have divined, answer your doubts more completely than any words of mine. I refer to my brother's attachment to Miss Leveson.”

“Is Mr. Aylmer then engaged to Miss Leveson?”

“Jam not at liberty to say he is! Indeed, I am violating confidence in saying so much, and I rely upon your honour not to repeat even to Lady Jane what I have told you now. But it was for your own sake, that you might know how fruitless it was to cherish any hope: it is best to know one's ground, is it not, my dear?”

“Yes, yes,” sighed poor Agatha. She felt so crushed, so utterly weary, that she could not continue the conversation. She hated and pitied herself alternately; but nothing gave her so keen a pang as the feeling she could not repress that Mr. Aylmer had acted unworthily! Yes, he *had* said more to her, and he had implied far more than he had any right to say or to imply, if he regarded her only as an adopted daughter.

“Shall we go?” she said presently, and the hollow sound of her voice rather startled her companion. Agatha felt a wild desire to rush away, she knew not whither, only it must be somewhere far away from Lady Caroline. She could not stay another minute in that greens ferny dell, and she rose and ran up the rocky path more quickly than the elder lady could follow her. But on the top she encountered Kate Chennery, bringing down some village children to see the lily-pond, and while she waited to speak, Lady Caroline rejoined her.

“We have been in Fernydell ever so long” said her ladyship. “I have been showing Miss Bevan your ferns. How you have improved the place, Kate.”

Overdale

Regardless of appearances, Agatha darted away; in the distance she saw approaching Mr. Aylmer and Miss Leveson.

Chapter 19. HOW AGATHA GOT HOME

But Agatha's very natural desire for a little solitude was not to be fulfilled; she ran down one walk and up another in a sort of blind endeavour to find the entrance to a small evergreen thicket which she had noted on her way to Fernydell, only to rush into the arms of Roberta, who at last had delegated her self-imposed duties to some one else and come to seek her friend.

"Oh, is it you, Roberta? I was so frightened!"

"Frightened, you silly child! Were you afraid there might be ogres lurking behind the trees? But, Agatha dear, what is the matter? You are so pale, and you are trembling all over. Sit down on this bank and tell me what has troubled you."

For answer Agatha sank on the green sward and burst into tears. It was wonderful how she had kept them back so long; for a few minutes she could not speak, and Roberta, though much concerned, stood quietly by her and let her passion of weeping have its way. She rightly judged that Agatha would be all the better, and far more able to command herself for the remainder of the day, if now she were permitted to indulge in the truly feminine luxury of a good cry. But then "a good cry" has its limitations, which, being overstepped, are rather disastrous in their consequences, and Roberta began to be seriously alarmed when at the expiration of five minutes Agatha still shed tears in torrents and began to sob convulsively.

"This will not do, Agatha," she said at last, authoritatively. "Whatever has caused this agitation? You must repress it, or you will expose yourself to vulgar curiosity and to unkind comments. You have not had any bad news from home, from your old governess?"

"Oh, no, no!" sighed Agatha. It would have been an unspeakable comfort if she could have told Roberta all that was so heavily oppressing her, but that could not be. Half-confidence would be of little avail, and she could never bring herself to tell the whole story of her own foolishness and vanity; besides, the state of affairs between Mr. Aylmer and Miss Leveson was not to be mentioned even in the family, Lady Caroline had appealed to her honour to be perfectly silent on this point. So she could only shake her head and say, "I cannot tell you anything, Roberta; I must bear my trouble alone; it is very much of my own seeking, I suppose—at least I am told so. There! I will be stronger. Do not look so scared, Roberta; I am sorry I have behaved so, but indeed I could not help it; I was wound up to the last pitch of endurance, and I am afraid I am not very brave. I never had a real trouble before."

"Are you sure you have one now, Agatha? I am a little older than you, and I know how at your age one is apt to think the sun will never shine again because there comes up a black thunder-cloud and hides it. Perhaps,—nay, I feel sure all this sorrow will pass away in a little while."

"It will not, Roberta, but I cannot talk now; if only I could get away I should like to go home. No one would miss me but Lady Caroline, and she would understand."

"Then Lady Caroline is at the bottom of your distress?" said Roberta, quickly. "Agatha, my dear, you are a little simpleton if you let her annoy you after this fashion. She has been taking you to task, no doubt; she has a rare gift at humiliating people, I know; but what then? Lady Jane and Mr. Aylmer are kind to you, and they will never listen to her representations, or misrepresentations rather; they know her too well. And she will go away next month, and you will see no more of her for a year. Take courage, Agatha; if it be only Lady Caroline it will be all right again presently."

But Agatha only sadly shook her head and repeated as if to herself, "I cannot stop here; I must go home! I must go home!"

"Home to Overdale, do you mean?"

"Yes, let me go, Roberta, before anyone looks for me."

And again the tears sprang forth, as she remembered how short a time that dear home would be hers.

But Roberta replied, "I will not let you go, Agatha. Are you crazy? Do you want to make a sensation, to enact the injured heroine, and set up a hue and cry throughout the country? No, my dear; I have let you have your cry out, and now you must be rational, and remember that you are a woman, and a child no longer. Whatever your trouble is, it is not *death*, the great trouble that crushes one to the earth for a little while. You must bear your grief,

Agatha, and bear it quietly; it is woman's peculiar trial that she may not dare to speak of her deepest sorrows, nor to let the world see how her heart is aching. It is very hard, I know, to wear a calm face, and to talk lightly, when we feel as if the greatest and only relief would be to lie down and die; but it has to be done—it must be done, if you would not lose all womanly respect. Thousands of women have done it, and thousands more will do it, while the world stands, and what one woman has done another may do. Come, Agatha, rouse yourself; dry your eyes, and we will walk up and down quietly for a few minutes. When you are sufficiently composed to encounter the people we shall have to meet on the lawn and on the terrace, I will take you into the house and upstairs, and you shall lie down for half an hour, and then make your toilet, and come down again fresh for the fireworks. Till you have tried it you have no idea how it calms the mind just to wash your face and hands and arrange your hair.”

“Roberta!”

“It is true, Agatha; and the same thing may be said of any of the common daily duties of life. It is very good of God to order it so. Of course it does not touch the real source of one's grief, but it quiets one, and so one gains a little strength for what has to be done, and also for the next access of sorrow which sooner or later will visit one. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,' and one step a time is all that one really need concern one's self about; God will order all the rest if we ask Him. Your concern now is to quiet your nerves and go through the evening respectably. Time enough to think about tomorrow when it comes.”

In silence they walked up and down the gravel path between the shining laurels. No one came that way, but they could hear sounds of laughter and of merry voices near at hand, and farther off of music, the band playing the gayest tunes for the benefit of the children. The mirth found no echo in Agatha's burdened heart; she longed to go away. When her tears were quite dried they crossed the lawn and entered the house, no one accosting them, and Roberta took Agatha to the chamber where she had herself been earlier in the day, and made her rest and perform the toilet, which really did act as a sedative; and finally she took her down again, calm and refreshed, and aided in looking for the children, who seemed just now to be best refuge, for any sort of conversation with any grown-up person was exactly what she least desired.

By this time it was growing dusk, and preparations were being made for the crowning event of the fete—the fire-balloon and the fireworks; and the school children were all assembled on the terrace, while behind them, and at the front windows, the guests were gathering. The sun was just down, and a strong yellow light was resting on the lawn and on the tall trees round about the house. Soon the lustre faded, the sky wore the placid, deep blue of nightfall, and one by one the pale stars shone out. Very quiet and peaceful it looked for all the crowd and the hum of voices, and, standing on the stone steps behind Ernest and Gertrude, Agatha felt as if all that had passed since morning had been an ugly dream, from which slowly and thankfully she was awakening.

But no, it was no dream; the calm was but for the hour. In a little while, as soon as ever they drove away from Chennery Park, all the misery in her heart would break loose again, and she was leaning against one of the pillars of the portico, feeling very weary, when some one came behind her with a camp-stool, saying, “You look so tired, Miss Bevan; all those children have been too much for you.”

It was Mr. Bell; he was always doing kindly things, one day carrying a bucket of pig-wash for a poor old man, nearly bent double with age and rheumatism, another day escorting up to the church door an infirm almshouse woman; and all the children in the village ran after him, sure of a pleasant smile or a cheerful word, and pretty sure, too, of a lemon or peppermint drop or a halfpenny, for Mr. Bell was supposed to spend a fabulous amount of his income at the sweet-shops for the delectation of the juvenile population. Agatha gratefully accepted the seat; she had felt so deserted all day that the little attention was most welcome. There was no doubt about Mr. Bell's civilities as there had been about Lady Caroline's—at least, if there were doubts, they must go quite in the opposite direction; he meant nothing but unmingled kindness, nor was his politeness a means to any end, it was just the expression of his natural feeling; and at that moment a little kindness went a long way with Agatha.

“I have the headache,” she pleaded, as she sat down and drew the children nearer to her; “I am so much obliged to you, Mr. Bell; but will no one want this stool?”

“A great number of people want it, I daresay, but you really need it and must have it. It has been a tiring day.”

“Very, and it will be a dark drive home.”

Then Mr. Bell began to talk about many things; he talked well always, and, as a rule, Agatha was interested in listening to him; but to-night, though she heard every word, she scarcely took in the sense of a solitary sentence. She was glad when the children gave a shout, and there was a great clapping of hands as the balloon rose up

steadily and gracefully into the deep purple air, where it hung like a star, as everybody watched its progress out towards the sea; then suddenly—hiss, whish, sh—h—h!—shot up a magnificent rocket, and green and golden rain, quickly changing to violet and crimson, was pouring down upon the shrubberies below. Then a catherine-wheel, all purple and ruby, with little flickering jets of emerald in the centre; then more rockets, and green and gold serpents and wandering stars, for the moment putting out of countenance the real luminaries of night, as they glowed from fiery red to azure blue, and from crystalline whiteness to most brilliant amber! More wheels, more festoons and circles, sheafs of coloured flame, miniature explosions of Vesuvius, sunflowers the blaze of which lighted up the lawns like day, tinted lights to represent summer sunsets and wintry moonlights; finally, the grand *scena* of the Tower of London, with ruby walls, turrets of ruddy gold, and pearly battlements, finishing up with the Chennery coat-of-arms, blazoned in all the colours of the rainbow upon a back-ground of darkness, and sending out little sputtering forks of fire, one moment argentine, another rosy, another golden, till all the hues blended, and the outline of the Chennery lions—or *pards* Mr. Bell said they were—became confused. There was one intense glow that lighted up the whole landscape far and wide—a wild darting upwards of the fiery mass—and all was over. Then everybody took breath, and declared it was “beautiful exceedingly,” glorious, wonderful, the best display that the county had ever witnessed; but then the Chennery folk were noted for doing things well when they undertook them.

As soon as ever the fireworks were over the school children, who had been marshalled in readiness, were hurried off to the waggons, and with them went Roberta and, as everybody supposed, Mr. Bell. Then there was a general movement, but first Mr. Chennery insisted upon all present going into the dining-room to take some refreshment and say “Good-bye” to Mrs. Chennery, and with the rest went Agatha, thankful that at last the day was so far over. The table was spread, but few were sitting down to it; the guests for the most part were standing in groups about the noble room, or lounging corners or against pieces of furniture, and several persons were talking to Mrs. Chennery. Rosamund and Ada sat near the window, gravely conversing and sipping lemonade; Lady Caroline was busy with the breast of a chicken, some cold tongue, and salad; Lady Jane was at Mrs. Chennery's side, both ladies fortifying themselves with white soup; and Mr. Aylmer was handing Miss Leveson a glass of champagne.

“Come in, Miss Bevan, come in,” cried the squire, good-humouredly, as his eye lit upon Agatha entering the room. “Sit down and make a good supper; you have a pretty long drive before you, mind. They call it *three* miles, but unless you go by the lower road, which is out of the question to-night, it is over four, and taking in the park, starting, you know, from my front door, I should say it was almost five. What will you have—chicken, ham, tongue, pigeon-pie, lobster patties, sweets, fruits, soups, collared eel, a cup of coffee,—eh? say what.”

But Agatha did not want any supper; she only wanted a glass of water, for she was still tormented by thirst. Mr. Bell, however, who had sprung from no one knew where,—since several persons affirmed they had seen him get into one of the waggons and drive off,—brought her wine, and insisted on her taking some in her glass of water. She could not be enticed to eat, but in order to escape further importunity she took something that was put upon her plate, and trifled with it till some one said it was time to go, and the ladies began to look for their wraps, and wonder if the carriages were ready. There were many last words to be spoken, and several little gossips had to be finished, before the party really broke up, and Mr. Aylmer seemed one of the least inclined to stir. Then some one asked Beatrice Leveson for a song, “only one,” before they separated. The person who made the request was an old friend going out to India, and he could not very well be refused. And that one song was followed by more. A musical mania had apparently seized the company, and they went on asking for this and suggesting the other till it became quite late; and Lady Caroline began to be concerned for her children, who were quiet only because, being quite worn out, they had fallen asleep, and were tumbled on to couches and ottomans like so much living lumber.

“I would advise no more delay,” said Mr. Aylmer, coming in from the terrace, where he had been to speak to his coachman. “The night has changed since we came in; all the stars are hidden, and it looks like heavy rain. It is too dark for fast driving, and my people have stupidly forgotten all the carriage-lamps. Jane! Caroline! are you ready? We ought to have set out an hour ago.”

“It lightens, and I fancy I heard a low growl of thunder,” said the squire, who had been out “to have a look at the kind of night it was.”

“Lightens!” cried Lady Caroline. “Oh, dear! oh, dear! what will become of the children, dear lambs?”

Overdale

The lambs being summarily awoke out of their first sleep were behaving more like outraged cats than the innocent creatures they were likened to; and they fought, and bit, and struggled while their papa and a footman carried them out on to the terrace. The night was indeed very dark; there was no moon, and not a star shone through the black canopy of cloud, but every now and then the lightning gleamed across the sky, making the gloom that succeeded seem deeper than before. Mr. Aylmer and Mr. Fripp were both anxious to start without a minute's delay, and the squire, apprehending a speedy storm, was for expediting measures as much as possible.

Agatha was already in the waggonette, and the children were being handed in to her when Arthur began to roar lustily for his mamma; Jane burst into loud crying; and Carrie declared she would not go with Miss Bevan, because she let Louis bite her. There was no time to dally: Lady Caroline sprang into the waggonette, giving the word of command for her husband to follow, and desiring Agatha to dismount. Agatha obeyed, and stood quietly on the terrace again, waiting to see in which carriage she would be packed. There was little room, for Claude and Ralph were driving now instead of riding, and Sprawson, who had come late in the day, was added to the party.

She was beginning to wonder what would be her fate, when suddenly the squire seized her arm—

“What shall we do with you, Miss Bevan? that waggonette seems quite full. Ah! they are driving off, I declare—very thoughtless of my Lady Caroline; of course Lady Jane and Mr. Aylmer think you are safe with her and the children. Ah! I have it: Bell, can you take a lady?”

Mr. Bell was driving himself in a two-wheeled gig, and he would be delighted to accommodate Miss Bevan, and before Agatha quite realised what was going to happen to her she was lifted up like a baby in the squire's stout arms, and placed in the gig by the curate's side, and in another minute, they were following the others down the avenue. It was extremely dark, and the drivers shouted to each other frequently: if it had not been for the lightning it would have been almost impossible for them to avoid running into each other. The flashes came frequently now, and the thunder rolled continuously, but it was still a long way off. Mr. Bell, who was accounted very weather-wise, thought they might get home before any rain came on.

Agatha rather liked the dark, wild night; she liked that deep voice of the angry sea, mingled with the louder diapasons of the thunder-cloud; and the gloom that lay about them, as they retraced their steps of the morning, was welcome; it was so much more in unison with her sad spirit than the glad sunshine, or the placid moonlight, or even the pale gleaming of the stars. Mr. Bell was unusually silent, perhaps his horse occupied all his attention; but a certain point in the road being passed, there was comparatively little danger: there seemed to be even a faint glimmering of light from the sea, and he was at liberty to converse again.

What he said Agatha scarcely knew, she was almost as weary in body as in mind; she was not sure but that she was going to sleep, only the lightning flashed so constantly and Mr. Bell talked so incessantly. But at last she woke up to the full sense of what he was saying; in the very plainest and most unmistakable language he was telling his love, and making an offer of his hand. Of course it behoved Agatha now to rouse herself and give him his answer, or he might conclude that silence gave consent.

Tremblingly she implored him to stop, as he grew more and more eloquent in pleading his cause, begging for one word, only one little word, to make him the happiest man alive! But the little word when it came was not the one he desired to hear.

Agatha's voice was low and unsteady, but there was no mistaking the clear negative. Mr. Bell found himself decidedly refused.

“But at least you will think about it?” he implored. “I have been too hasty. You know too, little about me. I will be patient. I will wait as long as you please. May I speak again, say at Christmas?”

“No; oh, no!” was all Agatha could say. “Please don't think of waiting; indeed, it can never be!”

“Never! Oh, Agatha!”

“*Never!* Oh, I am so sorry!”

“Do you not love me at all, Agatha?”

“Not at all.”

“But you might in time?”

“No, I could not; I pray you never mention the subject again. I am very, very sorry, Mr. Bell, you have been so kind to me.”

“*Kind, Agatha!*”

It was a relief to both when the Rectory was reached, and she hurried in, the rain just beginning to fall. Mr.

Overdale

Bell went straight to his lodgings. The rest of the party had already alighted, and were gathered in the drawing-room, except the sleepy children, who were being borne away to the nursery. Agatha heard Mr. Aylmer say to one of the under-servants, who had been left at home, "A gentleman, do you say, and still in the house?"

"Yes, sir; a gentleman who came by the 6.20 train from Blackmoor. Cook knows him, sir, and his name is—Mr.—Mr.—"

"Not Mr. Vallance, surely?"

"Yes, sir, that was the name cook called him by."

Chapter 20. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Before Mr. Aylmer had time to consider what this impromptu visit of Mr. Vallance might portend, that gentleman entered the room. Till her dying day Agatha never forgot the impression she then received. He came in shading his eyes from the blaze of light, for Lady Caroline had at once walked up to the lustres and afterwards to the girandoles and lighted all the wax candles, saying that she was scared with the darkness and must quiet her nerves before she went to bed. Agatha, worn out and confused with her late experiences, had sunk into the first lounging-chair that presented itself.

Removing the thin white hand from his face, Mr. Vallance looked round for Eustace Aylmer. He was tall and very slight, and very erect in carriage, with a mien that seemed composed of equal parts of extreme haughtiness and enforced humility. His features were strikingly handsome; his eyes were dark, deep-set, and penetrating; his forehead was high but not broad, a sure sign of narrowness of mind and judgment; and his hair, which was scant and sprinkled with grey, fell back from his temples, which were hollow, as were his cheeks, while his lips were thin and firmly set—his mouth and chin, indeed, showing immense determination and fixity of purpose. Altogether, Herbert Vallance was a very remarkable man, a very handsome and aristocratic-looking man. Only the undue height of forehead, without corresponding breadth, spoiled not only his beauty but his reputation as a man of mark; for no man could present such physical traits who had not cherished, for a lengthened period, 'views and opinions altogether one-sided.

He caught sight of Agatha, sitting wearily in her chair, and he bent his regards on her with an expression so strange—that Lady Jane, who instantly remarked it, started, wondering uneasily what it could mean. As if fascinated, Agatha sat upright and looked straight into the cavernous dark eyes that met hers, with a glance half-defiant, half-pitiful, and altogether sad. Had she ever seen this man before? she asked herself, and why did she shrink from him as if he were her evil Fate personified?

Her evil Fate, indeed! Poor, poor Agatha! Had she only known the terrible influence that man was to exercise over her future destiny in years to come she would have shrunk away, verily, as from the visible presence of Death! Aye and far more tremblingly; for there are times when Death, if not exactly greeted with a welcome, is yet met with something more than resignation—with quiet content, with cheerfulness even, if not with thankfulness, because the cup of life has grown so bitter that he who drains it to the dregs lays it down at last, rejoicing that it holds no more, that a sweeter, richer draught awaits him in his Father's kingdom. "It must be that offences will come; but woe to him through whom they come." Woe to the man who, like Herbert Vallance, mingles such needless bitterness in the chalice that might have been pure sweetness brimful with blessing. God may and will bless the wormwood and the gall to the pale lips that meekly taste the cruel potion, for out of all evil He will bring forth good; but not the less guilty is he who poisons the full draught that erewhile was an overflowing cup of joy. Surely such deeds, even in this world, will meet their righteous retribution.

It was a fluttering dread of she knew not what that filled Agatha's heart as she looked at Mr. Vallance. He looked to her like a man severed from all human ties, conscientious if erring, but stern, pitiless, uncompromising; a man also whose will you could not resist, any more than you could resist the waves of the incoming tide, when they break around your path and warn you to retire, if you would not speedily be drowned. They give you but one alternative, flight or destruction; and there was something in Mr. Vallance's fine but worn and attenuated face that uttered the same warning.

But while Agatha trembled, and Lady Jane wondered, and Lady Caroline was lost in strange imaginings, Mr. Vallance saw his host, and the hands of the two men met in a long and fervent clasp, that told of mutual esteem and settled confidential intimacy.

"This is indeed an unexpected pleasure, Herbert," said Mr. Aylmer; and yet there was something in his tone which to his friend's keen ear savoured *not* of pleasure. "I thought you were at Rouen, still."

"I left yesterday on urgent and unexpected business, and I crossed from Dieppe last night. I had no idea I was coming to England till just as I started, or I should have written you word; it was a bargain you know that I should not leave Overdale unvisited the next time I was in London."

"I remember, and I am glad that you also remembered. How long can we keep you?"

“Only two or three days; I must be in Paris by Tuesday next. But pray allow me to speak to the ladies!”

“I beg your pardon, but you were always more gallant than I, Vallance,” said Mr. Aylmer, smiling; “you know my sisters already, and this young lady is Miss Bevan, at present residing with us.”

Mr. Vallance simply bowed; his manner was extremely courteous, and even deferential, when he spoke to women. You could not exchange a sentence with him without remarking the polish and high-bred tone of his style, you perceived at once that he had moved always in the upper classes of society; but polish is sometimes very cold, and the highest breeding will occasionally lack warmth and cordiality. He spoke gently, almost kindly, to Agatha, politely to Lady Jane as to his hostess, and rather ceremoniously to Lady Caroline, whose brilliant hazel eyes were fixed upon him with an expression that said as plainly as if the words were uttered, “I do not like you; I distrust you, Mr. Vallance!”

“Did you not receive a letter from Mr. Vallance this morning?” asked Lady Jane of her brother; “you never told us we might expect him speedily.”

“That letter was written two days ago, Lady Jane,” replied Mr. Vallance. “I had then no fixed intentions as to crossing the Channel; in fact, I was not certain of taking the journey at all this autumn till within an hour of my departure. Business of great importance summoned me to town on the instant; so I had no alternative but to follow my letter, and then, when in London, finding that events had shaped themselves far otherwise than we expected, and that I must soon return to France, I thought my best plan was to take you by storm. I relied on our ancient friendship and on the tried hospitality of the Rectory. But I feel I ought to apologise, Lady Jane; you have other guests, and my remaining here may well be inconvenient. I know the ‘Aylmer Arms’ very well, and I can sleep there quite comfortably, and join your breakfast table in the morning.”

“Indeed, Mr. Vallance, there is no occasion for anything of the kind. The Rectory is so large that we have still a room or two to spare, and so old a friend of the family need not stand on ceremony. Have you dined?”

“I lunched heartily in town; and when your people here wished to serve dinner on my account I preferred to order tea. Thank you; nothing more to-night. And now, tell me, how are the Chennerys, and have you had a charming day?”

Mr. Aylmer spoke of the family at the Park, dwelling rather on the precarious state of Mrs. Chennery's health; and Lady Caroline gave an animated description of the fireworks, which she declared were as fine as any she had ever seen; and then the conversation drifted into ordinary channels, only there was nothing ordinary in any of Mr. Vallance's remarks; he never seemed to speak needlessly; there was wisdom and there was originality in even his most trifling sentences; every word as he uttered it, slowly and gravely, and in a voice of melody, came with weight, and evidently *to*. And branching away from some simple discussion about the day's pleasure, he spoke of the quaint old Norman city in which so much of his time had of late been spent; of its “dim and mighty minster,” the proud cathedral church of Rouen; of the solemn, thrilling beauty of St. Owen; of the fretted shrines, and the stately gloom of lonely fanes, half hidden, half sunk in decay, in the shadowy gloom of streets as picturesque as they were obscure and ancient; of the marvellous Church of Our Lady of Bonsecours; of the broad, silvery Seine, and of the sweeping hills; of the people of Rouen, of its commerce, and of Normandy generally, till even Agatha was so interested that she forgot her fatigue, and, for the moment, poor child, almost her sorrow. It struck her that Mr. Vallance could paint word-pictures nearly as well as Tennyson.

But suddenly Mr. Vallance checked himself; he looked at his watch, and, remarking he had no idea it was so late, begged to be shown to his chamber.

Mr. Aylmer accompanied him, and general good nights were exchanged; but Agatha had slipped away a little while before, unperceived, as she imagined, though both Mr. Aylmer and Ralph Mornington were aware of her departure. Poor Ralph! he was fathoms deep in love with Miss Bevan, and, when she left the room, all the brightness in it seemed suddenly extinguished. He had noticed many things that day, and he was very angry with everybody, and he had half resolved to declare himself, and then rush off to “the governor,” and with prayers, and entreaties, and promises, and, if need were, with tears and threats, wring from him his consent to the engagement. It was all very absurd, doubtless, this schoolboy's love, and there would come a day, not so very far distant, when Ralph would smile at his childish passion and blush to think of his romantic folly; but for all that it was a very pure and fervent love, with an amount of self-devotion in its composition that only needed constancy to make it worthy of esteem. In after years, when Ralph was a loved and loving husband, altogether happy in the Sacred ties he had formed, he looked back with tenderness, and even with respect, on that wild, impassioned dream of his

holidays at Overdale.

"I hate that man!" was Lady Caroline's remark, as soon as her brother and his guest were out of earshot.

"Indeed," said Mr. Fripp, wonderingly; "you never said so before, Carrie."

"My dear, I never remarked him so closely before; this is only the second time I have met him. Jane, I do not wonder at poor Augusta's prejudices I would not have that man in *my* house! Augusta used to say he was a Jesuit in disguise, and verily I believe she was right, though her perceptions were not the acutest in the world."

"Hush, Caroline!" and Lady Jane glanced at Claude and Rosamund, who were both listening intently. Rosamund had flushed up for a moment, and then turned very pale, her aunt thought, because her mother's name was not mentioned with due respect; it was really because she was indignant at the aspersions cast upon Mr. Vallance's character. She regarded him with the deepest reverence, believing him to be a man of fervent piety and of exalted sanctity of life.

"Children ought to be in bed at this hour," said Lady Caroline, crossly. "Why did not Miss Bevan take Rosamund with her? Really, Jane, that young woman neglects her duties most glaringly. What can she suppose governesses are for if not to look after their pupils at all times?"

"Miss Bevan is just tired to death," growled out Ralph; "she told me so! It was enough to kill her, worrying in the hot sun, with all those tiresome babies, not one of them heeding a word she said. Claude and I tried to help her, but really we could not stand the turmoil, and we only made matters worse; she begged us to go away."

"Yes, aunt," put in Claude, "you have no idea how perverse Louis and Carrie were; Janie was intolerable, and as for Arthur, little scamp, I longed to shake him by the neck as my terrier shakes a rat. You ought to punish them *all* to-morrow, Aunt Caroline! Mrs. Chennery's governess, the French madam, you know, said they were a disgrace to anybody."

"Miss Bevan has no management, and my darling little Arthur was excited."

"I'd *excite* him with a nice little switch!" murmured Claude, looking confidentially at Ralph. "If children roar with passion when they are excited it shows they are not excited enough."

"Hush, Claude!" interrupted Lady Jane, in her mildest, firmest tones. "I must beg you to say no more; you are talking about what you cannot possibly understand. I also think it is time for you and Rosamund to retire."

Rosamund, dutiful always, and implicitly obedient, rose at once and bade good-night; but Claude lingered, while Ralph burst out—"I believe that man is a Jesuit! I believe—"

"Ralph!" said Lady Jane, "one guest in a house should not so speak of another. Remember! Mr. Vallance is my brother's oldest friend, also his honoured and his trusted friend."

"I beg pardon," returned Ralph. "Pray forgive me, Lady Jane! I had better follow Miss Aylmer's example, I think, for I am saying all sorts of things I have no business to say; but surely you must have felt what I felt—that there was something irresistibly attractive about Mr. Vallance, while at the same time one could not feel quite at ease he being in the room. For myself, I felt conscious that he knew what I was thinking about. While apparently absorbed in one idea, he seemed to know everything that was going on around him. I felt as if it were impossible to escape his observation. One cannot help admiring him, I suppose; the fascination which lies on the surface only makes you conscious that there is much more beneath which you can neither define nor analyse; and a sense of mystery is always attractive, you know I should suppose his information on all subjects is varied and most extensive, and not only wide but deep; and he evidently possesses brilliant conversational powers. Then his commanding figure, his classic features, his lofty brow,—though there is something about it I do not quite like—and his dark, piercing eyes, that seem to read your very soul! Altogether he is to be admired—and *perhaps* esteemed; but he gave me an undefinable sensation I cannot account for, and which all his courtesy could not dispel."

This was so precisely the view of the case which both Lady Jane Aylmer and Lady Caroline Fripp had taken that neither felt inclined to make any rejoinder.

Mr. Fripp observed—"You are not far out of it, Mornington. There is something in that—in Mr. Vallance—that tells you all is not square and above board. As I listened to him I could not help thinking of a line of poetry some one once wrote—

"And things are not what they seem."

It *is* Watts, isn't it, Carrie—eh? or Cowper, perhaps, or I should not wonder if it was in Young's 'Night Thoughts'?"

Overdale

Carrie vouchsafed no reply.

The party in the drawing-room soon separated. Lady Caroline was anxious to go to her baby. Lady Jane was concerned about Agatha, whose pale cheeks and heavy eyes, and hopeless, listless manner she had remarked, not without some touch of self-reproach, for she felt that she had scarcely done her duty by the girl that day, while Eustace's conduct had been really inexplicable; he had certainly avoided Agatha, and left her to the mercy of Lady Caroline and her tormenting brood. All were wearied and glad to go to bed, and soon the lower rooms were left in darkness, and many a light twinkled from the upper windows, overlooking the wooded hills, the grey church tower, the heath, the cliffs, and the ever-sounding, restless sea.

Mr. Vallance accompanied Mr. Aylmer to his study; but the rector, after a brief conversation that all the world might have overheard, said—"I am very tired to-night, Herbert; I cannot talk; let us have our conversation to-morrow morning after breakfast."

"Certainly; I, too, am tired. We shall think more clearly in the morning."

"Of course, I know, Herbert, what you are come to say to me. I see reproach and pity in your every glance, hear it in every tone. But now you have seen my Agatha, tell me, have I not a fair excuse?"

"Such as the world would deem a fair excuse," replied Vallance, gravely; "but we are pledged to the service of One whose kingdom is not of this world."

And he pressed his friend's hand affectionately and went to his room.

Late into the night Vallance sat writing. The morning star was paling when he folded up and enclosed his bulky letter, written on fine, thin foreign sheets.

It was addressed "To the General of the Order of the Society of Jesus at Rome."

Chapter 21. DECIDED

How glad was Agatha to be alone, to be free at last of wondering glances and inquiring eyes! She threw open her window that she might feel the cool night breeze on her burning brow, and hear the soothing murmur of the tide; and the wind swept wildly up from the coast, tossing about the branches of the trees, wailing round the house, and moaning along the cloisters, as if it were a despairing human creature weary of life. The rain fell only at intervals, now drifting slant-wise in large heavy drops, that seemed the precursors of a storm, and now coming down thick and fast, as if the night at last had concluded to be wet. Then the cloud-drifts would part, the pattering on the evergreens and the dashing on the window-pane would cease, and only would be heard the melancholy sough of the wild autumnal wind, and the solemn anthem of the waves on the dark, deserted shore.

Agatha looked out, unheeding the rain and the wind, or the lightning that still played vividly about the trees; it was all very sad and lonely, altogether in keeping with the sense of desolation that had preyed upon her for several days. And it seemed so short a time since she had sat in the same spot, watching the summer sunlight on the purple sea, and listening to the bees' drowsy murmur in the golden heart of the lily, and hearing the pleasant chiming of the waves upon the shingle. Then she had been so happy, so thoroughly at peace, so deep and full a content had filled all her soul, that she scarcely cared to inquire as to the source whence it was derived. She only knew that she was calmly, blissfully happy, that she had no apprehensions as to the future, that she would like to rest for ever in that blessed home, and sun herself always in the presence that had grown to be so soothing and so sweet. She never thought where things were tending, nor whither they might tend; she built no airy castles, and dreamed no rainbow-coloured dreams; least of all did she plan what she would do or say, or imagine what might come to pass, if only certain words were spoken and certain vows exchanged.

Now the calm was over; there was no more quiet content. If she had indeed dreamed, she was rudely awakened.

"But they who wake from such a dream
Wake nevermore to dream again."

She was roused from her reverie by a gentle pressure on her shoulder, and there was Rosamund come to say good-night. "Dear Miss Bevan, do you know your sleeve is quite wet? Yes, and I can see the raindrops glistening on your hair; you will take cold."

"I think not, dear; I like to sit here."

"But you were so tired!"

"Yes, dear, very tired."

The hopeless droop of the head, and the desponding accent, caught Rosamund's attention. All at once she knew that something had happened to grieve her dear Miss Bevan; it was something more than mere fatigue, or even bodily pain, that had saddened the radiant face, and given to the voice that mournful intonation. Then she remembered how she had neglected her governess all day, how absorbed she had been in Ada Chennery's society, and how little thought she had given to any one else. She recollected, too, that Agatha had been burdened, at least a part of the day, with her aunt's troublesome children, who were enough to wear out any amount of native cheerfulness and patience.

"I am afraid," she said, "I have been very thoughtless to-day. I was so occupied with Ada—we had so much to say to each other—that I inconsiderately left you to the sole charge of the little ones; and really Arthur and Janie are, I must say—But there! I ought to have helped you. I am so sorry, dear Miss Bevan. I wish I could learn to be more unselfish!"

"My dear Rosamund, I wished you to enjoy your day with your friend. I did not feel at all aggrieved at your absence. The children were tiresome, of course; they always are; and they even made Ernie and Pussy-cat a little naughty. But it was not so very bad, and it is over now. As for you, my pet, do not distress yourself. Kiss me and go to bed."

"You are sure I have not vexed you?"

"Quite sure. Good night."

But still Rosamund lingered.

“Are you sure I can do nothing for you, Miss Bevan? Are you not feeling very unwell? Do you know you are nearly as white as your dress? and your eyes are so heavy! Let me close the window. I am sure you ought not to be sitting there! May I not? Please don't stay long there.”

And the child tenderly kissed her young governess, and went into her own room. And again Agatha was alone; but the current of her thoughts was a little diverted by Rosamund's unwonted demonstrations. How dear they were to her now, these children whom she taught; dear, she told herself, because they were so sweet, and so good, and so intelligent, that teaching them was rather a pleasure and a pastime than an actual toil. But ten times dearer in reality because they were *his* children; the children of the man whom, above all others on earth, she loved and venerated. *Above* all others! There was not another man in all the wide, wide world for whom she eared one iota. This one man, the rector of Overdale, was *the* one, the only one whose regard she cared about; the one near whom she would linger till her life's end; the one for whom she would have sacrificed anything, and been only too proud, too joyful to lay at his feet every blessing and every advantage that might have been purchased *by* forsaking him. All other men were mere human creatures to whom she must be kind and charitable, as in duty bound; but they were nothing, and never could be more to her. No wonder that Mr. Aylmer's children were beloved! it is so impossible not to regard with tenderness the belongings of those whom we love well and truly. Even the very garments or one who is dear to us are, in some sort, precious; and we handle reverentially the common things in daily use by those who are to us our second and far dearer selves.

“*Must* I go away?” asked Agatha of herself, when Rosamund had shut her door. “Oh, *must* I leave this dear home, these dear friends, these darling children who love me so much more than I deserve? Lady Caroline said I ought to go away for my own sake. Oh, yes! and I ought; I must! If she found out my secret others may; and oh! *he* must not—must not dream of it—must not for one moment suspect it! I should die of shame if he knew—if he only fancied. Yet there is no disgrace in loving a truly good and noble man; it is not my fault, it is rather my misfortune; it all came before I could see any danger of it, This is, I suppose, what Miss Frere meant to warn me against when I was leaving her four months ago. How shocked, how grieved she would be! And yet—yet I am sure I have done nothing to be ashamed of; the shame would be if I betrayed the secret; if I let him know what he was to me. I can tell God all about it, and as long as I can do that I think I need not be ashamed. But oh! why was I so foolish? and why did he say twenty little things that seemed to imply so much? Oh it was only *seemed*; he meant only just what he said; it was all my own silliness, and vanity, and presumption. He called me his child; that might have told me how he felt; he is so kind, so fatherly, and I am quite young enough to be his daughter, I suppose. And yet—oh! there have been words and looks that *did* seem to say, 'Agatha, I love you! I would have you for any wife!' Still, one never ought so to interpret a man's words and looks unless he speaks out plainly. I have been very foolish, very wrong, and justly I am punished.”

Once more Agatha's meditations were interrupted; this time some one knocked gently at the door, and the voice of Lady Jane was heard requesting admittance.

“My dear Agatha, not in bed yet? And you were so tired! I thought you would be glad to rest your poor head.”

“The quiet and the darkness and the cool air rest it, Lady Jane; it is better now, I think.”

“You think! Why it is burning and throbbing; and the air instead of being only cool is positively cold! If you like the breeze I do not, so I will, if you please, close your window; it is dangerous to expose one's self to the night wind after so hot a day; this is a time of the year when one must be a little prudent; we have midsummer at noon, autumnal evenings, and in the present case a night almost winterly. What have you taken for your headache?”

“Nothing; sleep will be the best cure.”

“That I quite believe; therefore you should at once undress, and try to go to sleep. Agatha, have you had anything to eat to-day?”

“Not much, but all that I wanted; please not to ask me to take anything.”

“No, I do not ask, I desire you to take something, and I expect to be obeyed. Get into bed as quickly as you can, while I see about some supper for you. Sprawson was offering everybody arrowroot half an hour ago; I will go and see if she has any, and tell her to bring you some. I shall come back and see that my prescription is duly observed.”

And Lady Jane was as good as her word; in a quarter of an hour she was again at Agatha's bedside, and she sat

quietly without speaking till the cup was emptied and carried away. Then she said, gently stroking Agatha's hand, "My dear, what is it? what is grieving you?"

"I cannot tell you, my dear Lady Jane; it would be a great comfort if I could, but I cannot. Please do not ask me; I could not speak clearly without betraying confidence."

"Has Lady Caroline been saying anything to vex you?" If you would please not ask me any question. It is partly my own fault that I am unhappy, just now. I shall be better to-morrow morning."

"I hope so; and if I cannot help or comfort you, I had better leave you. There are times, I know, when one has sorrows one cannot tell to any earthly friend. I have had such myself, Agatha, and the memory of them is painful still. But, dear child, do not forget there is One into whose ear you may pour all your grief, all, your perplexity; One who will not misunderstand you, who will sympathise with you, and guide you, and, in the end, make the trouble, whatever it may be, work out a blessing. I do not know what we should do if, when we feel that we must be dumb towards our fellow-creatures, we dare not speak to God. Just go to Him, Agatha, tell Him all your affliction, commit your way to Him, and then leave it entirely in His hands. Then you may rest, and say, 'I will both lay me down in peace and sleep; for Thou, Lord, only maketh me dwell in safety.' Good night, my dear; the Lord bless you, and keep you, and give you peace."

Agatha felt soothed by these few precious words, and she did pour out her heart; and before her prayer was well ended her eyelids grew heavy, and soon she slept profoundly the sleep of healthy, over-wearied youth; nor did she wake till the household was all astir, and it was time to dress, if she would be present at morning prayers. She felt languid and depressed, but still much strengthened by the long, quiet slumbers of the night; and she went downstairs, looking calm and composed, and Rosamund thought almost cheerful again.

Not so fortunate, however, was Mr. Aylmer; he scarcely sought his couch at all; lost in mazes of doubt and torturing perplexity, he paced his room till long after the grey September dawn had pierced the eastern skies, and the first blush of rosy red was in the clouds when, wearied in Spirit as in frame, he threw himself upon his bed and tried to forget his trouble for awhile in quiet slumber. No such respite, however, could he gain; and at length he rose, and began hurriedly to dress, feeling that the question that agitated his whole being must be answered quickly and decisively. That day he must decide whether he would take to himself the earthly happiness which seemed to be within his grasp, or whether he would remain firm to the principles which for the last two or three years he had adopted, or at least imagined he had adopted, as his own. It would not do to trifle; there must be no more vacillation. As far as his own feelings were concerned, he knew he could not bear it much longer; either Agatha must be all to him or nothing, and if nothing they must part. He knew Vallance was an early riser, and he determined to go to his room and talk with him, and come to a conclusion on the subject of his marriage before he met Agatha at breakfast-time.

Yes, Vallance was up and dressed; three or four hours' sleep were all he allowed himself in the twenty-four, and he smiled, as Mr. Aylmer entered, but did not appear to be at all surprised at the early visit of his host.

"I hope I do not disturb you," said Mr. Aylmer.

"Not at all; I have been up some time, and I had just concluded my devotions, and was about to take a walk on the heath, and perhaps run down to the shore for a bathe. The tide is up, I fancy."

"Yes; it is high water about seven o'clock. Do not let me keep you from your walk though. I will, if you please, accompany you. I should like to feel the breeze this morning; my head aches."

"You have rested ill; you look pale and haggard."

"I have not slept at all. I may have dozed for a few minutes, certainly nothing more."

"And you are not used to vigils! A walk and a blow will do you good. Let us go to the cliff's."

It was not till they were far out on the heath, and the village of Overdale lying behind them, that they spoke on aught but the most indifferent topics. But when they neared the edge of the rocks Mr. Aylmer stopped and threw himself on a huge slag of stone that was probably some relic of the upheavings of a primeval world.

"Herbert, I can bear this no longer. I *must* come to a decision. I shall not have a moment's peace till this question of marriage, or renunciation of the blessing of wedded life, is set at rest. This day I mean to make any choice."

Vallance sat down calmly beside his friend, and replied, "You are right, it is well to come to a decision; but beware how you decide, beware how you listen to the pleadings of a fond fancy! Beware of the weakness of human nature! Beware of the affections which, when fixed on earthly objects, are nearly sure to lead men into

error.”

“Yet God gave us these earthly affections. God gave woman to be the companion of man—'male and female created He them.' Is not marriage most divinely instituted? Is it not God's holy ordinance?”

“Undoubtedly! Marriage is unutterably sacred; it is thrice honourable. But, Eustace, it is not for *all*; it is not for you or for me—we are pledged to higher and holier things. What have such as we to do with wives?”

“You and such as you are better alone. The joys of the domestic hearth are nothing to you; you are beyond these human ties that are to us so very sweet and precious. To be husband and father would not tend to your happiness; rather would it be a clog upon your usefulness. I respect, I honour those who can put from them all entanglements of earth, and give themselves unreservedly to the service of God's most Holy Church; but for myself, I confess I am not yet ready to make the sacrifice. But, Valiance, can you truly judge in this matter? You do not know what love is.”

“I know what love is—I do not know passion; and even the love of friendship, which is all I know, or desire to know, I strive to keep in due subjection, that I may give myself entirely to God. Once I was tempted, I own. Once—it was only for a very little time—I had visions of a happy English home, of a hand clasped in mine while life should last, of a tender heart that should beat in unison with mine and share my every thought; I had dreams of happy years to come, of the patter of childish feet, and the ring of childish voices in my house, and I was tempted, *sorely tempted!*”

“Why call it a temptation?”

“It was a temptation. I was pledged to another and higher service, to a service which demands all. I might not dally with a human love—I, who had vowed myself to the Divine. I tell you, Eustace, a priest of the Church has no right to marry. Did I not prove to you—”

“I know, Herbert, I know! Spare me the repetition of those arguments. I remember well the grounds on which you advanced your opinions, and I also remember that I admitted them; but, Herbert, it was chiefly of man's authority you spoke, not of God's.”

“Of the Church's authority. Surely you allow *that?*”

“Assuredly, because the Church holds its commission directly from the Lord Jesus Himself. But the Church to which I and to which you belong does not forbid her priests to enjoy the solace of the married state; it seems to me that she rather encourages matrimony in her clergymen.”

“There are corruptions in all ages, and the Anglican Church erred deeply when, in the so-called Reformation of the sixteenth century, she broke away from the control and guidance of recognised and delegated authority. Self-will and the spirit of anarchy, which like a flood overswept that fatal century and the one which succeeded, prompted men's hearts to rebellion, and they fought against laws both human and Divine, and they resisted spiritual as well as regal rule. So this Church, which reformed itself in all its plenitude of vain self-complacency and rash presumption, naturally cast aside all or much that tended to the abnegation of self, and having left the fountains of pure bliss it turned to the polluted springs of earth. Eustace, all things have their price; they must be bought, and the more precious they are the more they cost. Did not our blessed Lord *purchase* to Himself a Church?—and at what a price! Did not the saints and martyrs win through blood and tears the palm and crown of martyrdom? And shall we, the pledged soldiers of the Cross, refuse to give ourselves—body, soul, and intellect—to the holy cause for which we fight?”

“They say who know the life Divine,
And upward gaze with eagle eyne,
That by each golden crown on high,
Rich with celestial jewellery,
Which for our Lord's redeemed is set,
There hangs a radiant coronet.
All gemmed with pure and living light,
Too dazzling for a sinner's sight,
Prepared for virgin souls and them
Who seek the martyr's diadem.

Once you had such aspirings, Eustace.”

“I know it; but, Vallance, there is another thing I ought to consider. It is true I have not said in so many words,

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'Agatha, I love you; be mine,' but I have implied it by look, and tone, and almost by caress. Can I honourably draw back? I have won this girl's affections, I feel sure of it, and I am torturing her as well as myself. Yesterday was a most miserable day. I purposely neglected her; I avoided her; but I thought only of her, and I am sure she was wretched, poor child! Herbert, I cannot be so cruel—I will not; I will speak to Agatha to-day. I shall not *sin* in marrying, though I own I may take the lesser for the greater good. I can say, 'God bless me and the wife whom I shall wed.'

“As you think best, Eustace; but grant me one favour; it is for your own sake I ask it. To-day is Friday—do not speak to Miss Bevan till Monday.”

“Very well; but remember, I have *decided*. Now let us go in to breakfast.”

Chapter 22. LADY CAROLINE'S DILEMMA

All were gathered in the breakfast-room when Mr. Aylmer and Herbert Vallance returned, nobody looking any the brighter for yesterday's fatigue. Lady Jane was not well, and Lady Caroline was feeling cross, and perhaps a little uneasy in her mind, while she pondered how she could get Agatha away at once before her brother should say anything which might compromise himself, and at the same time reveal the insincere part she had played in at least implying that there was a probability of marriage between him and Beatrice Leveson. That Eustace would be very seriously displeased should the truth come to his ears she was well assured, and Eustace's serious and just displeasure was something which, for reasons manifold, she did not wish to incur. Also it struck her that her husband might be vexed, if not angry, and, though not by any means in proper awe of marital authority, Lady Caroline had no desire to 'create what she graphically called "an unpleasantness," especially just now, when her visit at Overdale was nearly concluded, and she must go back to her London home.

And thinking about going home set her upon another train of thought. Why not take Agatha with her? She would then be safe, and Mr. Bell, if he cared about her at all, would doubtless follow her. Agatha would gain much valuable experience. Mr. Aylmer, freed from the charm of her society, would return to his sober senses and perceive how nearly he had reached the bunk of a precipice—that is to say, of a decided *mésalliance*, and he would have every opportunity of cultivating the regards of Miss Leveson without danger of the counteracting influences she so much dreaded. It would be better and safer for all parties, and it would really do Agatha good to move in a new sphere, and she would be thankful for the interference a few months hence. And so, laying the flattering unction to her soul, Lady Caroline became more composed, her self-satisfaction returned, she felt quite patronisingly towards Agatha, and in an amiable mood with all the world; and she began to enjoy her breakfast, and to talk away in her usual flow of silvery, pattering little sentences, to which, however, no one very much gave heed.

Lady Jane looked anxiously at Agatha, but the quiet though pale face somewhat reassured her; yet still she wondered what was the trouble through which her favourite was passing, and it struck her that one of those startling changes we sometimes perceive in those in whom we are deeply interested had suddenly passed over Agatha. She was not the same she had been a week before—not the same even as she had been on the previous day; she looked like one who had had a hard struggle and conquered—like one who had fought long and painfully, and at last gained the victory, but at the expense of all that was sweetest and most cherished. The girlish expression was gone from the lovely features; with the childlike roses of her cheeks it seemed to have vanished, and though her brow was weary and her eyes heavy, there was a steadfastness in her gaze, and a calm composure and fixity of purpose in her countenance that told of some recent mental processes, and some great revulsion of feeling, which scarcely yet was over. When Mr. Aylmer came in and saw the pale, downcast face, and the settled gravity of mien and look, he, too, was startled and more than ever confirmed in the decision at which he had arrived. He only wished he had not given his promise to Valiance; but for that he would, as soon as the others left the table, have requested an audience of Agatha, and at once placed his fate in her hands. "It did not matter very much, however," he told himself, "it was only the delay of a few hours; on Monday he would speak, and all would be settled, in spite of Lady Caroline's oblique hints, and in spite of the arguments and pleadings of his friend."

But instead of an interview with Mr. Aylmer, Agatha found herself called upon to have one with Lady Caroline, who followed her to the school-room, and after speaking for a few minutes on several trifling matters came to the point by saying, rather nervously—

"Miss Bevan, I should like to have a little talk with you in my own room."

Agatha, who had foreseen the impending visitation, quietly acquiesced, though she felt very much as if she were following her ladyship to an inquisitorial torture-chamber. But she knew that something definite must be arranged, for Lady Caroline Fripp was not the woman to discuss feasible plans and then make no effort to carry them into execution; and Agatha had determined to meet her fate courageously, and do that which seemed right, at any cost of self-sacrifice and renunciation. The girl had a good deal of heroism in her composition, though she did not know it; and without much debate, her sense told her that nothing would be gained by putting off the evil

day; if difficulties were to be encountered, and pain endured, they had better be met and suffered at once; delay would only weaken her resolves, and test her courage, perhaps beyond her strength; in fine, if she *must* leave Overdale, if it were clearly her duty to go, it would be wiser not to defer her departure any longer than was necessary.

Lady Caroline motioned Agatha to a seat upon the sofa, then she carefully closed the door, turning the key to secure them from interruption, and, sitting down near her, began, in that peculiar tone of hers, that was at once so winning and so imperious—

“Miss Bevan, I wish to know if you were in earnest yesterday when you agreed with me that it would be better, for the present at least, to quit Overdale?”

“For the present!” Agatha felt that if she went away she would never more return; still that clause seemed to comfort her; she fancied she could bear her exile better if at any future period she might hope to come back again. She answered, however, “Yes, Lady Caroline, I have thought about it, and I believe you are right. I will go away. I intend speaking to Lady Jane at the first opportunity.”

“You need not do that. I will speak to my sister and say all that is proper.”

“Your ladyship must excuse me,” replied Agatha, firmly. “I owe it to Lady Jane to make my explanations myself; I cannot deal untruthfully or reservedly with her. Her great kindness merits all the return I can make, which is very, very little; but at any rate I can treat her with due respect, and with absolute confidence. I should never forgive myself if I failed in candour towards dear Lady Jane.”

This, of course, was not at all what Lady Caroline intended, and she began to be afraid she had begun to build without estimating the cost; she felt no small perplexity as she listened to Agatha's composed reply, and she almost feared she was baffled, since it was not in her power to hinder the girl from saying all she chose; and if she did say some things, if she did speak plainly, as seemed the easiest and most natural way, then she, Lady Caroline, would find herself in no enviable position. She knew perfectly well that she had practised tortuous ways, that she had condescended to deceit, and no one, least of all one who is generally honourable and straightforward from good taste, if not from principle, likes *to be found out!* It is, perhaps, not till the fear of detection arises that our sins and errors are seen in all their native ugliness; certainly Lady Caroline had not till this moment felt properly ashamed of the subterfuges she had deemed it expedient to employ.

“I have been thinking,” she resumed, “that as I am the means of depriving you of one home, I ought to provide you with another. I need a governess for my children. Will you undertake the situation?”

“I should not care to live in London,” replied Agatha, feeling, however, that it mattered very little where she lived if it were not at Overdale; only the idea of living with Lady Caroline was not to be for a moment entertained. “I would rather return to Cotswoldbury; I have always a home at Sunny Lawn,” she continued.

“How very foolish of you! It would be so great an advantage to live in London, and really I think you might be very happy in my household; my children are remarkably intelligent, and very easily managed, when one understands their characters, I need not tell you they are singularly nervous and sensitive.”

“I am quite sure, Lady Caroline, that I could not manage either Carrie or Janie; they have been frequently under my care since they came here, and I have never succeeded in keeping them in anything like order.”

“That is because you were not recognised by them as an authority appointed by myself. You were only their cousins' governess, and they are such high-spirited little things they always object to any sort of extraneous rule. When they understand your true position it will be quite another matter; besides, I see you have *tact!* Now, a little tact is worth a great deal of experience.”

“Nevertheless, I am sure I have not the necessary tact to fill so difficult and responsible a post. I thank your ladyship for your consideration, but you must forgive me if I decline.”

“You are an exceedingly foolish girl! I could be of immense service to you. Indeed, I would make a point of serving you; you have been a little spoiled here, and I should not expect from you the same subservience which I have been accustomed to demand from my governesses.”

“I will consult Lady Jane, but I do not think I should suit you, Lady Caroline.”

“Take care what you say to Lady Jane! She is not ordinarily slow of perception, and if she once gets the smallest clue to what is passing in your mind, your secret will be hers at once.”

“I should not wish that, I think; but I am quite sure that if she knew it she would treat me tenderly; she might reprove, but she would not despise me; and also I should be quite safe in her hands.”

And as Agatha spoke she felt by no means safe in Lady Caroline's hands; she could not believe in her, she could never trust her, and she could not but feel that her secret had been wrested from her most unfairly. She continued:

"After all I do not see why I should shrink from telling the truth to Lady Jane. Why should I practise evasion with her? *You* know why I think it right to leave Overdale, and surely it is her due to be as well informed. It is only my duty to confide in her. Lady Caroline, I have been very foolish. I ought not to have decided upon any course till I had consulted one of the truest and kindest friends I have in the world. For the present, therefore, I rescind my resolution; I will tell Lady Jane all my difficulty—I was sorely tempted to tell her last night, when she came like a mother to my bedside. I will hide nothing from her; then I will say to her, 'Hew shall I act? What *ought* I to do? What is my duty? I am ready to go away to-morrow—shall it be so?' And I doubt not that Lady Jane will perceive the necessity of my departure, and take all proper measures; and I shall have the satisfaction of dealing honestly with her, also I shall secure the inestimable advantage of her counsel, and the comfort of her sympathy."

"And what do you suppose she will say to her brother? It strikes me very forcibly that Jane will tell the truth; she is terribly in favour of plain-dealing."

"So am I. But in this case Lady Jane would be womanly; she would respect my confidence, and she would say nothing to—Mr. Aylmer that could possibly compromise me, or if it were essential to disclose aught, it would be done when I am far away. My honour would be sacred as her own, of that I am perfectly assured."

Here was a dilemma! For Agatha was not to be shaken, and if she went—as she doubtless would go—to Lady Jane, and poured out all her heart, all Lady Caroline's fine schemes would come to nothing, and worse than nothing; for it would be quickly perceived that she had spoken untruthfully, and unwarrantably interfered in the concerns of other people. It was quite in vain to try to dissuade Agatha, for hers was one of those mild and gentle natures that upon occasion can be unmoveable as any rock. Lady Caroline had not calculated upon so much strength of character, and she was fairly baffled, and began to wish she had "spoken out" to Eustace, or else contented herself with giving her sister repeated cautions and the best advice. Now she was between the horns of a very wicked dilemma, and she alternately lamented her own folly and wondered how she could get out of the scrape with the smallest amount of annoyance and humiliation. At last she said, unwittingly copying Mr. Vallance, "You must promise me two things. The first is that you will not till Monday begin this subject with Lady Jane; she is not at all well, and there will be people here to dinner to-morrow; then the Sabbath is no day for such a conversation, as you must admit yourself. On Monday morning, if you are still in the same mind, you can speak as you intend. Will you promise this?"

Agatha hesitated.

"It will be painful to keep silence for three whole days, Lady Caroline. I shall live an unnatural, constrained life till I have confided in Lady Jane."

"That may be; but I see that it will be best; indeed, I must request you will not worry my sister till to-morrow's party is over—and Mr. Vallance in the house, too. I think so much is due to me as Mr. Aylmer's sister, though it may please you to ignore my claims."

"I trust I have not failed in respect to your ladyship. Believe me, I fully recognise your claims as a member of the family whom I serve. I will obey you, Lady Caroline, though, in doing so, I act against my own judgment, and prolong my period of suspense. I hope I am not selfish. I will not then ask to speak with Lady Jane till Monday morning, neither will I answer till then any questions she may choose to put. Is your ladyship satisfied?"

"Yes, on that head. You will find that I give you sound advice, though only in this instance will you act upon it. You will have time, too, to mature your intentions; and you will be able to arrange your conversation beforehand."

"I shall not do that; such arrangements are unnecessary when one desires to be perfectly candid. But what else am I to promise? Your ladyship spoke of two things."

"I did. The other is simple enough. I wish you to promise that you will not in any case mention to Lady Jane the fact—the little affair, I would say, that I referred to yesterday—I mean what I was so indiscreet as prematurely to disclose respecting Miss Leveson."

"I promise! There is no difficulty about that, for that is not my concern; I have nothing, and can have nothing to do with any such engagement or attachment. I am willing to believe that in kindness you mentioned it to me;

and I will respect your confidence, whatever else I may see fit to disclose; and now I shall be glad if your ladyship will allow me to retire. Rosamund and Gertie are waiting for me in the schoolroom.”

It was a weary morning for Agatha, but the lessons were over at last, and she went away to her own room, where, however, she was quickly hunted out by Gertie, who entreated her to come and arbitrate between her cousin Janie and herself, who were at issue on some momentous question. Janie went into tantrums, and it took a good half-hour to bring her to reason and to pacify Gertie, and then Lady Jane came to ask her if she would go on the shore that afternoon with all the children. She had intended accompanying them herself, but found that she really must stay at home; and she did not like either to disappoint the young people, or to allow them to go without some person in authority over them. “Besides,” concluded Lady Jane, “the tide-breezes will do your head good. You look better already, Agatha. I wish you would tell me what is wrong with you!”

“Dear Lady Jane, I cannot tell you now, nor to-morrow; but I will tell you everything soon. I do not want to hide anything from you; I sorely need your advice, your help!”

“Very well, my dear. I am ready to hear you whenever you choose to speak; but you are a little mysterious, and, Agatha, I must tell you I do not like mysteries; they irritate me, even in a novel.”

“Indeed, I do not wish to have mysteries, I hate them; I love plain-speaking and plain-dealing?”

“I am sure you do, but beware how you allow any one to lead you into any sort of silly entanglement; mystery is the mother of mischief! However, I am not going to scold you. You will be ready by three; the evenings are drawing in so fast it will not do to set out later. You are sure you are not too tired?”

“Quite sure; but who is going?”

“Our own children, and the three eldest little Fripps, with their *bonne*, and Martha, the under-nursemaid. I almost think Claude and Ralph will go too, and they will help you if Louis should become utterly unmanageable, or if Miss Janie should be taken with the sulks, as she was last week, and refuse to budge an inch, though the waves were covering her feet!”

“What time is the tide up?”

“Not till after dark, so there will be no danger; only don't go so far as Endcliff Chine.”

“I do not know Endcliff Chine; but we will not stray beyond the cave where we had the picnic. I will be quite ready by three o'clock.”

“Very well. I think I shall send you to the head of the great ravine in the waggonette. And there is the luncheon-bell; and—dear me! there is Mr. Vallance in the lavender-walk, deep in conversation with Rosamund!”

Chapter 23. PINK SHELLS

It was a merry party that went down to the shore that September afternoon; Ralph and Claude, Agatha and her pupils, the little Fripps and two of their nurses, and last, not least, Lady Caroline herself. A certain uneasiness of mind made her uncomfortable when Agatha was out of her sight, and at the latest moment, when the boys were mounted and the waggonette ready to start, she decided to accompany her children, feeling, as she said, unwilling to trust them to the dangers of the shore without maternal supervision.

Agatha would willingly have dispensed with her society, and she even went so far as to say that she herself would be responsible—a rash promise, Agatha—for Louis and Carrie and Janie, also to declare that there were no perils to be encountered, the tide was a long way out, and no one could possibly be drowned accidentally between the Chine village and Gibraltar Cove. It was all in vain; Lady Caroline had fully resolved to go, and go she did—quite as much to the dissatisfaction of her own sweet olive branches as to Miss Bevan's, Miss and Master Fripp loudly declaring “they hardly cared to go; there never was any fun where ma was; she was such a coward, and would be afraid of their being drowned in every pool the tide had left!”

But once out on the sands, Agatha was glad to feel that only her three pupils were really under her care. She could walk apart, intent upon her own thoughts, or sit on the shelves of rock, watching Gertie and Ernest busy with their spades, and Rosamund hunting about for green and crimson sea-weed. Claude and Ralph wandered far away, looking for new specimens for the aquarium which had recently been set up at the Rectory. And Lady Caroline gathered her unruly brood about her, and tried to keep them at her side, while they, of course, preferred to paddle in shallow water, and jump over small creeks; and they splashed themselves from head to foot in securing a scuttering crab that took refuge under a large slime-covered stone, in the very centre of a great mud-pool. Altogether, Agatha was reminded of the story of the unfortunate Dorking hen, who took her little ones for an airing, when they all turned out to be ducklings instead of chickens.

It was a quiet, soft afternoon, rather warm and not bright; the sky was grey, but not with clouds that prognosticated rain; it was rather that pensive, shadowy grey which sometimes makes a landscape as fair as if steeped in roseate hues, or flecked with shifting slants and gleams of golden sunshine. The silvery cuffs, looked grand and beautiful; the Overdale sands were firm and dry; and far away were the crested waves, making their deep murmur at the entrance of the little bay. The breeze was delightful, and the distant sound of that “billowy anthem” came floating to the land, like the low, solemn cadences of cathedral music; and now and then there were other sounds—the laughter and the merry voices of the children, and the scream of the sea-birds flying across to the bold headland where their nests were built. And a small fishing-boat with its sails swelling was putting out from the great creek which wound away Agatha knew not whither, only she always kept clear of it, except at the very lowest state of the tides, because it was said to be very dangerous from its meandering and almost labyrinthine course, and its rapid filling as soon as the tide was halfway up.

Perhaps this would be her last visit to the shore, Agatha thought; perhaps she would never tread those cool, firm sands again, never more watch the sweeping flight of the white-winged birds towards those cliffs, never gaze from that day forth on the Cove where that happy pic-nic had taken place in the bright midsummer afternoon, when first she had begun to feel that Overdale was the happiest place in all the world. And she remembered the little hollow with its grey rock and yellow flowers, and the azure fairy bells, that seemed to ring their quiet chimes out of a full, serene content—the little sheltered nook, perched like an eyrie above the wide shore, and the restless waters—the spot where she had listened to Mr. Aylmer reading from the laureate's charmed pages; and she longed to see it once again before she bade farewell for years, it might be for ever, to those lovely and well-beloved scenes.

She was wondering whether it would do to separate entirely from Lady Caroline. She had not been within speaking distance since they had crossed the shingle together; and she was half resolving to call Gertie and Ernest from their sand castle-building, and set out for the Cove, when Rosamund, lately joined by Carrie, came up to know if they might go in that direction—Miss Aylmer counting upon certain kinds of sea-weeds generally found there, and Miss Fripp intent upon shells.

“I was just thinking of going there myself, Rosamund,” was Agatha's reply. “Call Ernest and Gertie; but,

Carrie, I cannot take you without your mamma's permission."

"But I want to go. I shall go!" pouted Carrie, whose temper invariably failed her the moment she found herself at all opposed.

"Run and ask your mamma if you may go," persisted Agatha. "I shall certainly not take *you* away without her permission."

Thus constrained to obedience, Carrie did run to her lady mamma, dashing and splashing through all the pools that came in her way, very much as if she wanted to calculate her distance "as the crow flies," as people say.

In two or three minutes all the Fripp party were in motion, and Agatha went to meet them and as she approached them she could hear all three children alternately pleading and wrangling with their mamma.

"I shall, I must, I will," were frequent, not to say continual phrases on the lips of these badly-trained young people.

"Miss Bevan, *how* far is it to this Cove the children talk about?" asked Lady Caroline, coming up rather out of breath, for the juveniles were urging her along without much ceremony.

"It is not very far," answered both Agatha and Rosamund; "may Carrie go?"

"Yes, I suppose she may; but Louis has taken it in his head to go too, and now here is Janie crying because I do not want her to walk such a distance! I tell her she can pick up shells here."

"There are none here!" sobbed Janie, as if her heart were breaking. "I don't care for these common things; I want pretty ones, and I *will* get them. I saw some last week, when papa took us under those rocks yonder."

"Yes," said Carrie, nodding sagaciously, "the best shells *are* there; these are nothing, only whelks, and stupid, ugly things not worth picking up. And, Rosamund, I saw some of that bright crimson sea-weed you say you want—lots of it! Papa put some in his pocket-book. Let us all go, mamma!"

Mamma had no idea of withstanding her darlings, and there was really no reason why they should not take that direction; and Rosamund explained that there could not be any danger, since the tide was not nearly up, and would not cut off the way by the shore till the last few minutes before flood; and even then there was a gentle ascent close at hand, up the rocks to the downs above, and that would be as good a road home as any.

And Rosamund was right. The Cove, as far as the tide was concerned, was as safe as anybody's own parlour; but at the next turning of the beach, after the next headland of grey towering rock, there was danger enough, and it was consequently not much frequented except by fishermen, and, in days gone by, by smugglers, who were reported to have run many a rich cargo in dark nights among the rocks and caverns of the mighty Endcliff Chine, the largest, highest, and most beetling line of crags along the shore for many a weary mile.

Everybody being already a little bemired and wet-footed, went willingly across the sands and shingle as directly as they could. There was only one creek to leap, not so wide as a street-gutter in a thunder-storm; only a few rocks to scramble over, and the Cove, with its white pebbly reaches and its silvery cliffs, was close at hand.

But the sea-weed Rosamund expected to secure was not to be discovered; at least, she succeeded in finding only one poor, half-withered specimen, washed up high and dry by some long past spring-tide; and Carrie looked in vain for the pink shells she had promised Janie; and Janie, of course, had a "tantrum," and reproached her cousin and sister for deluding her thither on false pretences. While Janie wept and called names, and lamented as if all the light of her little life was suddenly extinguished, and while Carrie scolded and sneered, and Louis exasperated both girls, and Lady Caroline did her best to compose Janie's outraged "nervous system," there was a shout heard from above, and looking up, Claude's head was to be seen, looking over a natural wall of rock, which bounded the path Rosamund had spoken of as leading to the open downs. Ralph Mornington was close behind, and Claude was shouting, "I say, Miss Bevan! Rosamund! here are such tufts of *Asplenium Marinum*, and a lot of creeping plants I never found before. Come along and botanise!"

"May I go?" asked Rosamund. "I have never seen the sea spleenwort growing, though I always knew we had it on our rocks."

Agatha gave permission, and then Gertie and Ernest entreated to go too. They cared nothing about the plants; but, childlike, they were a little tired of the shore, and attracted by the promise of some new wonder, they were eager to run up the rocky path and see what was to be seen, whether it was worth looking at or not.

"May we go?" they pleaded, as they watched Rosamund's ascent.

Agatha hesitated a moment, then she replied, "Yes, if you wish it very much; but I must go with you. I cannot trust such frisky little colts up the cliffs alone."

“Oh! don't let us take you off the shore,” said Gertie, with true concern. “I know you like being down here, and we are such *safe* climbers nothing will happen to us, dear Agatha.”

“I cannot let you go without me,” persisted Agatha. “And I have had enough of the shore; I am quite ready to turn back. Give me your hand, Gertie.”

But Lady Caroline interfered. “No need for you to go, Miss Bevan; Louise and Martha shall go with them;” and she called to the *bonne* and the young London nurse-girl, who were picking up small waifs of the ocean at a respectful distance. The fact being that she wished to keep Agatha under her eye for the present; she did not wish her to reach home before she was there herself; and, besides, she might meet Mr. Aylmer on the down, or in the green lane leading to the village, and who could say what mischievous explanations might not ensue! “No, no! safe bind, safe find,” thought Lady Caroline to herself “I am going to look after you, my young Woman, and you and I do not part company just yet.” At any rate she was quite determined that Agatha should not join the party above, and so get back to the Rectory before the others.

The matter might have been easily arranged by all of them following Rosamund and the young gentlemen; but both Carrie and Janie absolutely refused to quit the beach; Carrie was sure the pink shells were only a little farther on, for she had picked them up by handfuls when she was with her papa, and Janie stood sulkily silent, only screaming and struggling when her mamma took her hand and tried to lead her up the rock. It was quite clear that the party must divide, and Agatha again urged the necessity of herself accompanying her two younger pupils.

“Really you are very unaccommodating!” returned Lady Caroline, with a pretty little air of childish pettishness that Carrie often copied, with large exaggerations. “You must see I want you to stay with me and my children. They will go on, you know. They have such a spirit there is no curbing them. And surely if Louise takes Ernie by the hand, and Martha leads Gertie, there can be nothing to fear. Besides, I take the responsibility on myself. I will be answerable to Lady Jane; she will not scold, I daresay, if you linger here on the shore with me just one half-hour longer.”

“That is not it,” said Agatha; “I always feel, when we are quite away from home, that I never ought to lose sight of the younger children.”

“As a rule, of course you ought not; but in the present instance there is no occasion to make a fuss. Louise, take Master Aylmer by the hand, and keep fast hold of him till you are a good way over the downs, quite away from the cliffs. Martha, lead Miss Gertrude; I give her into your charge.”

And so it would have been concluded, only as the nurses and the little ones began the ascent Louis, with a whoop and a halloo, dashed past them, and Lady Caroline turned pale.

“Oh, my boy, my darling Louis, come back!” she cried, uplifting voice and hands in real distress; and truly her concern was not without occasion, for the heir of the Fripps was a very rash, foolish boy, and a very unlucky boy too, who generally fell into all the pitfalls he especially derided.

“Agatha!” she said, hurriedly, “I must go after that boy. He is so daring, so reckless! He will do dreadful things out of mere bravado. Take Carrie and Janie on for another half-mile or so along the shore—I trust them to you.”

And before Agatha could remonstrate, or even reply, Lady Caroline was running after her son; and she was left with the two little girls in the Cove, and nothing remained but to make the best of the situation. “Had we not better follow?” she said, presently. “It is getting late, and it promises to be a dull evening.”

“Follow, indeed!” cried Carrie, “when Janie and I have made up our minds to go after the shells! We may not have another opportunity, for we go home next week. Come, Miss Bevan, come, Janie! what is the use of standing here? We need not go much farther than that point close by.”

There was no help for it, Agatha thought; and, after all, it did not matter; the others going on home would explain their absence, and they would be back at the Cove in little more than half an hour. So she yielded to Carrie's representations and Janie's vehement tugs, and they set out for the point of rock beyond which the pink shells were said to be. Everybody knows how deceptive are sea-shore distances; and in this case the little party found they had sadly miscalculated the length of way. It took them, not a few minutes, as they had expected, but a good half-hour to reach the promontory whither they were bound.

Agatha was quite as much deceived as the children, and she was uncomfortable when she thought how late they must be before they could get back to Overdale. But perhaps Lady Jane would send the pony-carriage to meet them, and so it would not matter much; only Agatha wished that the Fripp children had been a little more obedient. She was getting very tired, and hungry too, for her luncheon had been a mere pretence, and Claude had

informed her that her breakfast was only suitable to a dyspeptic sparrow. But Carrie and Janie pressed forward, and in about ten minutes more they had doubled the point, and all that reach of the shore with which they were so familiar was hidden from their view. For a moment Agatha forgot her weariness, forgot all her troubles, forgot even the tiresome children who were quarrelling at her side—the cliffs were more beautiful than she had imagined; the sun shone now, and the crimson light of evening was on the silvery fretwork of the lofty crags.

Even Carrie exclaimed—

“Oh! isn't it like a castle, those broken-looking rocks, about half up? And, oh! what makes them look as if there were a great fire somewhere—is it the sun?”

The shells were there—the very pink shells Janie had coveted, but not so near the Point as Agatha could have wished. Also there were treasures of bright-coloured sea-weed, gay pebbles that the little girls thought must be precious stones, and many other charming things that had to be picked up and examined and commented on as they slowly passed along.

At last Carrie, who had filled her basket, announced that she was tired, and in her patronising way reminded Miss Bevan that it was “quite time to turn back and hasten home.” Quite time, indeed! for the minutes had flown, and the sun had sunk behind a low bank of heavy clouds, and a wailing wind was rising, while the roar of the sea began to be like thunder; the tide was certainly coming in very rapidly; and rather furiously too. Agatha felt timid, a sort of dread fell upon her all at once; the shore was very lonely; they had met no one since they started from the Cove, and not a living creature was in sight save the screaming sea birds wheeling round the rocks. The sun was quite gone now, not even a parting ray shone out across the deep dark waters; it seemed as if the September evening were very quickly closing in; a cold, livid light lay upon the desolate shore and on the angry sea, and the cliffs stood up weird and spectral, now that the rosy glow had faded, and left them of a ghostly whiteness, or rather of a pallid grey. The whole landscape looked as if it had suddenly died, Agatha thought, and she shivered quite as much from a nervous apprehension of she knew not what as from actual chilliness.

“Yes, indeed,” she answered quickly, “we have stayed quite too long; it will be dark before we get upon the downs. Come, children, we have a long way to go.”

Carrie was feeling a little scared, the noise of the sea frightened her, and she wanted to get away from it; she said nothing, but turned her face towards the point, and began to walk as fast as pebble and shingle would permit. But Janie burst out crying; she was very tired, she said, and she must rest a little before she could go any farther.

“Indeed, we must not stop now,” said Agatha, nervously. “Oh, Janie, do be good; we must get home, you know, and it will soon be dark.”

“Come along this moment,” cried Carrie, half frantically, “or we shall be drowned! I am sure the sea is coming up to us,”

Janie began to cry; her sister's white face frightened her, and the wilful child was really so tired that she could scarcely put one foot before another. She was not strong, and she was apt to give way suddenly under fatigue, and the nurse in attendance would have to carry her on such occasions, if other means of transit were not at hand. It did not matter much in London streets and parks, but it became a very serious affair indeed upon this wild, deserted shore. Lady Caroline had remembered all about it when she had hesitated to let Janie extend her walk to the Cove; but then the *bonne* and the under-nursemaid were in attendance, and she had quite forgotten the probability of the child “giving in,” as they called it, when she told Agatha to take her daughters on for another half-mile or so. It is true they had walked more than a mile and a half since they left the Cove; but then Agatha was powerless with both Carrie and Janie, and they had refused absolutely to turn back till they found the marvellous pink shells that lay beyond the point. Persuasions and commands were alike mere empty words, and, Agatha had not strength enough to drag one child in opposition to her wishes; and, had she made any such attempt, both would have resisted her and conquered.

“I wonder where we are!” said Agatha, as she tried to pacify Janie, holding her in her lap. “is there any road up those cliffs? But no, they are too precipitous!”

“There is no road,” replied Carrie. “Papa said there was none; it is *something* Chine—I forget the name. Oh, do come on; I am sure the sea gets very near.”

“Not Endcliff Chine?” said Agatha, anxiously. “Yes! that is it; I recollect now.”

Agatha rose and took Janie in her arms.

“I must carry you,” she said, hoarsely, “or we shall all be drowned. Don't struggle, Janie; don't you hear the

Overdale

sea?"

The truth was they could hear nothing else; they had to shout to each other when they spoke; and the tide was coming in terribly fast; there was no doubt about it. They hurried on, Agatha gasping for breath, and staggering under her unaccustomed load. Janie was passive from sheer sick terror, for all at once she comprehended her real danger. Carrie stumbled along, holding Agatha's dress, saying nothing, but pressing bravely on her way, though her knees trembled with fatigue and fright. Both Agatha and Carrie knew that if they could double the point they would be safe; the road beyond to the Cove would not be covered yet, for it was not as yet high tide.

Breathlessly they hastened on; but before they reached the point the waves met them. Agatha dashed on, hoping it was only shallow water. If it were only up to the knees, she did not care; she meant to carry Janie through first, and then come back for the other child.

A few steps, and that hope was at an end; the water grew deeper and deeper, and over the rocks which they must cross a tremendous sea was raging. There was nothing left but to turn back, and try if they could climb the cliff for a little way, so as to be above high water—mark till the tide went down.

Chapter 24. PERILOUS CIRCUMSTANCES

Agatha struggled on a little longer, and then her strength failed her, and she was obliged to set Janie on her feet. The child did not object, for her fright had reduced her to an unwonted state of docility; and for several minutes the little party pressed on their weary way, close under the rocks, anxiously looking for some refuge from the waves, which were fast gaining upon them, leaving indeed but a very narrow path between the surf and the great wall of cliff, which rose perpendicularly to a height of several hundred feet above the shore.

No one spoke, but Janie cried quietly; it was quite as much as she could do to keep up with the others, and at every step her difficulty increased. Agatha saw plainly that the child was really in extremity, and could scarcely put one foot before another; and yet if she tried to carry her again she feared that she might herself sink down exhausted, if not actually fainting; and then, humanly speaking, there would be no hope for any of the three. Oh, how eagerly she and Carrie looked for some little nook or ledge to which they might climb and be safe till the angry waves went back again! But it was growing so dark that they had to strain their eyes in order to discern the outline of the rocks; and more than once they were deceived, fancying they had found something like a path by which they could ascend for at least a few feet above the beach itself.

At last they saw what looked like a small cave, and close by were some irregularities in the cliff; up which they hoped they could scramble—nothing at all that could be called a pathway, and yet a series of tiny hollows and projections that seemed to promise them a footing, insecure enough, and yet not quite impracticable.

Agatha knew that it was hazardous, but she did not hesitate; already the white-crested waves were breaking over their feet, and it was their only chance.

“Come, children,” she said, “we must try it; there is nothing else to be done.” And even as she spoke, one impetuous wave, rushing far ahead of its predecessors, broke over them, wetting them very thoroughly, as if to convince them how imminent was the danger from which they were endeavouring to escape.

“Oh, we shall be drowned!” gasped Carrie; “oh, the dreadful, dreadful sea! Oh, Janie, I wish we had turned back when Miss Bevan wanted! It was very naughty of us, and now we are going to die!”

“Hush! do not terrify Janie!” was Agatha's quiet reply. She was still calm and self-possessed, though heart and limbs were alike failing her; she dreaded lest her courage should desert her, and leave her incapable of making any necessary effort. And she had to think of these helpless children; for their sakes she must strive for fortitude and self-control. So she said—

“Do not terrify Janie! We could not carry her up the rocks, you know; we can help her, but she must trust chiefly to her hands and feet, and she must try to be a good, brave, sensible little girl! Wait one moment, Carrie; let us ask God to help us, let us commend ourselves to Him!”

The children understood her, but the hoarse raving of the flood prevented them from hearing the simple prayer.

“Oh, my heavenly Father! *Thou* seest our fearful peril. Help us now; and if it be Thy will, save us from the sea. Guide our feet, and suffer us not to fall. I put my trust in Thee, let me not be confounded. I look to Thee, for Thou only can save us.”

And then she sprang up the rock, and found the way less difficult than she had anticipated: first she drew Janie up after her, and then with very little assistance Carrie followed. But they were still very far from the cave, which was much higher up than they had imagined, and they were certainly not yet above high-water mark, and the spray still reached them as they stood, half breathless, upon the narrow ledge, which scarcely afforded them mere standing room.

“We must try again,” said Agatha, when she had recovered breath; “we must get higher, or the first great wave will wash us down. See, here are steps. Now, Janie, put one foot where my hand is, and give me the other hand; do just as I tell you, and take your time. There, that will do; the next bit of way is easier, and here is a nice square piece of rock, that would hold six or eight people. Now, Carrie, stretch out your hand; there, we may rest a little.”

And very thankful they were to rest, for they were trembling and panting with the exertion of the steep ascent; and they were nearly hoarse with shouting, so as to be heard by each other above the roaring of the sea, and the waves seemed gathering strength and fury every minute. For the moment they were quite safe, the spray did not touch them; but it was not yet high water, and the tides were still at the spring; besides, it was almost the time of

the Equinox. It would certainly be only prudent to attempt to gain the little cave, where certainly they would be secure, no matter to what extent the tide might rise. Also they would be somewhat sheltered from the wind, which was now blowing keenly upon them, chilling their very bones, as they stood shivering in their wet, clinging garments; and the longer they could keep moving about, at any expense of toil and fatigue, so much the better.

But this time resolution was fruitless; and effort all in vain. The little platform they had gained was hemmed in on two sides by smooth, inaccessible rocks, that presented no single unevenness on which the most experienced climber could plant his foot; the other two sides were open to the sea, one side shelving down abruptly to the shore, the other being that by which they had with such exceeding pains reached their present place of refuge.

“We can go no farther,” said Agatha, at length, when she had carefully examined the spot and, its surroundings. “Let us sit down and try to be patient; the tide must be nearly at its height.”

“I heard uncle say it was high water about seven this morning,” said Carrie; “what time is it now?”

“I cannot see the fingers of my watch—it is too dark; but it must be past seven, judging from the time of sunset.”

“It seems a long while since we saw the red glow on the cliffs,” sighed Carrie. “And, oh! Miss Bevan, how are we to get down again from this place? We could not see now, and it gets darker and darker every minute, and the moon does not give much light yet,—besides, it is so cloudy. Shall we have to stay here till morning?”

Stay there for at least ten hours! Agatha shuddered, for she knew that if they did they must die as certainly as if they had remained below and been carried away by the surge. They could never bear the exposure, drenched as they already were; and if they survived the night, which seemed almost impossible in the case of the children, who were both delicate, there would be little hope of their recovery from such illness as must inevitably ensue. They would be missed at home; indeed, even now they were missed, doubtless, and anxiety was awakened, and some one would be seeking them; and Lady Caroline would know in what direction to send those who went in search. But no one would be able to get round the point for several hours, and then it would be quite dark, and the noise of the sea would drown any voice; neither could Agatha count upon being able to make any further effort, for already she was growing benumbed, and a strange torpor, which seemed like a mingling of faintness and drowsiness, was fast stealing over her. She tried to rouse herself, however, and drew the children closer to her. Carrie clasped her hand convulsively, but Janie pressed heavily against her, and neither spoke nor stirred. Agatha was afraid she had fainted; but the only thing she could do was to fold her own wet cloak round her and hold her more closely in her arms. The little girl's hands and face were icy cold, and Agatha, as she held her to her bosom, could not feel quite certain that she breathed.

And so the time wore on, and the tide still rose, for again the spray had reached them; and now was reawakened the terror lest, after all, they might not be above high-water mark! One strong wave, and they would be swept away with the wild, stormy billows, for they could not cling to the smooth rock, and indeed they had little strength left them for any resistance they might wish to make.

“And this is the end, then,” said Agatha to herself, when, after sitting on the platform for nearly an hour, hope was extinguished, and the last gleam of physical courage died out. “Yesterday I thought I had a long, sad, weary life before me; this very morning I was bracing myself to confront the prospect of lonely years and separation from those who are most dear to me. Now it is all over. God is good to His weak child, and will not leave her to struggle on unfriended and alone. I am not afraid; my trust is in Thee, O Saviour, in Thee who hast walked the troubled waves, and knowest all our feebleness, all our need, all our sorrow! I commit my soul to Thee, my Saviour: take me to Thine eternal rest.”

And like a dream, a swift and vivid dream, Agatha seemed to live through all her past life again. Her thoughts went back to her earliest childhood, to the first weeks and months at Sunny Lawn, to the last evening she had spent there, to the happy days she had spent on first coming to Overdale, to the pic-nic in the Cove, to the evening when Mr. Aylmer had given her the “rose celestial,” to all her doubts and fears and miserable uncertainties, and to the agony of the past night when, for a little while, she felt as if death would be indeed a blessing.

But the love of life is strong, and they who in their despair call most wildly for death, generally shrink back appalled if the cold shadow of the grave fall on them for a moment. It is well that it is so. God gives us this natural clinging to life for wise and good purposes. When the right time comes, when He wills to give His beloved sleep, when He would call them to serve Him in His own bright kingdom of glory, He gently loosens the ties which bind

them to earth. He unwinds the threefold cord, and disengages the tendrils of the heart, and the freed spirit wings its way in confidence and joy to the presence of Him who redeemed it and preserved it, and now summons it to be with Him where He is. Oh, it is well—it is mercifully ordered that we cannot die when we like!

In youth, or it may be in middle age, some great sorrow falls upon us; the sun sets, it is night; all is dim, and cold, and spectral, and the world is emptied of all delight; and in our impatience we long for death to end our sadness, or to take us where there is no more weariness and pain, and where, perhaps, our best and only loved ones are gone before. And death will not come: we cannot lie down and weep ourselves away, as in our misery we vainly long to do. God knows better. He holds our future in His hand, and He is keeping in store for us bright, or if not exactly bright, yet calm years of happy usefulness and holy toil, and blessed, sweet content. As the days go on, and new hopes are born, new interests spring up, a new radiance brightens the path that we thought most dark and desolate for ever: once more life is sweet, and the light of the sun and stars is dear to us, and we are glad God did not listen to the foolish prayer for death, for had He done so we should have missed the full cup of joy that in later years he has placed in our hands, bidding us drink and be satisfied. Richest blessings are not always given first; the first half of life is not always the sweetest or the best. Blind are we, alike in our confidence and our despair!

And Agatha, though she was willing to go, still felt that life and youth were precious, and she would fain have lingered a little longer—only a little longer, that she might see once more the dear faces that even now were pale with anxious fear on her account; that she might clasp once more familiar hands, and look into beloved eyes once more, only once more, and say, “Farewell, darlings! it is but for a little while!”

But no fond voices were nigh, no firm, warm clasp, no tender glance; only the night wind swept wildly about her, and the blinding spray dashed in her face, and the sea roared like thunder through the impenetrable darkness.

She grew wearier and colder; her grasp of the two children grew weaker; she began actually to dream, and she fancied herself in the school-room at the Rectory, the fire burning brightly, the curtains drawn, and the dear Rosamund and Gertie and little Ernest gathered around the hearth. And then she was in Fernydell again with Lady Caroline; and the little spring began to rise and overflow, and she turned to fly, and it had become a great, wide lake; and the waters rose higher and higher, so that escape was impossible; and with a shriek she awoke to find the rock dripping wet, and the waves, as it would seem, lapping and breaking against the cliff, not very far below the platform on which they crouched. Again she tried to rouse herself fully, but it was in vain; her faculties, as well as her limbs, were growing benumbed, and a death-like sensation—it might be either sleep or exhaustion—was fast stealing over her. For a few minutes she struggled, trying to wring fine water out of her dress, and endeavouring to think connectedly; but it was all in vain; the folds of her skirts fell from her stiffened fingers, and she could not think—all was vague, shadowy, and unreal. And by—and—by all sense deserted her, and she knew no more, as leaning back against the rock, with her arms still round the unconscious children, she and they seemed to be sinking into the cold sleep of death.

Meanwhile the rest of the party reached home, and soon afterwards dispersed to dress for dinner. Lady Jane had no idea that Agatha and the two little girls had not returned with the others, and Mr. Aylmer and Mr. Vallance were shut up in the library. Lady Jane was sitting by her own dressing-room fire, waiting for the first dinner bell, which ought to ring at half-past six, when her sister, pale and breathless, rushed into the chamber.

“Oh, Jane! Agatha has not come home with those children yet, and it is nearly dark!”

“What children? I saw Rosamund and Gertie an hour ago. Is not Miss Bevan in her room?”

“My children! my own Carrie and Janie!” and then Lady Caroline explained as lucidly as in her great distress she could. Lady Jane listened all aghast.

“Oh, Caroline! how could you let those children have their way? And how could you send poor Agatha with them? If they passed the Point, I fear we shall never see any of them in life again. Oh, Caroline!”

For about three minutes Lady Jane seemed stupefied, and she scarcely heard her sister's lamentations, then she sprang up, saying—

“Let us go instantly to Eustace.”

She entered the library without the usual ceremony of knocking, and told her tale without the smallest preface.

“Beyond the Point!” exclaimed Mr. Aylmer; “if they are under Endcliff Chine nothing can save them; we cannot even get to them, except by boats.”

His face was ashy pale, and his voice trembled as he spoke; even the stern, cold Vallance was moved—he

could not be calm and impassive as he thought of Agatha's young beauty, swept away by the pitiless dark sea, to be seen no more on earth. Of the children he scarcely thought at all.

In five minutes the whole household was alarmed, and some blamed Lady Caroline, and some Louis, and Lady Caroline herself blamed Agatha.

But her husband said, sternly, "Hush! Caroline. You should have taught your children obedience! It seems to me you forced this unfortunate young lady to her fate. You compelled her to go to a part of the shore of which she knew nothing, and you and I know neither Carrie nor Janie would turn back till they chose. You have trained them very badly. I know what Endcliff Chine is!"

For once in her life Lady Caroline was mute, and terror-stricken and conscious-stricken she cowered before her husband's just rebuke; while the rector and Vallance, Mr. Fripp and Ralph Mornington, set forth with two of the men-servants on a quest that seemed well-nigh hopeless. They were joined by several of the villagers, and they all hurried down to the Chine—not Endcliff Chine, you understand, but the fishing village commonly called the Chine, immediately below Overdale, where were the nearest boats. The sympathies of the fishermen were instantly aroused; they all knew the dangers of the Endcliff shore, and they all sympathised with the rector and Mr. Fripp. Two boats were soon manned, and the fisher wives proffered blankets and a little store of whisky.

"I have brought brandy with me," said Valiance, in his deep, sad voice; "it *may* save her life—their lives, I mean, if we find them."

The boats put off with lanterns and torches ready to be lighted, and they rowed vigorously towards the Point, but notwithstanding all the haste they made, it was almost nine o'clock when they landed on the beach below the Endcliff rock. Of course there was no sign of Agatha and the children; and in vain the boat's crew shouted and waved lights. Nothing was to be seen but the white Chine glimmering in the faint starlight, for the clouds had rolled away, and nothing was to be heard but the plunges of the receding tide drawing backward from the land, and the melancholy moan of the wind among the crevices of the cliffs.

"We shall never find them," said Mr. Fripp, in accents of dismay.

"Oh, my Agatha! my Agatha!" was Mr. Aylmer's silent moan; and bitterly he reproached himself, for had he spoken according to his own intentions, and made Agatha his betrothed, she would not have been permitted to wander away with these two wayward children, nor have been left to the tender mercies of Lady Caroline. And up and down the shore they went, still shouting, and calling, and hoisting high the blazing torches, and waving the lanterns; and they were answered by a signal far out at sea, for a rocket suddenly shot up into the air; but no response came from the lonely shore, and there seemed little hope of discovering what they sought till the morning's light—if *then*; for gradually all present began to believe that the hapless girl and her charges had been swept away by the advancing tide, which they could perceive had been unusually high.

It was Mr. Fripp at last who picked up a little white handkerchief, marked "Janie Fripp"; Janie had dropped it as she scrambled up the rock, and it had clung to one of the sharp points of the crag.

"There is something like a path here," said Mr. Vallance, peering with a lantern; "they would try to escape this way. Light more torches, and place the cresset immediately in front of where I stand."

He was quickly obeyed, and the red light shone luridly on the face of the white cliff, showing its crevices and projections for a few yards above the level of the shore.

"There is something on that ledge of rock," whispered Mr. Aylmer to his brother-in-law; he was too agitated to speak aloud. "There is something black on the white cliff. It is Agatha's cloak!"

Without another word he sprang up, and soon reached the platform where Agatha and the children lay, all unconscious that deliverance was so near. Vallance and Mr. Fripp followed, and Mr. Aylmer gave a child into the arms of each; but he took Agatha from the rock himself, though he was obliged to call Ralph and one of the servants to his aid before he could safely remove her from her place of refuge.

Then came the question, was life extinct? Vallance, who had some knowledge in medical science, decided that it was not. All three were wrapped in dry cloaks and blankets, and Mr. Aylmer wetted Agatha's lips with brandy. Janie even swallowed a drop or two; she had been so sheltered by Agatha that she had really suffered the least. Then they carried the three senseless firms to the boats; it was still the quickest way of getting to the Chine village, and there was no want of sturdy rowers. Mr. Aylmer held Agatha in his arms all the way, and he carried her himself into the nearest cottage when they landed at the Chine; but he had little hope that his burden was a living one. Janie had spoken, and Carrie breathed perceptibly; but Agatha showed no sign of returning

consciousness.

Chapter 25. WEDDING BELLS

After that memorable night there were many sad days of watching and of anxious fear at the Rectory. The children, whom one might have expected to be the greater sufferers, after a day or two of rather alarming illness, began speedily to rally; and in about a week only Carrie's pale cheeks and Janie's nervous tremors were left to excite the apprehensions of their devoted mother. And Carrie loved to go over the terrible experience, and to dilate upon her alarm, and describe how the sea roared, and the spray dashed up, and the tide rose, and rose, and Pose, with all the spirit, and with somewhat of the graphic power of a professional novel-writer. While Janie shuddered if anyone referred to the tide, and she trembled at night as she listened to the distant murmur of the waves; and nothing could induce her to give the smallest account of her feelings when she found herself with the water rising about her, and the all but inaccessible Endcliff Chine towering high above her head.

But Agatha did not fare so well. As sometimes occurs in these and similar cases, the more delicate constitutions were the least injured, while the stronger physical nature seemed sinking under the sufferings produced by exposure and excitement. No doubt Agatha's mental distress, and all the harass she had undergone for several days before the Endcliff Chine disaster, had very much to do with the serious and almost fatal malady that ensued. However that might be, it seemed for nearly a fortnight as if all her earthly trials were nearly ended. In vain were physicians summoned and nurses multiplied, in vain was the tenderest care, in vain were the baby members of the Fripp family peremptorily banished in order to insure the most unbroken quiet, in vain was medicine, and for awhile it seemed as if prayers were all in vain; for hour by hour, and day by day, Agatha grew worse, till the physician ominously shook his head, and to all inquiries replied, "Miss Bevan is very ill, very ill indeed; I cannot give much hope, but she has youth on her side, red a naturally sound *physique*; and while there is life there is hope! I dare not say more, Mr. Aylmer."

And with such faint comfort Mr. Aylmer was compelled to sustain the load of anxiety that pressed upon his heart, while he waited from day to day for the change which must come, and blamed himself more and more that he had listened to Vallance instead of obeying the impulses of his own breast.

Prayers were offered at Agatha's bedside of which she knew nothing; she lay for a long time perfectly unconscious, in a sort of stupor, that evidently resulted from some heavy pressure on the brain. They could not get her to take any nourishment; only a little stimulant could be from time to time administered; and it was with extreme difficulty that even the smallest quantity of the medicines prescribed were swallowed. Then the strange death-like trance was broken; the girl began to speak, to mutter incoherent sentences, to toss about her arts, and to cry bitterly and hysterically.

Soon it became evident that delirium was setting in, that fever was laying his fiery hand on the fair young brow, and flushing to crimson the erewhile faded cheeks, and conjuring up before the tortured mind a whole array of ghastly forms and horrible imaginations. The wildest delusions seemed to haunt her fancy, while at other times she was going over the scenes and experiences of the last few days, with variations that were at once ludicrous and painful. Now she was talking to Mr. Aylmer about Church history and Church government; anon she was quoting "Froude's Remains," interlarded with scraps from other authors. Then she was in Fernydell, telling Lady Caroline that she had no right to interfere, that she did not speak plainly, and that she was being compelled by her ladyship to accuse herself; and then she raved about Beatrice Leveson, though not coupling her name with Mr. Aylmer's, and calling piteously to Roberta to come and save her from being drowned in the lily-pond by Lady Caroline. And again she was refusing Mr. Bell, saying—

"No, no! indeed it cannot be! I can never love you; it would be wicked to marry you, would it not? Don't be vexed; I shall never marry any one!"

And once more she was under the rocks of Endcliff, crying out—

"How they roar! the dreadful, dreadful waves! Oh, the poor children! And I shall be drowned too—poor Agatha!—poor little Agatha, as they used to call me long ago at Sunny Lawn. Will they care at Sunny Lawn? Will they care at Overdale? Will *he* care when he sees me quite cold and dead—drowned! *drowned!* like poor Ophelia? only she drowned herself, and I did not, you know; I would not be so wicked, because God always knows best. Yes, He knows best, and that is why He is letting me be drowned. It will be so cool deep down in

those purple waters, and so quiet. But will the sea always moan so? Its moaning wearies me; it sounds like my own heart. Don't look so hard and angry, Lady Caroline; I think I have saved the children. And I will go away from Overdale, indeed I will. I will obey you, for I suppose it is only right, but please do not tell any one about it. Only if you would let me speak to Lady Jane! Oh! my dear, dear Lady Jane, I cannot leave you—but I must! Yes, the tide is getting higher; it will soon be over. Shall I taste the brine on my lips, I wonder? No; it is not Church ordinances that must save my soul; Miss Frere was right. Oh, Mr. Aylmer! I cannot see with you; I wish I could. But I must trust in *Christ* alone, else where shall I be; what will become of me, now that I am going to die? Yes, I am going to *Him*. I trust *Him*. I commend any soul to *Him*. I believe in the Holy Catholic Church and in the Communion of Saints. What do they say in church? What did St. Chrysostom say? 'Granting us in this world knowledge of Thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting.' *Thy truth*, not man's truth, dear Mr. Aylmer! Life everlasting! that is beyond the sea. In heaven there is 'no more sea'; the Bible says so. I am glad of that now, though once, do you know, I was so sorry. I thought I should not like to miss the sea and its grand music, but now I am glad, for the sea is cold, and strong, and pitiless, and it roars and moans. There, it is coming; the tide is on us. Do not fear, children, God is with us. You know the sailors say that heaven is as near by water as by land, and we are going by water, Carrie; it is all one how we get there. Lord Jesus, take us safely home. Into Thy hath I commend my spirit."

And so the poor child raved on ceaselessly but not violently. Only now and then, when she believed herself to be in conversation with Lady Caroline, did she evince an angry spirit. Her delirium was quite in keeping with her sweet nature; it was sad and pathetic, but always, or nearly always, gentle. There was a touching tone of resignation even in her reproaches, and she seemed to blame herself severely for some fault at which Lady Jane could only guess, for some measure of reticence Agatha retained all through her illness. People have been known to guard a weighty secret through all the agonies and madness of brain fever, to touch upon it cursorily, to hover, as it were, on the brink of disclosure, and yet tell nothing which could reveal the truth, even to affection's quickly-sensitive perception. So now Agatha said nothing of any account about Mr. Aylmer; even in her supposed replies to Lady Caroline she spoke in enigmas, and Roberta, who shared Lady Jane's watch, imagined that the constant reference she made to leaving Overdale had no foundation except in the visionary world in which the sufferer was living.

But Lady Jane learnt much, and from Lady Caroline she forced something very like a confession. For once the meeker nature of the elder sister held sway over the imperious temper of the younger, and Lady Caroline Fripp, already blamed by her husband, and conscience-stricken as she heard of poor Agatha's delirious ravings, declared herself to be in error. She had acted for the best, she said, but she had made a mistake; she earnestly hoped Agatha would recover and be happy in her own way. And having said so much, she was in haste to depart, and only waited till the children were declared on competent authority to be in a fit state to travel to put between herself and the scene of her discomfiture all the country that lay between the metropolis and Overdale.

At last came the crisis. Lady Caroline had the grace to wait till it was over. She had a heart in spite of all her worldliness and her worldly prudence, and she deeply regretted the part she had taken, and dreaded the memories that would haunt her if Agatha should die. She would never, she believed, forget the girl's pale, reproachful face as they parted at the head of Fernydell. The crisis passed, and Agatha was safe. She would not die, though it might be long before she recovered her full strength; indeed, it was hinted that the perfect health of past days might never be restored, and truly, though her loveliness was undiminished, or rather, as some thought, increased, its character was changed, it was more refined and more *spirituelle* than ever, but the brilliant bloom that had been one of the chief charms of her girlhood was lost for ever.

Lady Jane sought her brother to tell him that the worst was over, that now Agatha needed only tender and careful nursing, and under God's blessing she would recover. And Mr. Aylmer, who had borne up bravely all through the trying days of suspense and dread, gave way entirely at his sister's announcement, and Lady Jane received from him such a measure of confidence as had not fallen to her share since the days of their early youth.

"I have made up my mind," he said, at length. "At any cost I will marry Agatha; that is, if it is God's will that she should recover."

"There will be no great cost. Of course people will say it is a *mésalliance*; but you never cared much for the world's 'on dits.'"

"I care neither for its foolish blame nor its yet more foolish praise. But, Jane, I had covenanted with myself

never to marry again; I had quite resolved to keep free of all those ties which bind us so closely to earthly objects; I had, as I believed, given myself to the Church, unreservedly, as her dutiful and obedient son, and—”

“Forgive me, Eustace, but it is God who says 'My son, give Me thy heart.' You are not required to give yourself in this way to any Church. The vows you will pronounce, if you make Agatha your wife, are vows hallowed of God, and disallowed only by men who would endeavour

“To wind themselves too high
For sinful man beneath the sky.”

There is but one step between an enforced celibacy and the cloister. God has blessed holy matrimony; it is His own institution, and I nowhere find any special benediction pronounced upon celibacy, except, of course, under peculiar circumstances.”

“I think I could find you some passages which bear upon the subject, but I do not care to discuss it now. I know that God has made us with social affections, and we may honour Him by exercising them as well as by devoting ourselves to lives of solitude and self-denial. But there are natures that seem to soar above the flickering light of earthly love—exalted souls, who find in the love of God and in the service of His Church satisfying depths which can never be exhausted, a repose such as thy who are content to give themselves to the creative cannot even comprehend. And I had hoped that such repose would be mine, that I should go forward on the path I had chosen, unshackled and unburdened by the weight of those intense affections and those sweet cares which keep the soul from God.”

“Oh, Eustace! Eustace! rather they lift the soul to Him! Love, such love as God blesses, is not idolatry. We need not, we must not, forget the Giver of the gift; but surely our hearts must rise in thankfulness towards Him who bestows the treasure. Every time we rejoice in our happiness we should praise Him from whom it is derived; and praise Him, as our 'Thanksgiving' so beautifully says, 'not only with our lips, but in our lives.’”

“I will so try to take my treasure, Jane; and I trust I shall not sin. I will speak to Agatha as soon as you tell me I may; you do not think she will reject me?”

“I do not think she will. I believe she cares for you, though of course I have never spoken to her on the subject.”

“If it be so,” said Mr. Aylmer, “it will be best, if Agatha consents, to let our engagement be as short as possible. Having once resolved, I shall not be at rest till she is actually mine. You do not yourself object to Agatha, Jane?”

“I am very fond of Agatha, but I do wish you had chosen some one older, some one more experienced, to be the mother of your children. Still, Agatha is a girl of no common mind, and she has more influence over Rosamund than has any other person except myself. The world will make a nine-days' wonder, of course, at your marrying your governess, but that is of very little consequence.”

“It is of no consequence. Agatha is essentially a gentlewoman, and her being a governess has not, to my mind, placed her in a station inferior to that in which she was born. Beauty without good sense and refinement would have had no attractions for me. Of course, I am not insensible to so much loveliness. I am not, like Vallance, far removed from an appreciation of such charms; yet I could never care for any woman who was not fair in spirit as well as fair of face, and much less should I desire to make her my wife. But all things being equal, mind and soul and face being alike lovely, I confess I cannot resist. Besides, Jane, I have been solitary all my life, and this girl I feel will love me, as once, long years ago, I dreamed I might be loved when I became a husband. I can—I think I can—ask God to bless me in seeking her hand.”

“There is no reason why you should not. But remember, Eustace, you are not to say one word till I give—you permission. She is to be kept as quiet as possible at present. I really hope she will forget that you are in the house.”

“I am willing she should forget me, if it is to be for her good. Nay, I could, I hope, resign her instantly, if I thought that by uniting her lot with mine I should take the least iota from her happiness, or from her well-being; and yet I will confess to you a strange sort of foreboding steals over me at times, an apprehension that unhappiness will come of this marriage.”

“There is one thing to be said: Agatha and you think differently on religious subjects.”

“That is nothing; she can have no settled views, and she is docile and tractable in the extreme. Her rule of faith is sound, so far as it goes, but she has not been well trained. We shall work together; and she will recognise in me

the Divine authority which as a duly-ordained priest I hold, and she will learn readily. I fear nothing on that head, Jane."

"There is a root of pure faith deep down in Agatha's heart, which will flourish, I believe, in spite of all the dogmas of the Anglican Church."

"We had better not get upon the question of the so-called dogmas. There are points, you know, my dear sister, in which I grieve to say we widely differ. Let us leave them. I can only hope that some day you will own the authority of the true priesthood, and yield an unquestioning obedience to the wife of our holy mother Church."

Agatha did not improve very fast; for the last two or three days her recovery was as decided and as rapid as could be wished; after that she made but little progress, one day being stronger and the next weaker; and her spirits varying even more apparently than her health.

Lady Jane began to be anxious, and she came at last to the conclusion that Agatha was still distressed in mind; and that matters must be brought to an issue before anything like actual convalescence could be hoped for.

"Agatha," she said one day, when the invalid was more languid and listless than usual, "when you were ill you were always talking about going away from Overdale. You had not really thought of it, had you?"—

"Indeed I had. And oh! dear Lady Jane, there is so much I wish to say to you. I think when I have told you what is in my mind you too will think I am better far away from Overdale. Do not think that am ungrateful; indeed I love you very, very much; and I shall always—"

But here Agatha broke down; her voice was choked with sobs, and for a few minutes Lady Jane let her weep on. They were not unkindly tears, she thought; and they would relieve her overburdened heart.

As indeed it proved, for presently she became calmer, and then Lady Jane said—

"My dear, I believe I know something of what you wish to say to me. You need not fear, my dear child; rather to think of me as your elder sister. But we will have our conversation to-morrow, or perhaps late this evening, if when the time comes you still wish to confide in me."

That afternoon Agatha, for the first time since her illness, found herself left alone. It was a sweet and fair October afternoon, and she lay back in her easy-chair gazing out over the deep blue sea, and over the woods, all gorgeous with the rich colouring of "St. Luke's little summer." The sun shone resplendently, lighting up the broad landscape with its mellow golden beams; the air was soft and warm; a redbreast, near at hand, was singing his "cheerful, tender strain," and the church clock chimed the quarters in low, musical tones that seemed to die away in echoes upon the gentle western wind. And, listening to the redbreast's lay, Agatha thought of one of her favourite verses

Sweet messenger of calm decay,
Saluting sorrow as you may,
As one still bent to make or find the best,
In these and in this quiet mead
The lesson of sweet peace I read,
Rather in all to be resigned than blest.

And she was beginning to brace herself to meet again the difficulties that had beset her path before that afternoon's expedition to Endcliff Chine. Life was granted to her; she was not to die yet; doubtless God had work for her to do, and in His strength she must do it. Her reflections were interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Aylmer, and he seemed nearly as nervous as Agatha herself could be; but there was that in his look, as he seated himself by her, that suddenly cleared away the shadows that had been gathering round her ever since the day of the Chennery Park *fete*.

Without one word, even without a pressure of the hand, she knew that she was loved.

"Agatha," he said presently, "my sister tells me you have some thought of leaving us."

"I had; I thought it best."

"But I do not think it best. Agatha, dearest, I have been longing for days to ask you if you could not be content to make Overdale your home, your own home as long as your life on earth shall last. Will you be my wife?"

A thought came unbidden, and drove back the blush of sweet confusion, and changed the throb of joy into one of pain. What if Mr. Aylmer knew her weakness; and out of pity, out of the great kindness and generosity of his nature, asked her to marry him?

"Are you sure that you love me?" she asked, in a low, tremulous voice.

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“I never truly loved any woman before,” was the answer. “My first marriage was not one of affection. You have all my heart, Agatha; I love you as I did not know till a few weeks ago that it was in my nature to love. You will not let it be in vain?”

Two hours afterwards Lady Jane came to see how they had arranged their affairs, and she found that all was settled.—She agreed with her brother it would be better on many accounts not to defer the marriage, so it was fixed for a very early period. Agatha was to go to Sutton Magna and stay with the Galbraiths, and be married from the house of one of her aunts, if they would receive her, as she did not doubt they would, now that her fortunes were so decidedly in the ascendancy.

She was right; they welcomed the future Mrs. Aylmer with open arms, and Mrs. Horace and Mrs. Alexander all but quarrelled as to who should give the usual wedding breakfast; Mrs. Horace, of course, finally, prevailed.

And one fine, bright winter's day Agatha and Mr. Aylmer stood side by side in the grand old parish church of Sutton Magna, and the words were spoken which made them man and wife. And it was said of them, as of every other married pair whose union is consecrated by the service of the Church, “Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.” And the bells rang merrily.

Agatha never dreamed of aught save *death* parting her from him who was now her own husband, from him who loved her as deeply, and truly, and fervently as man ever loved. She was very happy; only when Eustace spoke of taking her to France she begged not to go where there was any chance of meeting Mr. Vallance.

Mr. Vallance happily was not in France; several years elapsed before he and the rector of Overdale met again. When once more their intercourse was renewed, he was delighted with Mrs. Aylmer.

Chapter 26. SIX YEARS LATER

A young gentleman was taking a very late breakfast one wild, dark Friday morning, in the dull and drear month of November. He looked comfortable enough, in a lounging-chair drawn up to a glowing fire, his splendidly-slipped feet upon the fender, the *Times* in his hand, and the fragrant odour of fresh-made coffee slowly diffusing itself through the softly-carpeted and well-curtained room. The storm was raging without, the wind roaring in the pines, and blustering round the grey church tower, while thick walls and closely-shut windows could not keep out the hoarse murmur of the waves beating upon the rocky shore. But within all was warm, and bright, and peaceful; and the very pretty girl who was presiding at the young man's morning meal looked the personification of innocent, youthful happiness. You have seen her before; but then she was a little girl of ten years old, the pet, the play-thing, the "Pussy-cat" of the household; now she is turned sixteen, and is as great a darling as ever, and still answers to the name of "Pussy," and still is everybody's joy and torment; but she is a young lady about to be introduced, and called by servants and visitors Miss Gertrude Aylmer.

The young man, who is extremely handsome for all his gloomy and discontented air, is also an old acquaintance; he is Claude Aylmer, the eldest son of the rector of Over-dale, and he is in his twentieth year, and you shall hear what is making him so cross and out of humour.

"I say, Gertie, I never heard anything so preposterous in my life! No devilled kidneys, and no frizzled ham, because it is Friday! Is not one day of the week as good as another?"

"It is of no use frowning in that way, Claude; it is no fault of mine. I would order you anything you liked if it were of any use."

"How long has this been going on?"

"All the summer, more or less; since last February, in fact. It began while you were at Cannes." I must just mention here that Claude Aylmer had been very ill in the preceding year, and that, early in the winter, his chest showing signs of weakness, he was paced off by order of a celebrated physician to the south of France, where he remained till the summer. Being then perfectly recovered, he had joined a party of Oxford fends who were going to Switzerland, and their tour was extended into Germany, so that Claude was absent from his father's house about twelve months, and he had only been at home a few days—not a full week, indeed—when he fell foul of his breakfast, and pined for comestibles which were not forthcoming.

"I have no patience with you men," resumed Miss Gertrude, putting back her bright masses of golden hair, "You think so much of what you have to eat and drink. I like good things well enough, I confess, if they come in my way; but then, if they do not, I never care about it. I made an excellent meal two hours ago on tee and toast and a boiled egg. Come, now, drink your coffee while it is hot; here is some nice boiled milk and the most delicious cream; and here, in good time, comes Preston with fresh toast and eggs."

"Preston!" said Mr. Claude, authoritatively, "what is the meaning of this? No grilled nor devilled anything, no potted meats, no cold game! Why are we restricted to such penitential fare?"

Gertrude looked imploringly at her brother, begging him not to discuss the matter with a servant, em though it were a faithful old retainer like Preston.

Preston answered gravely, and with unmoveable countenance, "It is the master's wish, sir, that no flesh meats should be served at any meals on Fridays and other fast-days."

"Confound it!" muttered Claude; but Gertie, rising from her place, came and laid her little white hand on his lips, and in the meantime Preston left the room.

"Well, Gertrude, it really is enough to provoke a fellow! I don't care about the kidneys so much, you know; I wouldn't mind sloppy tea and tough toast, if there were any real reason why they should constitute my breakfast. I hope I don't pamper my appetite, but I call this keeping of fast-days *Romish* with a vengeance! It seems to me that Ralph was right when he warned me years ago about the governor's tendencies Romewards, I say, Gertie, do you think it will come to anything?"

"I do not know. Oh, dear Claude, I don't know what to say; we ought not to discuss papa, I suppose."

"What does mamma say?"

"Nothing, or next to nothing. I do not think she likes many little things that are going on; but you know

mamma, she is so devoted to papa that I believe she would jump into the sea from Montford's Rock if only he requested her to do it! There was never such an obedient wife, I should say."

"I only hope you may take pattern by her, Miss Gertrude. Bless her! she is an excellent mother as well as a first-rate wife; I only hope I may get one half as good. How is she this morning?"

"Going on very nicely, ever so much better. She is coming down on Sunday."

"And the baby, that is all right, I suppose?"

"Yes; it is a beautiful child, nurse says, and so healthy and good; but I think papa is a little disappointed, he would rather have had another boy. These four little girls in succession, and then Rosamund and myself—six Miss Aylmers! it is quite appalling!"

"Girls are all very well in their way, and really, Agatha—I beg her pardon, I go back to old times—mamma, I should say, gives us such very pretty sisters. Maude will be exactly like her; Eustacia promises very fairly—I think she features the Aylmers more than the others. As for tiny Beatrice, she is the most amusing creature in the world! the new baby may turn into something, but at present she is nothing at all particular."

"Indeed, but she is very remarkable. She got hold of my finger last night, and nurse says it was quite a wonderful clasp for so young a child. She held my finger quite firmly, indeed she did, and she has such a pretty little mouth, and mamma's own sweet, dark eyes."

"Oh, I daresay she is all right, and will turn out a very decent Miss Aylmer before long. You women see such charms in a young baby, where we lords of the creation see only little red, pulpy bundles of humanity, half-smothered in flannel, and if you touch the little heap it squawks."

"Does what?"

"*Squawks*. It doesn't cry; it makes a noise peculiar to itself, like other young animals. Lambs ba-a-a, calves—I am not quite clear what calves do—they *moo*, don't they? and new-born babies *squawk*. Now, I really should have liked another brother. I have but one, you see; and Ernie promises to be a regular milksop, if not something worse. I should have liked another brother, whom I might take under my own wing, and train up in the way he should go."

"Ernie is of the milksop genus, I am afraid," and Gertrude made a face expressive of disgust.

"A milksop, indeed! I wish that were all—a Methodist, a cant, a hypocrite!"

"No, no, Claude! no Aylmer was ever a hypocrite."

"Well, he cants shamefully. Gertrude, I tell you what it *is*, *I hate piety!*"

"Especially youthful piety?"

"Just so. Do you not agree with me?"

"I should if it were not for mamma, I do believe in mamma's religion, and for the matter of that I believe in papa's. Only whither does papa's religion tend? I mean that papa is quite sincere, as sincere as Rosamund."

"By the bye, where is Rosamund?"

"I have not seen her since she went to church—to early matins, or whatever it is called."

"I heard a bell going in the middle of the night. Do they have something that stands for midnight mass here?"

"Of course not. The bell you heard began to ring a little before eight o'clock. As you did not come down till nearly eleven, that seemed like the middle of the night to you."

"Eight o'clock! what an unearthly hour! You are as badly off as if you were undergraduates, and had to keep so many chapels per week. Do you ever go, Gertie?"

"Sometimes; when I cannot help it. But you know I do not go in for religion, it is not in my line. One Lady Abbess in a family is quite enough. Rosamund will endow a sisterhood, I dare say. I mean to make a sensation in the world, and marry as an Aylmer should. Rosamund's introduction was a mere matter of form; she positively refused to go into society. Now, I intend to make a sensation when we go up to town next spring. I am all for the world and worldly pleasures, and I don't care who knows it, Claude; only I should not like to vex mamma. I do love mamma! she is such a darling."

"So she is. She is a saint, an angel; and yet old what-d'ye-call-him's creature—"

"Not too pure and good
For human nature's daily food."

"I'll never join the cry against step-mothers as long as I live. I love mine better than I should ever have loved my own veritable mother, and I always say so when people begin to say savage things about the race of

step-mothers.”

“All step-mothers are not good. Look at the new Mrs. Chennery! What a life she leads Ada and Charlotte, and all of them, indeed! I believe Kate married purely to get away from home.”

“Kate was not the girl to get on with a stepmother of any sort, and as for Ada, she is enough to provoke a saint—she is worse than our Rosamund. And that reminds me, Rosamund had a shocking bad cold last night, and nurse was prescribing gruel, and hot mustard and water for a foot-bath. There she sat coughing like an old raven in mamma’s room when I went up to see her and baby before bed-time. You do not mean to say she was so mad as to get up and go into that cold church such a morning as this?”

“Indeed I do! Rosamund would not miss the early service on any account. I dare say she was up by five o’clock.”

“What on earth does she do with herself at five o’clock in the morning? Why, the servants are all in bed; there cannot be a room for her to come into!”

“She stays in her own room, and what she does I really cannot say, though of course I partly guess,”

“Says no end of prayers, and kneels before a crucifix!”

And Claude groaned.

“Something like it, I am afraid! And she spends no end of time in the church; I believe she goes there sometimes before it is well light. She has a key of that little door in the north transept.”

“Of course she approves of this wretched spread.”

“I almost fancy she talked papa into it. Long before a fish dinner became the rule of the house she took no meat on Fridays. Papa only stipulated for *no meat*, so mamma always orders some of our favourite puddings; but Rosamund never touches them, neither does Ernie when he is at home. Papa generally takes a small slice of fish without any sauce, and a piece of bread, and drinks only water.”

“And mamma and you?”

“Mamma and I take what we can get. After all, it is no hardship to have a fish dinner once a week.”

“Not much of a hardship, I suppose; but it is the principle it involves, Gertie. Don’t you see? It is the principle it involves!”

“Of course I do; and, as I perceive that every week or so we take some small but decided step in the same way, I am afraid whether we shall not all find ourselves ‘in the Fold of Rome,’ as Ada Chennery calls it, one of these fine days.”

“I’ll tell you what, Gertie, neither you nor I will take that journey. I will *not* join this Romanising party, I am fully determined. When I go back to Oxford, no Newmanites for me. Ah, here comes Rosamund; I can hear her cough!”

Rosamund entered—still the same pale, grave, steadfast Rosamund as of old; but she was much better looking as a young woman than she had been as a child. Her figure had developed, her complexion had cleared, and the rich raven hair, and pensive dark eyes, went well with the finely-cut features, and the pure pale olive of the cheek and brow. There was something stately, too, in her bearing; but her dress was severely simple, and might have passed for the regulation-ropes of some new-fangled order or Anglican sisterhood.

It was the time of crinolines, and Miss Gertrude’s bright blue robes fluttered around her in ample dimensions of skirt and furbelow, according to the fashion; but Rosamund’s plain and almost coarse black merino fell in straight folds from her waist to her feet. She wore a plain linen collar and cuffs of the same sort, of not too fine a texture, and of a shape and size which immediately attracted attention, as being unlike all other cuffs and collars worn by the young ladies of that day, and by their imitators. Her beautiful black hair was plainly braided, and her only ornament was a massive and richly-chased gold cross, depending from a fine Venetian chain. Her bonnet, which she removed directly she came into the room, was large and of very ordinary black straw trimmed with common black ribbon, and nearly covered with a large, thick, black veil, very much resembling those worn in the streets by some of the Roman Catholic “Sisters of Mercy.” Her cloak, a regular and useful waterproof, hung over her arm. She looked tired and unwell, and her cough was certainly very troublesome, and she sat down by the fire with a weary air of lassitude, and shivered as if feeling the cold acutely.

“I say, Rosamund,” said Mr. Claude, “but you have got a cough and no mistake. That is what I should call a churchyard cough, my dear; and I don’t think you’ll mend it going before daylight into a church as damp and cold as a chanel-house.”

“Were you ever in a charnel-house?”

And Rosamund looked up and laughed. It was wonderful how the smile brightened up her face; it became positively beautiful as the eyes glistened and the stern lines about the perfectly formed mouth relaxed.

Miss Gertie, with her rosy and ivory tints, and her lovely golden hair, was certainly very pretty and *piquante*. She had a snub nose, by the way, which gave her a saucy expression; but Rosamund was strangely beautiful when her delicately cut features were illuminated by a passing gleam of sunshine, and when a tinge of colour stole over the usual pallor of her cheek. Rosamund, with all her apparent coldness and professed austerity, dearly loved her sisters and brothers—those of the second family, perhaps, scarcely less than those of the first; but Claude and Gertrude were more especially her companions and friends. Gertie was always to be petted and given in to; and Claude was the darling brother of her heart. Rosamund loved Claude so much that she daily prayed and watched lest this sweet and very natural sisterly love should become a sin—an idolatry, in fact. But then, my dear reader, you and I have not Rosamund Aylmer's notions of “idolatry.” She could kneel before, and press with her lips, a graven image, but she dreaded lest a pure and natural affection should enslave her heart, which she had learned to think should never be filled with any love that was of earthly origin.

“Well, I must confess,” replied Claude, “that I never was in a charnel-house. I never had any taste for *bones*. The teeth of the eleven thousand virgins at Cologne filled me with disgust, and the relics commonly exhibited in Continental churches only made me laugh. But the church is cold, Rosamund; you cannot say it is not.”

“It is very cold,” she admitted with a shiver.

“Here is a cup of coffee,” said Gertrude. “It is quite hot, Rosamund; it will do you all the good in the world. And if you could eat an egg—”

“No, thank you, my dear; neither coffee nor egg this morning.”

“And I wonder at what hour you breakfasted. You were out of the house before eight o'clock, and it is now just twelve. You must be starving, and with that cough, too. Do take this coffee.”

“Thank you, you are a kind little Gertie, but not this morning.”

“You look ready to faint,” said Gertrude, reproachfully.

“Why will you not please us?” said Claude, almost imploringly; “you really need sustenance. And I should like to know what you took before you went to church.”

Rosamund coloured, and looked embarrassed, for Claude was holding her hands, and gazing straight into her eyes. Suddenly she regained composure, and replied distinctly, and without any visible tremour, though she became very pale as she spoke—

“Claude, it is well that you and I should understand each other. I hold views which you do not respecting Christian duties; there are those who are called upon to *forsake all and follow, Him.*”

“Follow our Lord Jesus Christ, do you mean?”

“Certainly; whom else should we follow?”

“No one, I suppose; though mind, Rosamund, I am no theologian, and don't pretend to be a saint. Still, it seems to me that Christ never desired us to practise asceticism. I do not, and cannot see how we glorify God by despising his own good gifts.”

“How many abuse them, my brother!”

“Doubtless; but that is not the point in question. We are speaking of lawful uses, not of abuse. What piety, now, can there be in eating fish only on Fridays and certain other days?”

“In the first place,” returned Miss Aylmer, eagerly, “the Church demands it. Yes, the Anglican Church to which you and I belong, Claude! Because many of the precious ordinances of the Church have become a dead letter, because some of its most holy observances have fallen into desuetude, it does not follow that upon her obedient children all obligation ceases. I recognise the authority of my mother the Church, and, God helping me, I will obey her in all things, great and small, if, indeed, there can be anything which should be accounted small by a sincerely renouncing and submissive spirit.”

“The Church of England does *not* command fasts,” said Claude decisively.

Rosamund opened her Prayer-book—

“Look here; here are plainly specified the days of 'Fasting or Abstinence,' first, certain particular days, and lastly, *'all the Fridays in the year except Christmas-day.'*”

“Who thinks of attending to that? All that stuff has been ignored like an obsolete Act of Parliament ever so

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long. You may be a good Churchman, and yet omit all this sort of bother.”

“I know we, as a people, as a Church, have sinned greatly in this respect. But the days of darkness have passed; good men, and there was always a remnant of the faithful left, have roused us from our guilty trance, and at last we are awakened, and acknowledge our privileges and responsibilities as children of the Church of God. Hundreds are now pressing into the fold, Claude; the spirit of true religion is wonderfully revived, and the Church will once more be clad in her beautiful garments, and reign gloriously over all the earth.”

And Rosamund's face glowed till both her brother and her sister felt fairly startled at its strange, mystic, and most vivid beauty. But neither Claude nor Gertrude were at all convinced, and Rosamund went away to her own room, and was seen no more till dinner-time, while Claude ran off to the nursery to enjoy a romp with his little sisters, and Gertie resorted to Mrs. Aylmer's room that she might hold on her lap the beautiful new baby, and help her mamma to decide upon the name that must shortly be given to it.

Chapter 27. CHIEFLY RETROSPECTIVE

Yes! the six years that had so peacefully glided by were happy years for Agatha. I do not mean to say that the course of her life was quite smooth; she had her cares and vexations, and her little worries, and even her disappointments, as, I suppose, all married women have, however dearly they may love their husbands, and however perfectly they may trust and reverence them. But no great trouble visited her; she gloried in her husband, in his fine intellect, in his learning, in his high standing among his brother clergymen, in the depth and fervour of his religious convictions, in his pure and holy life, and above all things in the ever-increasing, ever-strengthening love which he manifested in all his intercourse with her. She was not only his beloved but his honoured wife; he trusted in her, he rested in her, and very sweet and precious was the communion between the wedded pair during these six happy, tranquil years.

And Agatha was the joyful mother of children, of fair and healthy children, who, so far, repaid a hundredfold her unceasing tenderness and maternal love. She had four little girls, of whom the eldest was five years, and the youngest just three weeks old—the “new baby,” who was paramount, of course, in parlour, and kitchen, and nursery. And the elder children, her former pupils, were devoted to her; Claude was immensely proud of his beautiful young mother, Rosamund esteemed her greatly, and Gertrude stoutly maintained that no “own mamma” could have been one whit kinder and dearer, if half as kind and dear. Ernest, too, loved his gentle stepmother, but there were peculiarities in his disposition which made him appear of a singularly undemonstrative nature, and which developed themselves remarkably as he advanced from childhood into youth. But a more united family could scarcely have been discovered, albeit on many points, and on some too that were of primary importance, they differed from each other in opinion as well as in practice. Both Mr. Aylmer and Rosamund held advanced High Church views, holding them, as every one believed, from the strongest and deepest of convictions; while Claude and Gertrude, instead of being influenced by them, were strongly repelled, and, if I must speak the truth, were sadly inclined to general laxity of opinion, and had conceived an idea that the further they removed themselves from what they now recognised as Romanising tendencies, the better they actually were and the more praiseworthy as members of a Christian church. Of course to some extent they were right; it is well not only to abstain from evil, but to flee from its very presence, to flee from all communion with it. But I think I would rather be a devout Roman Catholic than a mere worldling, with a heart; entirely on earthly objects, absolutely absorbed in earthly joys and earthly interests, and a perfect stranger to any kind of communion with the world unseen.

And Claude and Gertrude, because they felt how erroneous were the tenets which their father and their eldest sister had adopted, had resolved to keep clear of all “such nonsense.” And I am afraid the “nonsense” included not only the false but the real religion; and in their anxiety to steer clear of superstition they were in real danger of falling into a practical infidelity. And this is one of the most common mischiefs wrought by a false, unscriptural creed: it not only perverts the judgment, and teaches that which is opposed to the simplicity of the Gospel, but it steels the hearts of thoughtless and careless persons, and unites them to receive the impressions which from time to time present themselves. Because they are surrounded by a false dazzle, which they know to be a sham, they rush to the strange conclusion that there is no pure, unalloyed gold anywhere; because they scorn the glitter of mock diamonds and rubies, they seem to take it for granted that the real gem exists only in imagination, forgetting that the ostentatious parade of the imitation actually proves the existence of the real thing.

It need not have been so in the case of these young people, for in the daily life of their stepmother they saw exemplified the beauty of true Christianity; and Roberta, in spite of all her vehemence, which sometimes carried her into difficulties, did honour to the doctrines she professed.

Lady Jane was not now living at Overdale; her elder brother, the Earl of Ashdown, had become a widower soon after Eustace's second marriage, and she had felt it her duty to accede to his earnest request that for the future she would make his house her home, and assist him in the management of his family.

Lady Caroline Fripp was still adding to her nursery, and she took great interest in Agatha's little girls, and frequently proffered her matronly experiences, which it must be confessed were large, if not exactly valuable. It does not follow that a woman must perforce be wise because she is the mother of ten or a dozen children, for she sometimes goes on from year to year repeating the mistakes she made at the very commencement of her maternal

practice, and the oftener she repeats them the more obstinately is she wedded to her system of crude error; and it is only by a shock, often of the most terrible nature, that she is partially *desillusionnée*. But Lady Caroline, though practically giving the lie to the ancient and well-esteemed adage, "*experientia docet*," as far as her children were concerned, had sagacity enough where they were out of the question; and she no sooner became convinced of her brother's determination to make Agatha his wife than she resolved to make the very best of unsatisfactory circumstances, and receive her graciously as the most beloved of sisters-in-law. Agatha was magnanimous, and her heart was so full of her new and overflowing happiness, that it never occurred to her that she had anything to forgive. In her present content, and in her prospect of a futurity of bliss, she could afford to forget the wretchedness of a few days and weeks; and Lady Caroline's overtures were quietly accepted, perhaps for rather more than they were worth, nothing was said about the period during which her Ladyship had done her best to administer the affairs of the Honourable and Reverend Eustace Aylmer according to own will and wish.

And when all was said and done, Lady Caroline was compelled to own that her brother had not entirely "thrown himself away." Agatha's family, which meant, of course, the Galbraiths of Sutton Magna, were found to be people of position: they were well born; they were a "county family"; their names were to be discovered in any authenticated list of the "landed gentry"; and they were not at all a needy race, although they were not endowed to any marvellous extent with this world's gold and silver. They had done their duty, as they imagined, by poor little Agatha Bevan. They had had her educated, and had given her a start in the world, and what more could be required from aunts and uncles with numerous olive branches of their own?

What indeed! And no one Galbraith of them all thought anything about their portionless kinswoman, except perhaps to bestow upon her a little good advice now and then, till all at once it was notified to them that she was to become Agatha Aylmer. Ah, that was a very different thing! A poor governess of course could not expect to be recognised by a family of such pretensions as the Galbraiths; but the Honourable Mrs. Aylmer might equally of course look for all sorts of kindnesses, and a rapturous welcome as often as ever she chose to present herself at Sutton Magna, and claim the hospitality of her relatives.

I told you how Mrs. Jemima and Mrs. Kezia almost "had words" about their respective rights as concerned the wedding breakfast—a breakfast at which the granddaughters of two earls would be present, having first officiated as bridesmaids, in company with four Miss Galbraiths; a breakfast at which sat a *Lady Jane*; a breakfast that would be flourishingly reported in the two daily papers in which Blackingham could boast, and in all the local papers far and near, bringing honour and glory incalculable to themselves, the Galbraiths of Sutton Magna, and inciting to envy and jealousy and bitter disappointment all those who were not concerned in the wedding festivities. I hinted at all this, but I did not tell you how dear Agatha became to aunts and cousins—and of the latter there was a goodly number—nor how she was deferred to, and consulted, and her will held to be law, even on most trivial occasions. Small quarter had the young Galbraiths in those days if they ventured to differ from "Cousin Agatha"—rather, I ought to say, from the future Honourable Mrs. Aylmer; and I really believe if Agatha had chosen to wish for all sorts of impossible things, and to perform all manner of unreasonable and objectionable actions, the vices would have been winked at, if not construed into positive virtues; and the impossible things would have been sought after in the vain hope of finding that the laws of nature were suspended in favour of a young woman who had obliged her family by marrying rank and wealth.

Agatha was herself so true of heart and of so unsuspecting a nature that it never occurred to her to doubt the foundations on which arose this wonderful edifice of a home. She did think it strange that so much affection should have remained so long without any demonstration. She wondered greatly when Mrs. Horace told her how she had ever been to her as her own child, though she had never been permitted to form one of the family, save in those childish days of which the dim retrospective was not agreeable, and when she had *not* been received with any show of enthusiasm, as far as she could remember. But Aunt Horace would have her believe that she did *not* accurately remember, and she would say in reference to these bygone times, "You know, my love, childish impressions are not to be trusted. You had been a little spoiled at St. Beetha's. You were an only child, you know, and as such you had been accustomed to more petting and to greater indulgences than can be accorded to a larger number of young people. I have had to be strict with a family like mine, Agatha. In a large family, if there is to be peace and order, somewhat of the discipline of a school must be enforced, and I daresay you found it irksome to obey. Again, my dear, what were your prospects? Your fortune was even insufficient to pay for your education, and it would have been no real kindness to habituate you to a mode of life which any day you might be called

upon to relinquish. I acted for the best, my dear, in making you a governess, and we all thought it wisest to leave you to make your own way, especially at the outset. There is nothing so good for a young lady, placed as you were by an inscrutable Providence, as *self-reliance*."

Mrs. Horace Galbraith, I must remark, was extremely fond of talking about "*Providence*" and its decrees, but unfortunately she fell into the very common error of mistaking her own decrees for those of Providence. It sounds pious, and of course orthodox, to refer continually to Providence, but the piety is more of sound than of sense, for the majority of people who are addicted to quoting Providence generally do so with reference to others rather than to themselves, and they fall into the lamentable mistake of confusing their own wills with that of Providence, and come at last to believe that what *they* arrange for the benefit, or it may be for the bane of others, is precisely what Providence ordains.

But to return to Agatha: she was quite ready to accept Mrs. Horace's explanations and representations, she was quite too happy to be at issue with any one, and so she was content to be praised, and petted, and caressed; and wedding presents were showered upon her, which would not have been the case had she been going to be married to some striving young tradesman or office clerk, whose income did not exceed £150 per annum. There is a Spanish proverb which says, "Heaven sends almonds to those who have no teeth." I am sure the world is most eager to heap benefits on those who least require them.

In order to be the lucky recipient of wedding or other presents, you must be wealthy; in short, you must not want presents. If you really do want them, having small store of your own, why, then you will not get them! "Men will praise thee when thou doest well unto thyself." This is the way of the world, and I am afraid too much the way of Christian people; it is an age of mammon-worship, and gold receives the homage of all classes of society; albeit we do not set up golden calves like the wicked Israelites, or fall down at the sound of the comet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, like that royal idolater Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, whose government must have been of a terribly despotic nature.

So it came to pass that Agatha Aylmer went to her new home not quite so empty-handed as might have been expected; and she and her husband, and Lady Jane, and every other member of the house of Aylmer, from the Earl of Ashdown to his twentieth cousin, were invited to honour Sutton Magna with their presence as often as they could make it convenient so to do. And Mr. Aylmer, having just won his bride, was willing to make concessions—promises that were perhaps inexpedient—and he said he would "come again some day." And he really did take Agatha to visit her aunts on one occasion; and the Galbraiths on their part liked nothing better than visiting at Overdale, and "my niece," or "my cousin, the Honourable Mrs. Aylmer," was continually being quoted.

Moreover, when Agatha had her first baby, Mrs. Galbraith came to the Rectory, acting as mother to the young mamma on that important occasion, and duly patronising the middle-aged papa. Lady Caroline would willingly have rendered her services had she not had special private business of her own which kept her in town; and I think Agatha was not sorry to be left to the charity of Aunt Horace, who was to be reinforced by Aunt Alexander if Mrs. Aylmer did not progress quite favourably, which, however, she did, giving no one the smallest cause of anxiety on her account.

Agatha had naturally been very much occupied with maternal cares, and she had not been as active as a clergyman's wife as she had at first imagined that she would be. She had quite intended to be busy with the schools, and to be the friend and *confidante* of all the old women in the parish, and the patroness of clothing-clubs, and the referee of anxious and despairing mothers. And in the commencement of her married life she did take her place as rector's wife, though by no means the place which Lady Augusta once occupied; but the birth of little Maude gave her other and more imperative duties, and before Maude could walk Eustacia was born, and then in due time Beatrice, so at Agatha had her hands pretty full; for in motherly devotion she rivalled Lady Caroline, though by no means sharing in her ladyship's infatuation as to her children being at once the most delicate and sensitive, and the cleverest and sweetest of all children in the world.

Mr. Aylmer was quite content that Agatha should devote herself to her family, for she never committed the fatal mistake of sinking the wife in the mother; and Rosamund, after she quitted the schoolroom, became very efficient in all parish work, and in fact seemed to divide her whole time between acts of devotion, the study of ecclesiastical history, and such matters as are generally represented by Church Catechisms and flannel petticoats. Roberta, too, worked earnestly as ever; but as years passed on she and the rector differed more and more, and at

this time when I take up the thread of my story they were as completely issue as two people could be who had not exactly quarelled.

It was the first cloud upon Agatha's sunshine when she into the drawing-room for the first time after her confinement to find that something had gone wrong, and at her dear old friend had been forced to give up the Sunday class which had been hers for more than fourteen years.

Very lovely Agatha looked in her white dressing-gown and pink ribbons, with her baby asleep in the pretty *berceaunette* by her sofa, and the little sisters standing on tip-toe and peeping into the cosy nest, very quiet indeed, lest baby should be awakened and dear mamma made unwell again.

But Miss Beatrice, who was only a baby herself, being yet under two years old, made snatches at her mamma's invalid-cap, and so the trio were marshalled upstairs, and Agatha was left alone. Gertrude had told her somewhat vaguely about Roberta's deposal, and it had grieved her exceedingly, not only on Roberta's account, but because it aroused in her mind a dim, uneasy foreboding of worse, or what she would deem to be worse, yet to come. Agatha had always acknowledged that "she could not go *as far* as her husband," but she had always tried to be what he called a sound Churchwoman, and to a certain extent she had succeeded. She was not one of those who attach a primary importance to secondary dogmas; she could discern between essentials and non-essentials, and therefore she often submitted her own judgment when it clashed with the opinions of her husband.

But in the quietude of her own chamber, with her newborn infant pressed to her bosom, and with silence all around, she had deeply communed with her own heart, and many anxious thoughts had arisen, and she began to perceive that she had been wilfully blind to the many changes which were taking place around her.

Mr. Aylmer came into the drawing-room soon after the children went away, and his grave and almost stem face lighted tip when he saw his wife upon the sofa. He bent down and kissed her tenderly, and then seated himself at her side.

"Eustace," said Agatha, "what is this about Roberta?"

"Only, my darling, that I have told her I cannot allow her any longer to teach in my school. The doctrines she inculcates are not those of the Church of England."

"Indeed. Are you quite sure? Are they not the doctrines of the Church of Christ?"

"The Church of Christ in this realm is the Church of England."

"Is there no other church, Eustace?"

"None, my love. I am surprised that you should ask the question. Surely you do not doubt it?"

"I think," said Agatha, with an evident effort, "as Jane thinks, that the Church of Christ embraces all who love Him in sincerity."

"We will not discuss the subject now, Agatha; you are not strong enough; when you are quite well we will go over the ground carefully. I cannot have my own wife in the least heretical. As for Jane, I have ceased to argue or to plead with her; she is on the verge of committing *schism*."

And Mr. Aylmer's voice sank to an awful whisper. Torquemada might have denounced a suspected heretic in the same low, thrilling tone. Agatha's cheeks were crimson. Mr. Aylmer was right; this kind of conversation was not good for her just yet.

Chapter 28. OVERDALE POST-OFFICE

The chief place of public resort in the village of Overdale was the post-office. The butcher's shop held its own on certain mornings in the week, and Miss Binks, the head milliner and dressmaker—who was an ambitious little woman, and had once sent a bonnet to the Queen—often held quite a *levee* in her front parlour, called by courtesy a show-room, especially at such times as the change of season involved an extra display of “novelties and newest fashions.” But only ladies gossiped at Miss Binks's; and the open shop, and the strong raw meaty odour of Mr. Mutton's premises, cut short many an interesting conversation, and deferred many a story to a better opportunity, which, perhaps, did not arrive. So by tacit agreement the post-office was made the centre of society; and anybody who wanted to know anything, or to tell anything, or to discuss anything, hastened thither, and was generally fortunate enough to procure the desired information, or to find their friends and neighbours needing to be informed.

When Agatha first came to Overdale the post-office had been a very scurvy affair, and the post-mistress, a grocer and draper, and general dealer in a very small way, also a very sour and grey old woman, who sold stamps grudgingly, and weighed letters under protest, and took a venomous pleasure in seeing people come up hot and panting, letters in hand, a quarter of a minute after the box was closed. But one severe winter the unamiable woman took cold and died. She departed this life one bitter January evening. The post went out as usual at ten minutes to seven, the box being closed five minutes earlier. At eighteen minutes to seven Mrs. Hancox sent down her nurse to see that the box was shut exactly to the second, and to take care “that that young hussy did not receive 'too-late' letters over the counter.” A little after seven she expired, and her reign over letter-boxes and letter-bags was at an end. I cannot say she was regretted, for she had taken care to oblige nobody, and there had been a time when she was strongly suspected of tampering with certain letters.

The present post-mistress was a blooming young woman, the daughter of the parish clerk, who was also by trade painter, glazier, and paperhanger. It was time, he said, that Hetty should be doing something for herself, and he did not want her to be going away from home; so, when Mrs. Hancox died, he asked for the post office for himself, intending that Hetty should perform the necessary duties. He was a man much respected in the parish, and Mr. Aylmer at once interested himself in the matter, and procured for Oakley the desired appointment, without much loss of time. His own shop was not eligible, but the one adjoining it, large, comfortable, and nicely fitted up, was to let, and that Oakley took, and established in it his daughter Hetty as post-mistress and general superintendent of affairs. For, at the same time, a little business was commenced in the stationery line, and it grew and grew till it was a little business no longer, till it was “*the business of Overdale,*” and people no longer cared to go to Blackmoor or to Hoveness for what they could get quite as well in their own village. Hetty Oakley had sense, and tact, and taste, and the sweetest temper in the world; to oblige people was her delight; she was clever, too, and her judgment was remarkable, for one so young. She seemed to know intuitively what people would buy and what they would not, and, as I said, her taste was excellent, so that her stock changed hands with marvellous rapidity.

At first Miss Oakley only sold stationery; but her note-paper was the nicest, her envelopes the best chosen, and her valentines and Christmas cards the choicest that could be obtained. By-and-by were added all sorts of fancy articles, children's books, illustrated almanacks, and the like. Then some ladies suggested what an accommodation it would be if Miss Oakley kept Berlin wools and working materials generally; and presently from small beginnings a circulating library began to flourish, so that people had no end of excuses for going to Hetty Oakley's, whether they had letters for the post or not. Also Hetty was a universal favourite, and she was made much of by people of all degrees; she was liked by the Aylmers and the Chennerys, and she was a great pet with the old women in the almshouses. And to all her good qualities she added the charm of prettiness; and she dressed neatly and becomingly, and of course had many suitors, to none of whom at present could she be induced to listen.

One cold, bright morning everybody seemed to have business at the post-office, and Hetty and her youngest sister Anne were as busy as they could be. The Chennery-park carriage drove up with the younger girls and the governess, and there was a great matching and shading of wools, and a long discussion upon the merits of rival

crochet—cottons. Then Miss Aylmer came in for a packet of note—paper, and for some Sunday—school reward cards, which were ordered, and which were not at all to her mind; and other people came and went the whole morning, till Hetty Oakley began to be tired even of putting money into the till—at least she wished all the population of Overdale would not turn out at one and the same time, but rather come in relays on each succeeding day, so that they could be the better attended to. At last, however, there came a lull, and only a few gossipers remained, pretending to choose books from the circulating library. Three young ladies were there, the daughters of a half—pay captain; Miss Grierson, an old maid, aspiring to be considered a literary character; and Mrs. Bellamy, the wife of the richest and most influential farmer in the neighbourhood.

All these ladies were discussing rather vehemently the merits of a popular High Church novel, which had just been added to the catalogue on the recommendation of Rosamund Aylmer. Now the Misses Harrison were as High Church as they well could be; that is to say, they fancied they were, because, having nothing to do in particular, they found going to church, practising with the choir, and arranging garlands of flowers, interested them quite as much as anything else. Miss Harrison was rather *passée*, and had given up the gay world, though some people were ill—natured enough to say the gay world had given her up; and she was the most austere and the most decidedly “*Tractarian*” of the three. Miss Laura and Miss Dorothy were both enthusiasts, and they had learned all about apostolical succession and baptismal regeneration, and things authorised and unauthorised. Already they had doubts whether the Anglican “priests,” when they left the pale of the elder Church, had been able to bear with them the authority they had derived through their spiritual superiors; and that ecclesiastical movement of the sixteenth century, which had dismantled their own Overdale abbey, they spoke of always as the period of the “*so-called*” Reformation!

But Miss Grierson hated these “new ways,” which Miss Harrison declared were only the good old ways revived, and I am afraid she was rather an unreasoning champion of the truth, since she too frequently mistook mere invective and fierce declamation for argument, and was quite content could she reduce her antagonist to silence by simple force of words and sweeping, rash assertions, that could scarcely be disproved in common conversation. She was beginning to be continually on the alert for fresh offences, and unfortunately Mr. Aylmer furnished her with ceaseless opportunities of indulging in Jeremiads that did no good whatever, as she chiefly expended her sorrow in wildest denunciations, talking incessantly about *Ichabod*, and quoting scripture without much reference to its real meaning.

Mrs. Bellamy, on the contrary, was mild, thoughtful, earnestly pious, and extremely liberal in her views, and while she deeply deplored the state of things at Overdale, she was slow to criticise, and extremely guarded in making any statement which did not redound to Mr. Aylmer's honour as a minister of the Reformed Church of England. Now, however, she was speaking more plainly than had been her wont. Affairs were coming to a crisis at the parish church, and it behoved some of the parishioners to expostulate most strenuously with the rector on the impropriety and inexpediency, not to say the *illegality* of his proceedings, for during the last four years he had made rapid progress Romewards, and he was now spoken of in all quarters as a man of mark and a leader of his party. His wealth, his rank, his reputation for learning, combined with the ultra opinions he professed, placed him on a pedestal, so that he was watched not only by his own divided flock, but by all English people who were interested in the religious movements of the age.

“Yes, I have heard of it,” Miss Grierson was saying, “and I have formed my own conclusions. I tell you what it is, Miss Harrison, our rector is a wolf in sheep's clothing! He is a robber carrying the shepherd's crook! He is an emissary of the Pope, yet consuming his share of the loaves and fishes of the Established Church of England! But I go to church no more while the present dispensation lasts, Harriet Harrison! I am a Protestant, and I will not join in Roman worship—processions, and crosses, and antiphons, and candles lighted, and mumblings, and fumbings with gaudy robes fit for the stage, and Mr. Aylmer and his two curates bowing to the Lord knows what, with their backs turned to the congregation! I'd as lief worship in Baal's temple, and liefer, if I knew where to find it; for I don't suppose the priests of Baal were half such mountebanks as the High Church clergy of the present day!”

“You will go to church no more!” said Miss Harrison and her two sisters in concert—“not even on Sundays and Fridays?”

“Not on Sunday or any other day! I haven't lived to be sixty years old without knowing how to say my prayers, and I am not going now to say them any other way than I have done. Prayers, indeed! I scarcely know where they are, or what they are at! Indeed, my Prayer—book is of little use to me. I could find my places in it when I was five

years old, and now I can't. However, for many Sundays I tried to shut my ears and go through the prayers in my own way; but I couldn't manage it, for every now and then I got so hot and angry, and I longed to fling the book at Mr. Aylmer's head. So I thought I had better say my prayers at home, and I bought a volume of sermons— good, sound Church sermons, with no nonsense in them— and I rang the bell about half-past ten, and called in my Jenny and the boy Dan, and I began with, 'When the wicked man,' and went straight through to the prayer of St. —what's his name?—that comes just before the end; and then I read a sermon, and said the Benediction, and Dan and Jenny went back to the kitchen~ But I must say I was very tired, and the servants didn't like spending Sunday in the house; and I found it dull, too. Still, anything was better than that shocking mummery.”

“I hope you did not read the *Absolution!*” said Miss Harrison, gravely.

“Not I! I don't think much of the Absolution; it means no harm, but it's made to mean harm! No; I left it out, and read the collect that the young fellows that are not full-fledged have to read.”

“The collect for Ash Wednesday, you mean,” said Laura Harrison. “Ah, Miss Grierson, I am so glad you did not read the Absolution; it would have been terrible!”

“Stuff and nonsense, my dear! I've as much right to read the Absolution as the Archbishop of Canterbury has, if it's in accordance with God's word. If it is not, nobody ought to read it.”

“The only persons who should *dare* to read it,” said Dorothy Harrison, “are those who are Divinely authorised.”

“May I ask what you mean by that phrase?”

“I mean those who are authorised by our Lord Himself; the immediate descendants of the Apostles and their successors. From the days of St. Peter until now there has been an unbroken chain of Divinely-called ambassadors of the truth.”

“If the chain were not broken at the time of the Reformation, so-called,” put in Miss Harrison.

“Ah, and what if it were?” archly returned Miss Grierson. “What if you have got hold of a few separate spurious links, that never did belong to this miraculous chain you talk about?”

“That is too serious a subject to discuss here and now,” interposed Miss Harrison.

“Quite too serious,” chimed in the younger sisters.

“I think so, too,” said Mrs. Bellamy, gently. “These are very solemn subjects we are talking of so lightly.”

“Dear Mrs. Bellamy, *you* don't agree with Miss Grierson?”

“I cannot precisely say, because I am not quite sure about Miss Grierson's views. I do, however, agree with her so far as to feel deeply pained at the un-Scriptural and un-Protestant practices now prevalent among us. The change in our Church service has grieved both Mr. Bellamy and myself greatly, and we have come to the resolution respectfully but urgently to bring the matter before our pastor, and entreat him to return in some measure at least to the plain and devout simplicity of earlier days. If he will not listen, if he persists in his ritual observances, we have but one course open to us—we must leave our parish church. We cannot any longer even outwardly conform to what we know to be deadly error, nor dare we any longer expose our children and servants to the influences we deprecate for ourselves. Our determination is taken, my husband will seek an interview with Mr. Aylmer this week; last Sunday was too much for anyone not already a Romanist to bear with equanimity. So, if next Sunday you see our large square pew empty, you will understand what has happened.”

“And what will you do?” inquired all the ladies, in one breath.

“Very much what Miss Grierson has done; my husband will be the priest of his own household. We are a large family, ourselves, eight children, a governess, and including outdoor labourers, seven servants.”

“But you will not insist upon your servants absenting themselves from church?” asked Miss Laura, anxiously.

“I would!” cried Miss Grierson, disdainfully; “no one in *my* service shall set foot across the threshold of that idol's temple! They will have the Virgin and the Child before long, I expect.”

Mrs. Bellamy quietly replied to Laura—

“No, we shall make no rules for our servants; no man or woman, or boy or girl, being of an age to judge for himself or herself, ought to be controlled in matters of conscience. We shall tell our people faithfully but kindly why we feel we must absent ourselves from the church of our fathers, and we shall invite them to join with us on Sunday mornings and evenings, if they think fit so to do. But if they prefer the church service as it is now *performed*—I can use no other words—they are at liberty to please themselves, and neither Mr. Bellamy nor myself will interfere either directly or indirectly.”

"I have gone down to the Methodist prayer meeting on several occasions," said Miss Grierson.

The Misses Harrison exclaimed with horror: "The Methodists—the Wesleyan Methodists Have *they* made good a footing among us?"

"I am glad to say they have. They meet every Sunday evening in a cottage at the Chine. The preacher is only a fisherman himself; but that is rather in his favour; some of the Apostles—among them your favourite, Peter—were, I believe, fishermen."

"Yes; but they were called by Christ Himself."

"Do you think, then, Christ never calls fishermen now?"

"Not to minister at His altars."

"Well, this Methodist fisherman seems to me to be called—that is, I think he would be the means of awakening ten sinners in his own class of life while Mr. Aylmer failed to awaken one. He is a man who is doing, and has done, a great work among the fishermen and boatmen down at the Chine, and I respect him,"

"What do these Methodists do at their meetings?" asked Miss Dorothy, with a supercilious sneer.

"Come and see," replied Miss Grierson; "let us go together next Sunday evening."

"Oh, I could not! indeed, I could not!—I dare not!" said Miss Dorothy, shrinking back. "But tell me—I am so curious—what do they do?"

"Well," returned Miss Grierson, with more than her usual amount of sarcasm, "you will be pleased to learn that the poor, deluded, ignorant creatures do nothing decidedly immoral, nor anything strikingly profane. They only read the Scriptures, and pray, and sing, and preach. I cannot say I quite like their mode of doing it. I was bred to the Church, you know, my dears, and have been accustomed to something very different. Still, I have the wretched taste to prefer the Gospel with bad grammar to error and trash with the most unexceptionable style and composition. It is as if a feast of many courses served up on damask and rich plate were offered to me, I knowing all the while that a little poison had been mingled with the viands; while, on the other side, on a plain board, was presented to me wholesome bread and cheese and onions. Which, think you, I should choose? I should, of course, prefer the style and elegance of the well-spread table, but I should be very foolish if I did not take the coarse but nourishing food which I knew all about, rather than the spiced and highly-seasoned dishes which, if not actual poison, would certainly impair my health."

"I know nothing about Methodists—nothing about any kind of schismatics," said Miss Dorothy, loftily. "I am only sorry that Dissent has reached us; I believed we were quite free from it, though there is plenty of it at Hoveness, I believe."

"There would have been no Dissent in Overdale, Miss Dorothy, had the rector been faithful to his trust."

"A little Dissent will not hurt us," said Mrs. Bellamy. "Pray God we may have nothing worse in our midst. I dread something very different from Methodism or Independency."

"You dread Popery," said Miss Grierson, with slow, solemn emphasis, "and *so do I!* That man of sin, Mr. Vallance, is here again!"

The words had hardly left her lips when that gentleman opened the shop door, and asked Miss Oakley if any letters were waiting for him. Three were given into his hand; they were all of foreign aspect. He pocketed them, bowing gravely to the pretty Hetty and her sister, and very quickly was in the street again.

"What were the post-marks, Hetty?" eagerly inquired Miss Grierson.

But the discreet Hetty answered, "I really cannot say, ma'am."

Chapter 29. COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE

“Roberta, it is just an age since we saw you,” said Gertrude Aylmer, looking up from her drawing to welcome her old friend. “I think you have never paid your respects to the new baby yet, and she is more than three weeks old. Under the same circumstances previously you have always been one of the first, if not the first admitted visitor, and we have been obliged to decide on the youngest Miss Aylmer's name without consulting you.”

“What is to be her name?”

“Agatha Mary; and she is to be taken to church on Sunday. Rosamund and Ada Chennery are the two godmothers; and, I am sorry to say, Mr. Vallance is god-papa!”

“I heard some one say he was here: I did not quite believe it, so I asked Hetty Oakley, and she said it was true. Did you expect him?”

“Expect him? No! He always comes and goes like a shadow, there is such a mystery about the man—I do hate mysterious people; how horrible it must be to go about brimful of secrets! It would not do for me; I should be sure to tell them to everybody.”

“That you would. How well I remember Mr. Vallance's visits here in old time! Dear me, Gertie, what an elderly young lady I am growing. I am quite on the old maids' list now!”

“All your own fault, you stupid Roberta! Why don't you get married to some of the men who want you so badly?”

“I should not think of marrying more than one, Gertie, that is, one at a time! And that one, you see, I cannot decide upon, so I am forced to remain a spinster. But I do not want to discuss the old vexed question of my marriage; I want to ask you, has Mr. Vallance been here since your mamma was married?”

“Yes, once, but only for a day or two. He came down then upon us, like the wolf on the fold, giving us no notice of his intentions, and looking as grim and weird as a ghoul—only I never saw one. Roberta, I do not believe he is an ordinary mortal man; he is one of those horrible creatures one reads about in Eastern stories—if not a ghoul, a *wehr-wolf* or a vampire!”

“*Wehr-wolves*, my dear, are German, as you very well know, and they don't figure in Oriental classics. Be accurate, Gertie, even if you are absurd. I hope Mr. Vallance did not do anything ghoulish.”

“I daresay he did. He was always in the cloisters, or in the church, if he were not in papa's study, and he ate right little proper human food. It was such a relief when he went away; but papa seemed miserable for a month afterwards. Mr. Vallance's visits always give him the dismals, and make him more starchified than ever. Oh, I detest Mr. Vallance! and I don't believe mamma likes him; and yet I suppose it is my own wickedness, for he is really *very good*. He is devoted to the Church, you know, and though he has great wealth, he spends very little upon himself. He is very kind, too, and his manner softens if you come to talk to him. In fact, there is a peculiar fascination about him if you really enter into conversation with him, and you like him in spite of yourself, and trust him against your own convictions. And then he knows everything. My dear Roberta, I believe sometimes he must be Cardinal Mezzofanti in disguise, he knows so many languages. Only I suppose the cardinal is an old man if he be living still. Of course he speaks French, and Italian, and German, as if they were each one his mother tongue. I know he is a wonderful Spanish scholar, and Portuguese comes as a matter of course, seeing he is every now and then at Lisbon, and at—I forget the name—the place where poor Inez di Castro came to an untimely end.”

“Coimbra, was it not?”

“Yes, yes; 'blue Mondego's heaving stream,' you know, where the earthquake tolled the bells! I daresay *he* knows all that romantic, pathetic story, for he knows every history, every legend, every tale of old romance. He beats papa in the classics—at least papa says so; then as for science and ologies, he is well up in them all. He seems to have studied law and physic as much as divinity, and he can tell you all about the councils of the Church; and as for ecclesiastical history, he has Bede, and Mosheim, and Milner at his fingers' ends. Also he is extremely accomplished; he has a magnificent tenor voice—and, oh, how he plays the organ! I stole into the church yesterday afternoon, and heard him playing the 'Ave Verum' in the dark; it was just *delicious!* Oh, he can

do everything, and he knows everything—even what you are thinking of, I do believe; for now and then he startles me nearly out of my senses by answering my thoughts instead of my spoken words.”

“What does he do with himself, Gertie?”

“Do you mean here, at Overdale?”

“No, I mean always. What is his life? What does he profess to do?”

“He is a clergyman, and yet he holds no living, no curacy even. He is a fellow of his college, of course; but I don’t know that that involves any positive duties. He is evidently busy enough, for his correspondence is immense—at least Claude says it is.”

“It used to be; and he has an immense deal of writing to do, and it is my belief that he writes letters which he goes over to Hoveness to post himself. He is always going about from place to place; he has been chaplain to a nobleman more than once, and once he was tutor to a young earl who went over to Rome.”

“Rome, I should say, is his proper place. But we of the English Church do not concern ourselves about secret dispatches; we leave all that to our ‘elder sister,’ as it is the fashion to call the Scarlet Lady now. At least it was so; but I am sure I do not know what the Church of England is coming to.”

“Oh, Gertie! I love my Church, my dear old mother Church! but it seems to me that she is changed, and I must be driven out from her bosom. I thought to live and die in communion with the Church of England; but I fear it cannot be. There is one blessed comfort: nothing and no one can drive me out of the Church of Christ.”

“Do not begin to look and talk in that way, Roberta. I am not equal to pious conversation; you know I am the most irreligious person in the parish, except, perhaps, Claude. And it is of no use to lecture me!”

“Because you dislike formalism you need not hate religion, dear Gertie.”

“But I cannot help it, indeed I cannot, Roberta. There is something to me so repulsive in the system of piety which prevails at Overdale. Either you are to be mortifying the flesh and the affections, saying countless prayers in a damp church, and half–starving yourself on particular days, or else you are to be absorbed in some musty old canon, and in Church millinery, chasubles, albs, stoles, copes, and all the rest of the rubbish, and to work altar cloths, and hassocks, and *prie–dieux*, and embroidered priestly robes! The whole life is unnatural, senseless, and I will have none of it, neither will Claude.”

“There lies the secret of your vehement disinclination to Ritualism; if Claude were to become imbued with High–Church principles, you would quickly catch the infection. Take care, Gertie; Claude is not quite a safe guide in such matters; take care that he does not lead you out of the gloom into the darkness. The cold, proud Rationalist is still farther from God than the bigoted Romanist. In your determination not to believe too much, take heed lest you believe too little, or nothing at all.”

“What am I to believe, Roberta? Among rival creeds, which shall I select? We are all Anglicans here, except the Methodists down at the Chine, and they are too insignificant to mention. But I have taken to read the papers lately, and Claude tells me lots of things, and reads me the spiciest articles out of the *Saturday Review*, and it seems to me that the world is cram full of religions. There are all sorts of Dissenters or Nonconformists—Baptists, Independents, Methodists in heaps, and of various kinds, too, Unitarians, Swedenborgians, and a lot more! Shall I cross the bridge on which so many people are loitering, and become a Romanist at once? I think I could like the real thing better than this Anglican imitation. I always did despise shams. Or shall I turn Plymouth Sister, and separate myself from all religious communities? It must be so nice to feel that you are right and all the others wrong. Only I have no notion what the Plymouth sect believes!”

“Neither have I. Do not let us trouble about sects, Gertie.”

“But what am I to do, if I am to have a religion at all? Which of all the creeds of Christendom is to be my creed? One must be something; unless, indeed, one concluded to be nothing, which I sometimes think is really the most sensible course to take.”

“Never mind creeds, Gertie. Unless you are a Christian it matters very little what you call, yourself; and being one it matters still less, so that you earnestly and honestly believe the doctrines of the church to which you profess to belong. There is no perfect church on earth, no faultless communion here; do not expect to find one. We must wait awhile for the best things. While we are here let us keep as close to Christ as we call, seeking to glorify Him. In all we say and do, having our religious life, as it is falsely called, in Him and by Him; taking Him for our guide, looking to Him for help and comfort when we need them, and trusting Him and loving Him through all things.”

“But you would not undervalue Church ordinances?”

“Certainly not; they are very precious to Christians. But they are only a means of grace, not the grace itself.”

“I do not wonder that papa took your class away from you if you taught them that sort of thing. *He* thinks the Church a Divine, not a human establishment, and he is always talking now about the 'sacramental system.' I heard him say the other day to Bessie Ashley—she is going to be confirmed, you know—that though the visible Church did not profess to save without individual personal religion, yet without having recourse to the Church there could be no certainty of receiving the benefits which are linked by Divine power to her ordinances. I remember that was what he said, and I wondered whether little Bessie would understand it all. But, Roberta, what is the matter?”

The tears were standing in Roberta's eyes, and she could hardly control her voice as she answered—

“You spoke of my class, Gertie—my class that I have had ever since I was old enough to teach in a Sunday-school. Oh, you cannot tell what a pain it has been to me to lose it! How much I feel it still, how I almost dread Sunday! Don't mind me, Gertie, a little crying will do me good.”

“Darling old thing! It's a burning shame, and everybody thinks so. But I will beg papa to let you have your class again. When he knows how much you take it to heart I am sure he will not refuse. I will coax him ever so, or, better still, I will set mamma at him. He never says 'no' to mamma if he can help it. Yes; mamma will set it all right, dear. If she had been downstairs and about I daresay it would never have happened. You will have your class back again next Sunday, Roberta.”

“No, Gertie; and you must not set your mamma to interfere. I have had it out with your papa; it has been a long time coming, but now we understand each other. I never can teach much that he preaches both in public and in private; and if I teach at all, I cannot refrain from teaching certain truths which I hold as such. I dare not hold my peace. He was very gentle with me, and I am sure he was sorry to vex me; he was ready to concede some points, if I would only make certain promises, which, however, I could not make. And so, in some sort, it was my own will and deed. I wish Lady Jane were here!”

“Would you wish her to try to arrange the matter?”

“No; I want to consult her. Dear auntie is not always very clear now, and I cannot make her understand about it. This is my difficulty: several—five, indeed—of my girls, the nicest of them, want to be allowed to come to me at home on Sunday afternoons. Indeed, I do not think they will attend the school”

“Where is the difficulty, my dear, wise Roberta? Why, it comes in just right, a most charming arrangement, and you can snap your fingers at the powers that be—papa and his two pale-faced, long-coated curates! I say, Roberta, why do you not write to Mr. Bell? He is still at Hoveness, I believe. Ah! those were good days when Mr. Bell was sole curate; but of course he was not 'high' enough, and I wonder he and the rector went on together as long as they did! But why do you hesitate to tell the girls they may come to Walnut Cottage? No one can hinder you if you choose to have them.”

“I hesitate because I am not quite sure that I am right. I fear lest I should do the thing, not for God's glory, but to gratify my own self-will. And it is painful to me to be in opposition to my minister; to have the girls at home would be to act in complete defiance of his authority; and I am sure he would be very angry.”

“I should not care for that.”

“Hush, Gertie! Remember you are speaking of your own father. It was wrong of me to discuss the subject with you at all. May I go up now and see your mamma?”

“I will ascertain if you may. Mamma will be glad enough to see you, if that awful potentate, the monthly nurse, will allow it. I am thankful to say her reign is nearly over; she goes away next week to Chennery Park, and when Mrs. Chennery has done with her she is off to town, for Aunt Caroline wants her again. There is no end of Aunt Caroline's babies; this is the tenth or eleventh, I am not certain which; I have lost count of those little Fripps.”

“I quite expected to find Mrs. Aylmer downstairs.”

“Well, she is downstairs, properly speaking; I mean she comes into the drawing-room every day, but not till towards evening. All morning she keeps in her own dressing-room; It is quieter. I am sure she likes to have as little of Mr. Vallance's society as possible. She does not say so, but I know. I can read people pretty well, though some people think I am such a goose and a regular rattle! Besides, she did come down earlier on Sunday, and she was not so well after; indeed, nurse says she has not been quite so well since. She does not get strong quite so quickly as has been the case before. You must not talk to her too much, Roberta.”

“I will be careful, and if she is tired I will come again another day.”

Agatha, however, was eager to see Roberta, and nurse being propitious, Gertrude brought Miss Roberta upstairs, and left the Mends together.

“Oh, Roberta, I am so glad to see you again!” and then there were the usual embraces and congratulations, and Agatha put back the pretty little embroidered flannel square, and proudly showed Roberta her beautiful new baby, as fair a specimen of healthy, vigorous infancy as any young mamma could possibly desire. Roberta kissed the tiny hands that lay on the coverlet. Agatha's babies were always very dear to her, and she had taken *brevet* rank as “Auntie” long ago.

“And you are going to call her Agatha Mary?”

“Yes; papa said there ought to be one with my name, and I agreed with him. But we thought she ought to have another name besides Agatha, just to avoid confusion. Papa frequently calls me Agatha himself, and of course Jane and Caroline call me so. It was best to make a difference. I suppose she will be our little Mary.”

“I think, if I were married, I should always like my husband to call me by my Christian name—that is, to call me so sometimes. I do not like the husband to sink into mere 'Papa,' and the wife into 'Mamma.' There is something so sweet and beautiful in the Christian name of any one you love dearly; even if it be an ugly name like mine, I suppose it may come to be musical under certain circumstances.”

“I wish, Roberta, the 'certain circumstances' would occur.”

“Thank you, Agatha. I am quite happy as I am; but perhaps married life *is* happier. You, at least, recommend it; you are *very* happy, Agatha?”

“Yes;” and Agatha bent fondly over her sleeping babe, and cooed to it in right motherly fashion; “yes, it is such a joy to have all these!”

“But their father is a still greater joy to you?”

“There can be no one to me like my husband,” replied Agatha, gravely; and the happy flush that had mantled on her face while speaking of her children faded fast: “my babies are very sweet and precious to me, but their father is first, of course. There are some women, I know, whose married life seems all motherhood; but I could never understand that, and I do not think you will, Roberta, if ever you come to be a matron, as I hope you will some day; and yet—”

“Yet what, dear?”

“The unmarried woman is spared many a care, many a doubt, many an hour of dreariest apprehension.”

“But you cannot doubt your husband?”

“Oh, no!—not in the common sense of doubting. He is as true to me as the needle to the pole;” and Agatha's face brightened and coloured up again. “The love he has for me is the one great love of his life; and it is all the deeper and stronger and the more enduring that it comes when all the impulse and impatience of youth are over. And I *know* he will love me to the end; but—”

“But what? Only don't tell me if you had rather not.”

“Perhaps I *ought* not. Only—I wish I knew whether the fault were in myself—I would give worlds to know that he is right and that I am wrong! But I have thought so much, Roberta, while I have been laid by this time. Through those silent hours, and in that darkened room, I lived all my life over again; and oh, I must say it once—and I could only say it to you or to Jane, for it is agony to speak it and to feel it—my Eustace, my precious husband, is *not* holding the simple truth of the Gospel, neither is he preaching it to others; how could he? He is going deeper and deeper into error, farther and farther away from the plain scriptural teaching of that which I once understood to be the Church of England; and I see before me a prospect of infinite sorrow,”

“Dear Agatha, God can over-rule it all for good!”

“He can—He will! But some of us may never see it in this world; and human nature is very weak, and it shrinks from the suffering that will end only with mortal life.”

“What do you mean, dearest?”

“I cannot tell you, for I scarcely know myself. But imperceptibly the shadows deepen, and the night comes on. You will pray for him, Roberta—for us all?”

“I have always done that—lately more than ever—that God may grant us the knowledge of His truth, and bring us all at last to His eternal joy!”

And as Agatha looked very tired, Roberta took her departure; and no word was said of the deposition from the Sunday-school, nor of Mr. Vallance's presence in the house. And as yet Agatha did not know of the Methodists'

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meeting at the Chine, nor of that other weekly gathering in Mr. Bellamy's large kitchen.

Chapter 30. ROBERTA'S NEW TROUBLE

Roberta's desire to consult Lady Jane quickly passed into action; she wrote a long letter to her old friend, telling her exactly how matters stood and begging her advice. The answer came almost by return of post; Lady Jane felt unable to speak decisively while at a distance, there was so much to be taken into account; Agatha had written begging her to come to Overdale as soon as possible, that she might be introduced to her youngest niece, therefore she would say little by letter but come in person within a few days, and converse with Roberta on the subject; she was also writing to Mrs. Aylmer to expect her at the Rectory about the middle of the following week.

So Roberta told her girls that she would give them an answer in a fortnight, and that she wished them to attend school as usual on the following Sunday; her class, she found, was to be given to Miss Dorothy Harrison.

But another trial awaited Roberta, and one which she had not anticipated. On the Sunday morning, after leaving her aunt comfortably knitting by the fire, she went to pay her usual visit to certain poor old women in the neighbourhood; formerly she had gone to them once a week, but old Miss Roberts's infirmities increasing, Roberta found her home duties pressing more heavily, and her parish work fast becoming an occasional recreation rather than the serious and regular occupation it had been at the time of Agatha's marriage, and, for some years prior to that event. Dearly the old woman loved Roberta's visit, for she "cheered them up," they said, one and all. Sometimes she brought a nice little tract and read to them; she listened patiently to prosy accounts of "rheumatics," and complaints of all the ills that venerable feminine flesh is heir to; and she heard with due interest long-winded stories of other days, when feeble hands were strong, and dull eyes bright, and grey locks raven black or sunny brown, and tottering, palsied frames in all the pride and vigour of youth or prosperous middle age.

"Her be that hearty, you see," said old Folly Dawson one day to her gossip and neighbour, Kitty Long. "Her's a lady, every bit of it; but she comes and sits down in my poor room, and I tells her all my troubles, and how my poor bones does ache, and she listens as kind-like, and doesn't cut one short with a 'my good woman!' like some of them visiting ladies does. But no! she harkens as if I was a duchess, and comforts me, and heartens me up; and then she reads a chapter, or some pretty hymn she has just found, or one of those nice little books she takes about with her, and whiles I forget my rheumatic, and the draught in the left hand pane, and she do look so bright and pleasant that I get pleasant too. And many's the bit of tea and sugar she's brought me, and warm stockings, and a woollen shawl for my poor shoulders, and port wine constant all the time the doctor ordered it. There's very few like Miss Roberta, God bless her!"

"Aye, God bless her!" responded old Kitty, who was extremely deaf, and had not heard the half of Polly's harangue, though it was shouted in her ear. "God bless her and all like her! She be a good'un, she be!"

"And so is Miss Aylmer!" interposed a young woman, who had just come up, and had heard most of the conversation, as indeed anyone might have heard it within a reasonable distance, without committing the sin of eavesdropping.

"Yes," returned Mrs. Dawson, "Miss Aylmer's all very well, but she hasn't the gift with people—especially with old people—that t'other one has. Two years ago I was in great trouble about my soul, for I went to Hoveness, and I heard a Methody-man preaching in the market-place. He was a-hollering like wad, and I went to hear what he said, curious like; and I heard what I never forgot. Says he, 'Every man, and woman, and child that is alive has a soul to save! Now,' says he, this man—and he was terrible in earnest—says he, 'Is your soul saved? and yourn? and *yourn?*' And if he didn't look me straight in the face! That set me a-thinking that I was an old sinner, and the more I thought the worse I grew, till I wished the Methodyman had kep' his mouth shut, or else that I'd never gone to Hoveness that market day. But then, thinks I, the facks is the same anyhow, for facks *is* facks! And if my soul ain't saved, it's time it was, for I'm nigh on seventy, and can't look to be here many years. And whiles I was groaning in my sperrit, and wishing I knew where the Methody-man lived, that I might go and tell him my case, in comes Miss Aylmer, as kind and condescending as could be, and asking after my rheumatics as if I was her own grandmother. But I couldn't talk about my body then, so I out and says, 'Oh, Miss Aylmer, never mind about the rheumatics; it's my soul that's troubling me now; I want to get it saved.'

"Whatever do you mean, Polly?" says she, with that sweet, soft voice of her'n, but looking serious like. So I tells her all about it; then she says, very grave—

“Polly, it was very wrong of you to listen to one of them sort. Methodies allus disturbs the mind, and they've no right to preach no more than you have. If you are in distress of mind you should come to papa; he's allus in the church on Wednesday and Friday mornings to give ghostly counsel.'

“Says I, 'Beggin' of your pardon, I've heard parson Aylmer preach Sunday by Sunday ever since he came to Overdale, and most beautiful sermons he do preach. There aint no denying it; but nothing that he ever said set me on thinking about my soul as I'm thinking now.'

“Says she, 'That shows, Polly, that this *unauthorised preacher*'—them was her very words—'did you harm instead of good.' Then she begins to tell me how I was received into the Church in holy baptism, and how all my sins of one sort was done away with. It was a partikler kind of sin, but I can't mind its name now; it seemed like one I'd never committed. And she went on to say I was placed in a state of salvation then; that I was a member of the Church of Christ; and then she arkst me if I had been *confirmed*. And I says 'Yes,' for I minded it well, though it's more nor fifty years agone. I mind how I said the Catechism to the parson without missing a word, and how I had a new white hat, with a top-knot of white love ribbons on it, and a new dress, pea-green, with yaller roses a-running over it, and a sweet thing it were counted in those days. And I minded the bishop's hand on my head, it made me feel so queer; and the Sunday after I and a lot more of lads and lasses as was confirmed with me took the Sacrament, and I've took it ever since regular twice a year, at Christmas and at Easter, till of late I've took it oftener, understanding it better and getting comfort from it. But then I never took it more than twice a year, as I tell'd Miss Aylmer; and she talked to me ever so long, till at last I did begin to think the Methody fellow wur only a prating fool, as had better have kep' his tongue atween his teeth, for I surely was a Christian woman, having never sinned no *very great* sin, never having broke the sixth nor the seventh commandments in my life, nor the eighth since I was a child and took halfpence to buy lollypops! And I was good to my old mother, and kep' her from the wurkus when I had nine children, and my husband wasn't to call steady. And I never told many lies, and what I did tell were white ones; and I never bore no false witness, nor coveted nothing *much* except a blue hood for my first baby, as is married now to Samuel Perkins, as is a sailor! And I was a member of Christ, a child of God, and a 'heritor of the kingdom of heaven, for the Church made me all that when I was an infant; and hadn't I *kep' my church* ever since, and taken Sacrament twice a year regular, 'cept, perhaps, twice or thrice I've missed, when I had a young baby and only myself to see to it? So I comforted myself, but I did as Miss Aylmer advised—I went to the vestry the next Friday morning and told my trouble to the parson, and he wore very kind, but awful solemn-like. And he arksted me many questions, which I replied to as near the truth as ever I could, though it put my sperrit up a bit to be arksted some of 'em as if I was a giddy gal, instead of an old woman just upon threescore and ten, as the psalm do say. But if the Church ordered it I s'posed I'd better put up with it because of my soul, else I'd more than half a mind to tell parson Aylmer to attend to his own business and see after his own sins. But I didn't, because of my soul, that I wanted to be all right for heaven, you know! so I kep' meek, and at last says he, 'I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost;' and he sort of snapped his fingers over me, but solemn-like, and it minded me of the conjuror as comes sometimes at the wake; and I got up, and my knees were so stiff I could hardly get home.”

“Snapped his fingers!” interrupted Betty Bridges, the younger woman, who had joined Folly and Kitty; “snapped his fingers, indeed! why you talk like a very haythen, Mrs. Dawson. He was making the sign of the cross on your sinful head.”

“Was he, now? Well, I hadn't much larnin' in my young days; boys and gals weren't taught then as they be now, though whether they're the better or the worse for it, it ain't for me to, say. And I thought as it was the Pope's people as made the sign of the cross in that way— I didn't know.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Bridges again, “didn't you feel any better?”

“I made up my mind I *would* feel better, anyhow; I went home, and I kep' saying to myself, over and over again, “a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven!” My soul must be saved if I'm all that; and the parson said I was in a state of salvation.' But lors, Betty, it didn't do! there's some things you can't bring yerself to believe; and I moped and maundered, and felt sure that my soul *wasn't* saved. And then Miss Roberta, who had been away on a visit, came home; and I told her at once about my trouble, though I didn't know her so intimate then, for I d only just been 'lected to the almshouses; but I made a clean breast of it, and told her all. And she didn't say I was no sinner; but she told me how all my sin could be washed away; how I must come to Christ, who was calling to me then to come. I can't remember all she said, only I know it went to my very heart to

hear how God loved me—me, that didn't deserve nothing but His anger. And it sounded like music when she took out her little Testament and read, 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' That was what I wanted; that was like being in a state of salvation; and one day Miss Roberta she teached me a verse of the prettiest hymn I ever heard: the first verse was—

“I lay my sins on Jesus,
The spotless Lamb of God;
He bears them all, and frees us
From the accursed load.
I bring my guilt to Jesus,
To wash my crimson stains,
White in His blood most precious,
Till not a spot remains.’

Ah! I've sung it often with my poor quavering voice when I've been lonesome, and my bones aching so that I couldn't rest abed nor up; and I'm thinking I'll sing it before long, or something like it, up there; no more sighing, nor sorrow, nor pain! So I've reason to bless Miss Roberta, haven't I? for she was like the angel they read about at Christmas; she brought me glad tidings of great joy! Miss Aylmer's a very nice young lady, and as kind as kind. Didn't she knit this petticoat for me with her very own hands last winter? and didn't she bring me beautiful white soup when I was ill with what the doctor calls *bronkrikris!* An awful complaint it is; you feels as if you took every breath on the edge of a sharp knife. But she hasn't Miss Roberta's way of putting things, nor her religion don't seem to make her happy, though she's always at it. Miss Roberta's words come to me like good wine—they warm my old heart! and Miss Aylmer's talk's like herb tea, cold, and not nice, and you must take such a lot of it if it's to do you any good.”

This is rather a long parenthesis, but I wanted you to know what Roberta really was to these old women, and to many others living out of the almshouses. Well, then, on the Saturday morning, she set out to pay half a dozen of these visits, which were a pleasure to herself~, as well as an unspeakable comfort to the poor old ladies; and not many yards from her own gate she met Mr. Aylmer.

She would have bowed and walked on, for the days were past when she would have stopped and chatted with the rector as a matter of course. He paused, however, and in a distant yet courteous manner inquired after Miss Roberts the elder. Then he asked Roberta if she were going into the village, and she at once declared her errand, remarking that she had much less time for visiting now, as her aunt required such frequent attention, but that she did not feel justified in giving up her parish work entirely.

Mr. Aylmer was silent, and Roberta wondered why he continued walking by her side; he was certainly going with all speed in the opposite direction when she encountered him. He looked so grave, and kept silence so long, that she began to feel very uncomfortable; was she going to be scolded again for her heresies, and was she to do penance, on pain of being excommunicated with bell, book, and candle? At last he spoke—

“Roberta, I am sorry to have to say what will give you pain.”

Roberta recovered her spirits as she heard his voice, and she answered quickly—

“Then don't say it, Mr. Aylmer. Nothing that you can say can alter my opinions, because, as I said before, I take them from the Word of God. It is useless to revive the subject; please do not let us have any more controversy.”

“I am not intending any controversy, Roberta, and I *must* speak, though it is a duty which I could wish had not fallen to my share. I am not going to dispute with you any more, as you say it is all in vain; I am going, as your pastor, as one having authority from the Most High, to issue a command—I cannot permit you any longer to continue to make these visits of which you speak.”

“*You cannot permit me!*” said Roberta, turning round with flashing eyes.

Her spirit rose at the haughty tone in which she was addressed; she was not one tamely to submit to unwarrantable coercion.

“I cannot permit you to spread error in the fold of the Holy Church. It is not I, Eustace Aylmer, who command you—it is as the priest of Overdale, the authorised minister of the Church, who yet claims you as her child, that I desire you to render to me obedience in this particular.”

“What have I done that you should seek from me such obedience?”

“Roberta, it should be enough that I required obedience. The powers delegated to me justify me in asking from you, from all over whom *I* am placed, an implicit and unconditional obedience. But I will not so test you, knowing that you would fail, that I should only be giving you occasion to transgress. I will tell you why I issue a decree which sounds harshly in your ears. Your teaching is not the teaching of the Church; your consolations are not those which the Holy Mother imparts; your—”

Roberta interrupted him in the old impetuous way that reminded him of her girlhood. Of late years she had been far gentler and meeker. “Mr. Aylmer, excuse me, but are you a minister of the Protestant Church of this realm?”

“I am a priest of the Anglican Church, Roberta. I do not call myself a *Protesant!* That the Church of Rome made undue assumptions in past ages I am bound to admit; but that did not justify the Church of England in severing herself root and branch, as she essayed to do, from the Holy and Apostolic see. I belong, not to the Protestant, but to the Holy Catholic Church,”

“And so do I, I hope, Mr. Aylmer. For that blessed Church is indeed the true fold of Christ. It is the only Church throughout the world acknowledging God’s love in Christ; it is the Church of the past, and of the present, and of all time to come; the Church of the Apostles, and prophets, and martyrs, of Greek and barbarian, of bond and free, of rich and poor, of old and young, of all who call Jesus Lord, and love Him and serve Him in sincerity.”

“So far we quite agree, Roberta.”

“Yes, Mr. Aylmer, so far, but I go farther, thank God! My Catholic Church is far wider, far more crowded than yours. *All* Christ’s children are in it, whatever may be their varying creeds; they are called by various names, and they worship in various modes, but the Master owns them all—they are all members of His Church militant here on earth, and one by one He calls them to join the great multitude of the redeemed in heaven, the Church triumphant, who see His face, and serve Him perfectly, and praise Him for evermore.”

“Take heed, Roberta, how you delude yourself and others! This is an age of falsely called liberalism, which is indeed only a fatal latitudinarianism; but we have been over the ground so lately that it seems useless to rehearse the arguments I brought before you.”

“Quite useless! Dear Mr. Aylmer, you know how I have honoured you, how I have loved you as my pastor and my friend, but when my Bible teaches me one thing and you another, it is you whom I must perforce disbelieve and disobey.”

“Is it not presumptuous, your seeking to understand all mysteries for yourself, instead of listening humbly to the voice of the Church, speaking through the words of her ordained minister? My dear Roberta, trust me that her ordinances are the channels which convey the Blessed Spirit; her pastors *alone* are the appointed dispensers of her blessings; and most gracious, most consolatory are the provisions which she makes for the comfort and instruction of all such as walk in fitting submission and humility of spirit. Oh! Roberta, you little know what you are casting from you!”

Roberta was softened now, for Mr. Aylmer spoke gently and even affectionately; once more he seemed like the loving pastor of her earlier days; he was no longer the stern, gloomy priest, arrogating to himself all but supernatural gifts and powers. The tears were streaming down her face, as she said—

“Oh! Mr. Aylmer, I love my Church; I love her as I knew her in my childhood and youth. I love her liturgy, I reverence her ministers; and it will be a bitter grief to me if I am forced out of her communion.”

“Nay, my child, do not weep, or rather let your tears, which I trust are tears of penitence, flow as the harbingers of restored peace and joy. I do not feel that I am called to exclude you from the privileges of the Church. You are still of our communion; the blessing of the holy Eucharist is still yours. Come back, Roberta, to the bosom of the Church, the *one* true Church of Christ, the ark which shall bear you safely over the floods of earthly trial and earthly sorrow, and bring you at last safe into the haven of eternal peace.”

“Mr. Aylmer, I was not fearing that you might exclude me from communion; I was fearing lest I should feel it my duty to withdraw myself. I cannot join in the unscriptural practices lately introduced into our church. I cannot listen to your preaching, for by my presence I seem to countenance that which I disavow. The service is no longer the service it used to be. I cannot join in it,”

“You will not commit schism, Roberta?”

“I scarcely know what schism is.”

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“If you separate yourself from the one true and Apostolic Church, and join the lawless sects, you become a schismatic.”

“I have not thought of joining any lawless sect.”

“I am glad to hear it. Remember, that *Dissent* is *heresy*.”

“I am not sure of that, and A do not want to be a Dissenter; but there is no other church within walking distance, and I cannot attend yours. There are others, too, who feel as I do. Mr. Aylmer, what are we to do?”

“Till you are in a humbler frame of mind I cannot tell you.”

“One thing more. I am not sure that I can obey you In the matter of my old women. I do not speak positively. I must think over it, and take counsel; but if they choose to receive me, I do not think I can give up going to see them. And I may as well tell you that I have serious thoughts of taking my class at my own house on Sunday afternoon, since you deny me admission to your schoolroom. I have not yet decided, but if I see it to be right, I shall carry out my plan. I will not go to the almshouses to-day, because I will do nothing unadvisedly; but I am pretty sure I shall go in a few days.”

“*Roberta!*” said the rector, sternly.

But Roberta was saying good morning; she had business in Hetty Oakley's shop.

Chapter 31. THE DENE

Mr. Aylmer was fated that day to endure vexations, for when he left Roberta he turned back towards the destination he had in view when he met her in the lane; and that destination was no other than Mr. Bellamy's house.

Twice during the week had Mr. Bellamy called at the Rectory, and Mr. Aylmer had been from home; therefore he resolved to take a walk to the Dene, as the farm was called, that he might ascertain what the farmer wanted; little guessing, however, what he actually did want. He felt sorrowful rather than angry after he parted with Roberta, and deeply he mourned over the spirit of the age, which, to his thinking, seemed to generate rebellion, irreverence, and contempt of authority, just as a piece of rank, neglected ground produces weeds. It was a grey, still morning, a soft haze hung over the hills and over the dim sea-line; a few sere leaves yet fluttered on the oak and beech, and one weeping birch in a sheltered rocky nook swept its yellow tresses like golden rain around its silvery stem, and just above the coral clusters of a leafless mountain ash. Gossamer threads, spangled with pearly dew, were everywhere; they covered the withered brake and showed like fairy handiwork on the purpling bramble, and on the glossy sheen of the prickly holly bush; here and there a pale sad daisy drooped its stricken head, or the ragwort's faded amber glistened through heaps of withered foliage; while perched upon a straggling briar, all jewelled with its bright scarlet hips, the redbreast poured forth its "tender, cheerful strain."

The lane had ended in a broad slope of broken ground. It was the nearest, but not the most frequented road to the Dene, and no living creature save the warbling red-breast was in sight. Mr. Aylmer sat down on a rock, and, glancing round the little hollow, to be sure that he was quite alone, covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud. For some minutes he remained thus, and in that brief conflict, which none but God saw, he for a moment wavered.

"Not that!" he cried. "Oh, my God, not that!—ought but that! No, I will not believe that *Thou* wilt it."

And then he shuddered, as if he had spoken blasphemy; for the chains wherewith a false faith had bound him were very heavy, and day by day their cruel coils grew closer and tighter about him. The sacrifice of a perfect and willing obedience he was called upon to render, and in all but one particular, was he ready to render full, unflinching, unquestioning submission. But on that one point he wavered—nay, more than wavered; he *could not* yield! *He would not yield*. But the agony of spirit was terrible; this struggle between an earthly affection and the full surrender of himself body, soul, and intellect, to what he deemed a purer, higher, holier life, was almost more than he could bear; and again he murmured to himself:

"No, no; not *that!* Oh, my God, I will give all. I will bear scorn, torture—a death of anguish, if *Thou* wilt it;—but *this* I cannot do. For I could not suffer alone; if mine only were the desolation, I would nerve myself to bear it. I could but die—I could but endure till the end came! But it is not so. Oh, what were the cutting off a right hand, or the plucking out a right eye, to *this*?"

Just then the bark of a sheep-dog broke the stillness of the quiet glade, and Mr. Aylmer rose slowly, and continued his walk; but he looked haggard and worn. The sorrows of years seemed to have swept over his pale, stern face since he parted with Roberta. His aspect was that of one stricken and crushed beneath a heavy load, which must be borne in silence and alone.

A little later, and Mr. Aylmer was in Mrs. Bellamy's pleasant sitting-room, where she and her eldest daughter were busy with their needlework. The farmer was somewhere about, she knew, and she would send one of the servants to look for him and tell him he was wanted; and, in the meantime, Mr. Aylmer must take some refreshment.

Almost eagerly he accepted Mrs. Bellamy's offer, for the struggle through which he had been passing had so exhausted him that he felt unequal to conversation, even on unimportant matters, till his physical powers were somewhat restored.

After a slice of one of Mrs. Bellamy's famous pork-pies, and a glass of the farmer's excellent October ale reserved for special occasions, Mr. Aylmer began to feel like himself again, and ready for whatever might ensue; though still an unutterable sadness, which no revival of mere bodily forces could sweep away, weighed down his spirit. Only he felt stronger to bear the pain, to go on with the struggle, to confront whatever of opposition might

be in store; for that something antagonistic was awaiting him he could not doubt.

Meanwhile he talked pleasantly, yet with a peculiarly abstracted air, to Mrs. Bellamy, answering her inquiries about Mrs. Aylmer and the children, and touching upon various topics supposed to be interesting to people who live in the same village, till at last the master of the house, having been discovered with his men in a turnip-field, made his appearance, and respectfully saluted the rector. A fine specimen of the better sort of English farmer was Mr. Bellamy—tall, well made, decidedly handsome, and having but a very slight air of rusticity in his bearing or appearance. He was an excellent farmer, and he owned most of the land which he cultivated; only he rented a few acres of glebeland which lay conveniently contiguous; all the other farmlands for miles round belonged either to the Aylmers or to the Chennerys. But Mr. Bellamy studied something else besides soils and sub-soils, and guano, and roots, and crops generally; nor was his interest entirely absorbed in prize oxen, mammoth sheep, and obese swine, whose lazy lives must have been a burden to them. He knew all the points of a good horse, and he liked a day's shooting, though he strenuously objected to coursing as a cruel and unmanly sport, unworthy of a Christian gentleman; for to terrify and run to death with men and dogs a panting, defenceless creature for mere sport seemed to him about as mean and unworthy a pursuit as scaring and injuring children or helpless women. But then, as everybody knew, Mr. Bellamy held peculiar views on many subjects; and he not only held them, but proclaimed them with a courage that roused the anger of some people, while it called forth the admiration of others. And he read the newspapers carefully, not in the idle way in which newspapers generally are read, but seriously, thoughtfully, and as a Christian duty.

And Mr. Bellamy had other than newspaper literature; he loved to spend a quiet hour in reading; and in the winter he and his family contrived to get through a goodly number of pleasant, useful volumes; and they were talked over both by parents and children in the cheerful circle of their hearth. Very little was read in that house for mere reading's sake, and very little, if any, that was not profitable; though do not misunderstand me, and suppose that I mean that the Bellamy family read only histories, biographies and travels. Most of the best works of fiction, having a high and pure tone, found their way to the Dene; and true poetry was well appreciated by them all. Then they were really musical, and the two elder girls and Miss Binder, the governess, played with great taste; and Helen, the eldest daughter, whose speciality was sacred music, was longing for a harmonium. When she first wished for it she little dreamed of the way in which it would come to her.

So much for Mr. Bellamy; now let us hear what he has to say.

"A nice mild, open morning for the season," was naturally the first observation after the farmer and the rector were comfortably seated. They were both Englishmen, and were therefore fain to discuss the weather before approaching any other subject.

"Yes," said Mr. Aylmer; "it is even warm down in the hollow yonder."

"And Mrs. Aylmer goes on nicely, and her little one?"

"Yes; my wife went to church yesterday, and to-morrow the little one will be baptized."

"Ah!" said the farmer, thinking how much that meant to Mr. Aylmer; how much to him would be involved in the morrow's ordinance.

Then there was silence, and gentle Mrs. Bellamy's pulse beat very fast; for though she knew her husband would say what was in his heart as kindly and respectfully as firmly and uncompromisingly, yet she knew also the sensitive nature of her pastor, which from many people he succeeded in hiding under a veil of seeming pride and studied reserve; and it was not in her nature to behold another wounded and not suffer herself.

Then said Mr. Bellamy: "We are not quite sure whether we shall be with you on Sunday morning. It was to speak to you about it that I called twice at the Rectory in your absence. One or two of my friends have counselled me simply to withdraw myself from attendance on the parish church, leaving you to form your own conclusions, or to satisfy yourself by making inquiry if you chose. But it seemed to me, and to my dear wife there, for we are of one mind in this matter, and we have taken counsel of each other, and we have conferred together solemnly and prayerfully,—it seemed to us that it would be more in consonance with Christian straightforwardness and English frankness if I came to you and told you honestly what it is that is acting as a barrier between your ministrations and ourselves." Cold and unmovable, but sad, looked Mr. Aylmer.

He replied: "I know of nothing which *ought* to form a barrier between you and the Church which claims you as her son; of myself I say nothing. But I thank you for your candour, Mr. Bellamy—there is no sore like a hidden sore, which rankles and rankles, while we dare not show it to a physician. Better the surgeon's knife, with its

sharp, fierce, but passing agony, than the slow torture which cannot be confessed, and which therefore loses every chance of being healed. What is it, Mr. Bellamy?"

"Mr. Aylmer, I and mine have always been faithful to that branch of the Church of Christ called in this realm the Church of England. It is not its right name, but we will not quarrel about that. I should prefer to call it the Established Church, or the Episcopal Church, which you will. I love Overdale church as I can never while I live love any other sanctuary. In that church were my father and mother married—in the churchyard, near the great yew-tree, are their graves, and the graves of many of my kindred and ancestors; for we Bellamys are an old family in these parts. There are also buried two babes of my own, and a young sister of my wife. Sunday after Sunday we have met under that sacred roof, and joined in praise and prayer, and we have listened to your teaching, and to his teaching who came before you. And my wife and I would fain have so continued; but, Mr. Aylmer, it cannot be; we have had several conversations on the subject; but I ask you once more, are you quite resolved to go on with these newly-introduced practices, which, to my mind, savour so strongly of Popery? Nay, it seems to me that this Puseyism, or Tractarianism, or whatever it may be called, *is* Popery, only more or less adulterated, as the case may be."

"My teaching is the teaching of the Church, Mr. Bellamy."

"But of what Church, Mr. Aylmer?"

"Of the Anglican Church, Mr. Bellamy."

"Then if it be so, the Anglican Church and I must part company. So long as she taught the truth, the simple truth of God's Holy Word, I loved her and clung to her ordinances and her discipline. I love her still; but I cling to her no longer if she dishonour Christ."

"And who shall dare to say that the mother Church in this realm dishonours Christ?"

"The articles of the Church of England and its liturgy in the main do not dishonour Christ, sir! God forbid that I should bring such a charge against the Church of my fathers. Yet there are serious errors in her formularies, and also I believe in her canon law; but on that point I am not sufficiently learned to speak with full certainty, and it is the party which you represent, Mr. Aylmer—I say it with all due respect as to my minister, and to a man whose rank in life is far above my own—it is this party which, taking advantage of sundry unreformed portions of the Book of Common Prayer, and of obsolete canons of the Church, has built up a new Church called the Anglican Church, that is *not* the good old, simple, Evangelical Church of England, which teaches and preaches the plain, unmingled Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It seems to me, Mr. Aylmer, that this new sect which has arisen among us, the Anglican Catholic sect, breaks the first commandment, it puts Christ's Church, and Christ's sacraments, and Christ's ministers, in the place of Christ Himself. Sir, this love of ritual, this ceremony, this technical phraseology, this superstition of a priesthood without its power, is a disgrace to us as Protestants. Yes, I know you repudiate that name, for we have talked about these things many times before, but the more I think upon the matter, the more I read my Bible and the history of my country, the more intensely Protestant I become. And it has come to this, Mr. Aylmer, that either you must promise me to change your habits—that is, to discontinue the strange order of service which you have adopted or adapted—or I must quit my parish church and worship elsewhere."

"I cannot make any change, Mr. Bellamy, for I am acting upon the profoundest convictions; and you are quite wrong in supposing that I am introducing new forms or new doctrine into Overdale Church. I am seeking only to restore and to revive. I would bring back the Church of England to her ancient glory, to the place of power which is hers by right Divine. She has been cramped and fettered too long; her piety has been chilled and withered, her authority set at naught, her teaching has been unsound. Now the time has come for her to arise and shake off her ashes, to assume her true position, and become once more the joy and blessing of the nation."

"That which is untrue can be neither joy nor blessing; and that section of the Church which you represent, Mr. Aylmer, and, thank God, it is only a section as yet, will, if it prevail, ultimately lay in ruins the Church of our forefathers in this realm. '*A house divided against itself cannot stand.*' Take heed, sir! The time will come, if all this go on, when there will be no Church of England as by law established. And it will not be because the land has grown irreligious, nor because Nonconformity has waxed mighty and denounced and attacked the Church that long ago persecuted her and treated her with contumely; it will be because you and such as you have undermined the true foundations of the Church. You have hoisted the enemy's colours; you have made division in the camp. Better, sir, a thousand times that all the Dissenters in the country were arrayed rank and file against us,

determined to pluck down our flag and break down our enclosures; better that infidelity itself, armed to the teeth, as in the French Revolution, came and threatened us, than *the treachery* that is now in our midst. *Ritualism is betraying the Church of England to her doom.* It is driving thousands from her. At this hour many are seduced into an open profession of Popery; many are *forced* into Dissent; and many, despising the Church in which from childhood they have trusted and which they have been educated to honour, grow sceptical, and rush from superstition into rationalism.”

“It is vain arguing with you in this frame of mind, Mr. Bellamy. Already I have shown you that the Church claims Divine authority. God speaks to you by the voice of His Church.”

“Rather say by the voice of His Spirit through the Word which He has given us.”

“Truly. But the interpretation of that Word rests with those who are duly *authorised*. Besides, Scripture and tradition taken together are the joint rule of faith, and most certainly it is not safe for the laity to judge things by the Scripture alone.”

“The Romish priest at Hoveness would say that, Mr. Aylmer. You would not, I suppose, as he would, forbid private reading of the Scriptures?”

“No, certainly not. I only ask you to submit your judgment to that of the Church, in whose bands lies the key to all the mysteries of our faith.”

“That sounds very un-Protestant.”

“Once more let me say, Mr. Bellamy, that I distinctly and avowedly reject Protestantism. I trust, of course, that an active and visible union with the see of Rome is not of the essence of a Church; but at the same time I and many others, thoughtful and earnest and self-denying men, are deeply conscious that in remaining out of it, far from asserting a right, we forego a privilege.”

“After that, Mr. Aylmer, I will say no more. I only marvel that you do not at once secure to yourself the ‘great privilege.’ You will not expect to see me or my family again in our usual places on the Sunday morning. My wife and my elder children are entirely with me in this matter; over my younger children I claim, of course, the authority of a father. My servants will please themselves; but I shall not leave them unwarned.”

“It seems, then, that you are about to sow the seeds of *schism* in your native place, Mr. Bellamy. Are you going to turn Dissenter, may I ask?”

“Not at present, for there is no Dissenting place of worship nearer than Hoveness, and if I went to Hoveness at all, I should attend St. John's, where the Gospel is faithfully preached, and the service simply conducted, and the sacraments administered according to the old usage of the Established Church, as I have known it all my life, without any admixture of Romish or semi-Romish ceremony. But that is out of the question; I shall only go there occasionally, my wife and I, and Helen, and Ruth, and Miss Binder, for communion. I shall be the priest of my own household.”

“I do not clearly understand.”

“I shall make it to be understood that there will be the worship of God in my large kitchen every Sunday morning and evening; and in the spring I daresay we shall have a prayer-meeting on some evening of the week. I shall read the Church prayers, not perhaps always the whole of them, for I see no reason why I should go on the mischievous principles of Archbishop Laud, who made three services into one—wherefore I am not scholar enough to say. We shall sing hymns, and I shall read a good, plain Gospel sermon, or perhaps occasionally say a few words of my own, in exposition of some passages of Holy Scripture. Now and then, perhaps, I may prevail upon some good, truth-loving minister to spend the Sunday with us, and conduct our little service.”

“I warn you of one thing, Mr. Bellamy—you are about to commit the sin of schism. It will be sheer hypocrisy in you to read the Litany in your house, and say, ‘From all heresy and *schism*, good Lord, deliver us.’”

“Schism is not always separation, dear sir; it is rather *division*, and those who cause the division are *schismatics*. As a good man said the other day—Schism arises when any members of churches maintain dangerous errors which *force* faithful men to protest against it; it arises when the ministers or members of churches oblige their fellow-Christians to separate from them by their violation of the plain commands of God. Those who propagate errors are the schismatics, not they whose conscience compels them to recede from it. The sin of schism will not rest on my conscience, Mr. Aylmer. I can still, with an unfeigned heart, ask God to deliver me from it. And may He be our guide in all things, teaching and leading us by His Blessed Spirit. Doubtless to you I seem presumptuous; but I must say, Mr. Aylmer, ere we part, never again perhaps to meet in the relations

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which have so long subsisted between us, you are blinded, and your feet are entangled in a terrible and fatal snare. God alone can deliver you. There is still hope, for the Saviour is ever ready to forgive; and He watches in love over His erring ones, and calls them back to His fold. The day may come, nay, it will come, when your heart, your broken heart, I fear, will yearn to come to Him alone for pardon and peace. Then remember these words, 'Thou hast destroyed thyself, but in Me is thine help.'

Chapter 32. IS IT INDIFFERENCE?

The weeks passed away, and now it wanted only a fortnight to Christmas; but Mr. Vallance still lingered on at Overdale, very much to the secret chagrin of its mistress, who, though far from well, was sufficiently recovered to resume her usual place at the head of the household.

She saw very little of her husband; either he was shut up in the study with his Mend, and might not be disturbed, or else the two were taking a walk “over the hills and far away,” no one knew whither. And of course the daily services and the visitation of parishioners, not to speak of the “getting up” of the various “celebrations” on Sundays and saints' days, took much of Mr. Aylmer's time, so that he was not very often to be seen enjoying himself in the bosom of his family.

As the days wore on, and matters did not mend, Agatha began to chafe at the isolation which had so suddenly become her portion. If she had anything of importance to say to her husband, or if she wished to consult him on any point, she found it nearly impossible to gain his ear alone. Private interviews were becoming rare; and when Lady Jane, who had lately arrived at the Rectory, asked sundry questions concerning her brother, Agatha had the mortification of being unable to reply to them. She was really in as much ignorance of her husband's movements as was the Lady Jane herself. Sometimes he ran up to town “on business,” but what business Agatha knew no more than the man in the moon, she could not even form a guess; but Vallance always accompanied him on these mysterious expeditions, which were never announced till the carriage was ordered which was to convey them to Blackmoor station. Occasionally, too, the rector went to Hoveness, and stayed all night at the house of one of Valiance's most intimate Mendes; but the name of the friend did not transpire, and Agatha was too proud to ask. Lady Jane, however, was less scrupulous; and one day she boldly asked her brother, “Eustace, where do you stay when you remain all night at Hoveness?”

“Sometimes at the hotel—the Queen's Hotel—where we all of us stay when we are at Hoveness; sometimes at the house of a friend of Herbert's, or rather I should say at his lodgings, for he is not himself a householder.”

“Is he a married man?”

“Really, Jane, you are singularly curious this morning. What has given you such a fit of inquisitiveness, may I ask?”

“Nothing that I know of; it is only a very ordinary demonstration of that laudable thirst for information which possesses women generally and old maids particularly. I never knew before that Mr. Vallance had any friend in these parts save yourself; naturally when I hear of a friend living at Hoveness I want to know—being of essentially feminine nature—who he is.”

“I cannot tell you much about him. He has not lived at Hoveness many months, and he, is a clergyman, the Rev. Mr. La Motte.”

“A French name; a clergyman of our Church, I suppose?”

Mr. Aylmer was so much occupied with the refractory lock of his travelling-bag that he did not for several minutes answer his sister. At last he replied, as if he were thinking of something else, “Yes, he is of French extraction, but I believe he is English born; and he is a clergyman of the Church. What is Foster thinking about? he has not put up—,” and Mr. Aylmer, bag in hand, hurried from the room, and Lady Jane saw him no more till he was seated in the carriage with Mr. Vallance, who was ready to take the reins. Lady Jane felt certain he had taken no leave of Agatha, though he waved his hand to her as she stood at an upper Window just as they drove away.

It was quite true; he had not said good-bye to Agatha. That is, not specially; he had risen from the luncheon-table, saying to his wife, “My dear, I find that Vallance and I must drive to Hoveness to-day before dinner; we shall not be back till to-morrow evening; Gregson and Bonner take the services between them.” Then, consulting his watch, “I had no idea it was so late. Goodbye all.”

Agatha never doubted that he would come to her sitting-room before he left. She did not, however, as she would have done a little while before, go with him and help him in his preparations for the journey. A miserable feeling of restraint, an inexplicable shyness, had seized her of late; and she had now as much hesitation about invading her husband's privacy as if he were not her husband. When and how the feeling began, and whence it

sprang, she could not tell; she only knew that some sort of barrier had risen up between Eustace and herself, and that fetters of some kind were being woven for her, which were all the more formidable that they were impalpable. Now and then it occurred to her—did he repent? Did he regret his somewhat hasty, and, as many people called it, his *unsuitable* marriage? Was he tired of her?—had he found out his mistake, that, dazzled by her poor beauty, he had taken to himself a wife who could never thoroughly understand him, never satisfy his deepest needs?

All these questions Agatha asked herself again and again as she sat shivering by the fire, and listening for the footsteps that never came. Once she thought his hand was on the door; but no! it was only little Maud come to complain to mamma of some petty nursery grievance; and she soothed the child, and sent her away smiling and happy. She could not keep her with her; she was too anxious, too *disraite*, for any society but that for which she was yearning. So she drew her low chair closer to the fire, wondering, poor thing! why she was so cold and so miserably nervous. And again she listened, and her heart beat almost audibly as she strained her ear to catch the import of the different noises in the house. Now she heard Gertrude run downstairs, singing one of her favourite operatic airs, "Scenes that are brightest"; now she caught the swell of the harmonium from the other side of the house. Some one was playing the *Stabat Mater*; but the doors closed, and all was still again, and she went on unconsciously crooning to herself the quaint melody of the "*Cujus Animam.*" Then the baby cried, and she listened quietly to the wail, she could hear that it was not a cry of pain, for the nursery was not far from her sitting-room, and she did not go. Strong as was the maternal passion in Agatha's heart, it slumbered now, or rather it was held in abeyance by one still stronger, perhaps one may say still holier; for before and above all other ties is the sacred marriage tie—a tie, too, that never holds one so closely, so enthrallingly, as when it seems likely to be broken or loosened by death, or by change, which is infinitely worse. She would not go to her child and perhaps miss the chance of the farewell kiss and the loving adieu that might be awaiting her from the child's father; so she waited in a sort of patient agony, murmuring to herself now and then, "Will he *never* come?"

Then she began to tell herself that she was a simpleton.

"Why cannot I go to his dressing-room?" she asked herself, plaintively. "I am so weak, I am ashamed of myself; and yet I *cannot* muster courage to walk into that room where I have every right to be. *Right?* till just lately I have never thought about my rights; it seemed only natural to be where my husband was; I went and came with him, and was ever by his side—for it was my place. And it is my place still; nothing can alter that; nothing, and no one, can make me other than I am, his chosen, lawful wife. Is he estranged! what is it that seems like a closed door between us? He is not unkind—oh, no; every word is kind and gentle! I cannot say he is *cold*, and yet—oh, is he not growing *indifferent?* Ah! he had far better be angry and stern, and even cruel, than coolly indifferent. Anger may be soothed, sternness charmed away. If I had offended him I might surely win him to forgive me, and take me back again to his heart of hearts, which I thought was mine for ever! But *indifference*—ah, how shall that be conquered! how shall things that die for lack of root be brought to life again! And yet I cannot say it is that—thank God, I *cannot*. Rather it seems as if something had come between us. He loves me still, I know; such love as his—and it has been mine, all mine, for six happy years—is not, gourd-like, born to spring up in a day and perish in a night. How can I wrong his deep, true nature so? Oh, if he would only come; I *will* go to him; why should I, his wedded wife, the mother of his children, linger here as if I were still the poor minion, Agatha Bevan? What is pure maiden modesty and due reticence in the girl is utter folly in the wife. *I will go!*"

And Agatha rose, and her fingers were on the handle of the door; but just then a sound from without attracted her attention; it was certainly the pawing of a horse's feet upon the gravel. There would be scant time then for adieux, for the carriage must have been brought round, and, absorbed in her reverie, she had not heard it. She went to the window to look, and there she beheld what seemed to transfix her on the spot. Her husband was seated in the one-horse carriage in which he commonly drove about when going beyond the limits of his parish or its vicinity; Mr. Vallance held the reins ready to start, and Foster had just put in the travelling-bags behind. Had he forgotten? Was he really going without a word? He looked up and saw her there, pale, statue-like, and was stricken, and he waved his hand; it was almost a compromise for throwing a kiss; but then Mr. Aylmer was not one to make much show of conjugal affection. He had said once of a certain couple in the neighbourhood that it was the worst possible taste for married people to be making love to each other in public, and Agatha heartily agreed with him, as would, I am sure, any other sensitive, fine-natured woman; and she was quite content with

the little kindnesses and affabilities common to all the family, if only she had her own special share on other occasions. "Yes, he must have forgotten; Mr. Vallance must have hurried him at the last minute." Ah! how heartily she wished Mr. Vallance were at Canton, or Nova Zembla, or anywhere else save at Overdale. Eustace never did forget her in old time. Doubtless it would be all right again when this man was gone back to Normandy; but when would he go? He seemed likely to become a fixture in the neighbourhood, for she had heard Claude say something about "the fellow inquiring for lodgings in the village."

She watched the carriage out of sight, then she sat down again by the fire, this time shivering as if she had an ague, though the day was tolerably mild, and the room most comfortably warm. Poor Agatha! her heart felt very cold, and she wondered sadly whether it would ever be quite warm again. A book lay on her work-table, little Eustacia had carried it from the morning room, and it had been taken from her, and placed where it would be seen, that it might be taken down again. Agatha took it up; it was a volume of poems by various authors—a "Book of Gems," or something of that sort. Some of the verses were illustrated, and the pictures had attracted little Eustacia's attention. Agatha saw that one page was crumpled up by the small, busy hands, and instinctively she began to smoothe away the creases; as she did so she almost unconsciously read the lines before her: they formed part of an extract from Mrs. Tighe's "Psyche," and they were on the theme of "Indifference."

"Who can describe the hopeless silent pang
With which the gentle heart first marks its sway,
Eyes the sure progress of her icy fang,
Resistless, slowly fastening on her prey;
Sees rapture's brilliant colours fade away,
And all the glow of beaming sympathy,
Anxious to watch the cold averted ray,
That speaks no more to the fond meeting eye
Enchanting tales of love, and tenderness, and joy?"

"Too faithful heart! thou never can'st retrieve
Thy withered hopes; conceal the cruel pain,
O'er thy lost treasure still in silence grieve,
But never to the unfeeling ear complain.
From fruitless struggles dearly bought refrain;
Submit at once—the cruel talk resign,
Nor watch and fan the expiring flame in vain."

Though the words spoke painfully to Agatha's heavy heart, they inspired her with new courage.

"No," she said, putting the book from her, "I will *not* submit at once. I am not going to be a heroine in a three-volume novel. I hate those stories in which everything goes wrong from the middle of the first volume to the final chapter of the last, when all is explained, perhaps too late. Just as estrangement ceases, and peace and union are restored, somebody dies, and the book ends in unmitigated wretchedness. And the whole miserable tangle results from mere want of confidence and a little common candour. If the people in the tale had only *spoken out* instead of nursing their wrongs and brooding over them in silence, all would have been explained. Ten minutes' conversation would have chased all doubts away; a few plain questions asked, or an opinion expressed, and all would have come right. But then there could have been no story, and the publisher and the public alike would have been defrauded of their three volumes. Now, I do not want to live in a story; at any rate, if I am to be miserable, I will know exactly why. When my husband comes home to-morrow I will tell him at once frankly how unhappy I am, and ask him why it is he avoids me. I will be quite open and straightforward; why should I act a part? I know married life should not need explanations, but better explanations than the continuance of this strange, cold shadow, which shuts out all my sunshine, and robs my life of all its earthly warmth, and light, and comfort!"

And thus Agatha resolved, and then she felt calmer, and better able to meet her children and her sister-in-law; and after a short sleep, and a little while spent in earnest prayer for strength and guidance, she rang for her maid, and began to dress for dinner. She fancied the girl looked at her with curious eyes, and she wondered painfully whether the change in her husband's manner was so apparent as already to furnish food for speculation in the

servants' hall. Did all the house know that he had gone away to Hoveness without saying good-bye to her?

During the evening Rosamund came to her and said, "Mamma, I have asked Ada Chennery to come here for several weeks; I ought to have asked you first, but I had no opportunity, and you are so good as to ratify my invitations generally."

"Of course, my dear, you are at liberty always to invite your own special friends when we can find room for them; and Claude seems bent upon having a full house at Christmas. Ralph Mornington is coming, you know, and my cousins Helen and Stephen Galbraith are invited. Helen will pair with Gene, so it is only fair you should have Ada. But I hardly know where I shall put Stephen; I do not like giving any one that cold attic called the 'Bachelors'-room.

"Mr. Vallance's room will be empty before Christmas Eve, I suppose?"

Agatha's heart beat so fast she could scarcely speak. Was he really going away? and if going, how far? But anything was better than having him continually in the house.

"Indeed?" she said, quietly. "I did not know he was going so soon; when was it decided?"

"A few days ago; I wonder papa did not tell you. He is going to the Post-office; he has taken Hetty Oakley's rooms—the drawing-room and the best bedroom."

"I am sorry, very sorry, that Hetty should be exposed to his influence. She is innocent and happy now."

Agatha spoke with some irrepressible bitterness, and her fingers trembled so much that she had to lay down her knitting-needle.

Rosamund answered, in indignant amaze, "Mamma, what can you mean?"

"It seems to me a man like Mr. Vallance must have originated the fable of the Upas-tree, for wherever he goes he leaves desolation, and blight, and secret misery behind him. A girl like Hetty Oakley will not escape him."

"What's that?" cried Claude, throwing down his book "I say, Rosamund, you look quite vixenish; it is a relief to find out you can be human, but I hope you are not bullying mamma."

"Mamma is bringing the strangest accusations against Mr. Vallance," replied Rosamund, still excited. Her cheeks wore a rich crimson tint; her eyes were lustrous as two stars; she looked startlingly beautiful, scarcely less so than her lovely young stepmother.

"Heigho! *mater mea*, you turned accuser! What is it all about? surely I heard the name of Hetty Oakley. Mr. Vallance doesn't think of meddling with her, I should hope, our pretty wild rose of Overdale?"

"He is simply going to lodge over her shop. Hetty will have nothing to do with him; and Mr. Vallance has something better to think about than trifle with the affections of a village belle!"

"I never thought of his trifling with her affections," said Agatha, beginning to feel that she had spoken unwisely; she had an uncomfortable presentiment that Rosamund would tell him all that she had said. "I only wish he would love some good girl, as sweet and nice as Hetty Oakley. Of course I do not want him to marry so much out of his station; but any marriage that had true love for its foundation would be better than his unnatural protest against the sacred bonds which man, not God, has disallowed."

"You surely cannot find fault," said Rosamund, "with one who, like Mr. Vallance, voluntarily abjures those ties which are supposed to afford so much content. There are souls whose aspirations are so high that an earthly love can never satisfy them; they soar above the troubled regions of human passion; they find in God's love *all* they need, all they desire, and that Divine love fills the heart so completely that it leaves no space for any meaner love."

"My dear," said Agatha, "God claims our first love, I know that; but He has Himself instituted the holy ordinance of marriage, and He has Himself blessed all pure family ties. Surely we honour Him by availing ourselves of His richest gifts. Did He give us these strong and sweet affections that we should crush them? I do not find in the Word of God one command to forsake the ties of earth. I grant that sometimes our heavenly Father, for wisest, kindest purposes, breaks those ties. He dashes from the lip the brimming cup of joy. He spills earth's wine that He may fill the chalice with a purer, richer draught—a draught so satisfying that they who drink of it shall never thirst again. He sets apart some men and some women, and He lays on them the sanctity of a great sorrow, and bids them go and work in His vineyard, devoting themselves more fully, more exclusively to works of love and mercy than those who still keep their dear ones by their side. But this is God's hand, not man's; let man beware how he creates artificial barriers and institutes new laws which the word of truth can never ratify."

Rosamund made no reply; but Claude answered, "Well done, mamma! that's all true. I wish the old Jesuit

heard you. I am very glad he is going away from our fireside; we have never been the same since he sat at our hearth. But I am sorry that he should have any opportunity of tormenting poor Hetty Oakley. Ah, no! he will not make love to her; unless, indeed, he finds that the readiest mode of breaking her heart. Men of his type, I believe, think it meritorious to make people suffer in order that, being disgusted with the world, they may renounce all social ties and duties, and devote themselves to what they are pleased to call a religious life. Hetty is a sensitive little thing, she would easily be crushed; then comes in the *Church*, and—my daughter, find your peace, your true rest in her holy bosom! Yes; I know the whole programme. People are more easily worked upon when they are unhappy; therefore a true son of the Church feels it incumbent on him to make them speedily as miserable as he can. Mr. Vallance is no Anglican, take my word for it, Rosamund!”

But Rosamund had left the room, and just then one or the servants came in to say Claude was wanted in the stables; his favourite horse was ill.

He hurried away, and the conversation was not resumed.

Agatha spent a weary, wakeful night framing over and over again the sentences she would address to her husband in the conversation to take place next day. Of course the first thing must be to ask him to come to her sitting-room, as she had something of importance to say to him. Alas! that she should need to ask him to enter that room where once he had spent his happiest hours.

Chapter 33. AFTER CHRISTMAS

It was late next day when Mr. Aylmer returned from Hoveness, and all the morning and afternoon Agatha was nerving herself for the explanation she had resolved to seek. As the twilight gathered round, she began to fear that he would not come back till the morrow; that another night of wearing suspense, anxiety, and apprehension must be her portion; and she was trying to quiet the feverish impatience, which was fast becoming painful, when little Maude, standing at the drawing-room window, and peering out into the fast-thickening obscurity, announced that papa was coming, and ran out into the hall to meet him.

Agatha saw the carriage-lamps flashing among the wet evergreens, and she determined to take the first step instantly, lest, by delay or unfortuitous circumstances, her courage should desert her. The first thing clearly was to go and meet him. Even if Mr. Vallance were with him, why should she mind—could any right be more sacred, more inalienable than hers? There had been a time, and that very recently, when his first words on entering the house, after ever so brief an absence, were always an inquiry for his wife if his eyes fell not upon her almost immediately. “Where is mamma?” or “Where is your mistress?” Agatha generally heard him ask of children or servants as she hastened to the pleasant *rendezvous* which had been a sort of institution ever since her marriage. She lingered now in the inner hail, hoping to hear the familiar question put to her little daughter, who was shouting a dozen welcomes to her “dear papa.”

“Kiss me, papa, kiss me!” cried Maude, energetically; “you haven’t kissed me for three, four, six days.”

“Is it so long as that, my pet?” answered a voice full of weariness and sadness; “not quite so long, I think, Maudie.” And he lifted the child in his arms, and kissed her tenderly, and asked how baby was, but still he did not say, “Where is mamma?”

As he put Maude down, Agatha advanced to meet her husband, and she tried to be as natural as possible. She put up her face for a kiss as a matter of course, and equally as a matter of course she had a kiss, though she fancied rather a queer one. It seemed to her as if her husband kissed her, not against his will, not against his wish even, but rather *against his conscience*, only the idea was too absurd to be for a moment entertained. No one was present save little Maude, and she had not spoken to him since the morning of the day before.

“Are you wet?” she said, putting her hand on the sleeve of his coat. “Claude told me it rained a little while ago.”

“No, it does not exactly rain; but a little fine mist falls now and then. I am rather damp though, and very cold.”

“Come to my sitting-room,” she replied, eagerly; “there is a nice fire there, and we will have our cup of tea together before we dress for dinner. Besides, I want to talk to you.”

“There will be letters waiting for me in the study, my dear. I thought of ordering my early tea there.”

“Ah, no!” she said, keeping hold of his hand, and caressing it; “do come upstairs to-night. I have been looking forward all day to having you to myself for one little half-hour before dinner. But where is Mr. Vallance?”

“He has business which keeps him at Hoveness for a day or two. I left him with his friend.”

“The fates seem propitious to my request,” said Agatha, playfully; “now you have no excuse for shutting yourself up in that dismal room. You cannot have ‘Church matters’ to discuss with Mr. Vallance. Let me help you off with that overcoat. There, now I take possession of you. Come to my boudoir at once, sir! I am not going to have any disobedience; you are my prisoner, at least till the dressing bell rings.”

“Have you really anything to say, Agatha—that is, anything of consequence?”

“What a question! And we have not had a real good talk since baby was born. Yes, there is something I very much wish to say to you, and it *is* of importance.”

“Very well, then; I will come, my dear.”

And almost gaily Agatha mounted the stairs, with her hand on her husband’s arm. It was almost like old times again, and the simple fact of Mr. Vallance being a few miles away gave her fresh strength and animation. Oh, if he would only stay away for ever! And yet what great harm could he do?

Very cosy and pretty looked Agatha’s sitting-room, with its closely-drawn curtains and its clear, bright fire, and the costly little chamber tea-service, which had been one of her wedding presents, standing ready on the small round table drawn up to the hearthrug.

And Eustace Aylmer gave a sigh of relief as he settled himself in the comfortable easy chair, which was always his seat in that apartment. Not all the ascetic teaching in the world, not a thousand Vallances, could hinder him from feeling how sweet a thing it was to be welcomed home by a dear and lovely wife; to be cared for, and petted, and made much of; to know that there were little pattering feet in the nursery that would run to meet him if he went thither, and little fat arms that would be twined round his neck, and innocent, dear little lips that would press their pure, fresh kisses on his, and little treble voices that would hail his advent with delight. To know, too, that his elder children would rejoice at his appearance among them; that his home was a bright and happy one, unvisited by those jars and frets which so often disturb the domestic atmosphere in families where the heads of the household are not entirely one at heart, undarkened by any shadow save that one of mystery and dread of which he was himself the miserable centre!

Agatha lighted her candles, and prepared tea. She had made sundry little preparations that touched the heart of her visitor; they were all in his honour; the elegant china, the exquisitely arranged bouquets of greenhouse flowers, the lace-like anti-macassars spread on the crimson cushions, and the silver kettle hissing and bubbling so merrily over its spirit-lamp. Agatha did not take her five-o'clock tea in this state generally. As a rule a cup was brought to her, or sometimes a tray was carried into the morning-room, and people helped themselves exactly as they chose. And Mrs. Aylmer was looking her very best that evening; she was far more beautiful than when, in all her girlish bloom, she first came to Overdale; and her matronly grace and quiet dignity were even more charming than the sprightly elegance of earlier days. Among the rich folds of her dark, glossy hair shone out a superb camellia of pure, pale, rosy hue. It reminded her husband of that evening long ago when, half in hesitation, he gave her the lovely "Rose Celeste." Since then he had wooed and won her honourably, and now for six happy years she had been his true and faithful wife, the wise and tender mother of his children, the honoured and beloved mistress of his well-ordered household. Surely God had blessed the union sealed in His name, and by the authority of His word; for it had brought forth only fruits of love, and peace, and trust, and increased usefulness. Ah, they had been very blessed years, those which had elapsed since the day when Eustace Aylmer had, in the old church of Sutton Magna, pledged himself as in the sight of God, and before her kindred, to Agatha Bevan. Thrice blessed, thrice happy years, whatever might be the aspect of the time to come!

Agatha drank her first cup of tea before she commenced to open the conversation; and now, as the minutes glided by—oh, how rapidly!—her nervous tremors came back again, her hands trembled, and turned cold for all the glowing fire and the refreshing draught of warm and fragrant tea. Though, in the silent night hours, she had arranged every sentence—nay, every word that she would utter—she could not, as she sat there opposite her husband, remember a single phrase as she had intended to make use of it. A grave, tender remonstrance was what she had meant to start with; but at the moment it seemed unsuitable, and she turned to *badinage* as the readiest mode of expressing herself.

"I told you I had something to say to you, Eustace! and the eloquent blood rushed over cheek and brow; a moment before she had been nearly as pale as the white flowers in her vases.

"Yes; what is it? I cannot stay much longer; I have writing to do to-night."

"Eustace, I have not been at all happy lately."

"Indeed! have you not?" He paused; but he did not make the inquiry which seemed most natural for him to make, "*Why* are you not happy?"

"The fact is, Eustace, I have been jealous, and consequently miserable."

"*Jealous!*" and his face darkened ominously. "Agatha jealous? I thought my wife was above the smallness of such petty vices. I thought she had better taste. I thought she trusted her husband. If that is all you have to say, I have no reply to make. Only remember, Agatha, that when a woman stoops to jealousy—unfounded jealousy, such as yours—she degrades herself, while she dishonours her husband. A jealous woman is nearly always, if not always, conscious of shortcomings of her own; she feels that she is lacking in certain points which some one else may possibly supply; she knows that she either cannot, or will not, or certainly does not make her husband happy. Oh, Agatha, I thought you so far above the foibles of ordinary women!"

The severity of his tone touched Agatha deeply; she had never seen him look so thoroughly displeased, not even when he came home and announced that Roberta had defied him in that little matter of the almshouse-women! Her pride was wounded, and her feelings were also hurt; the hurried disclaimer that had been upon her lips she suppressed, while she answered, steadily, "You might have allowed me to finish what I had to

say; you condemn me unheard—it is unjust, Eustace!”

“There can be nothing to hear. Some men, I believe, rather relish such passages in their married lives; but I am not one of them—far from it, indeed. Some men take jealousy as a compliment; I do not, for it is far oftener the offspring of an irritable, exacting nature and an empty mind than the expression of doubting love, if true love *can* be doubting.”

“You do not even ask me who it is that in some sort wrongs me.”

“No, indeed. Oh! Agatha, I thought you trusted me so completely. What have we not been to each other for the last six years? If all my friends and all my neighbours had come to me, hinting that your slightest thought wandered from me, I should have laughed to scorn the incredible, base slander. Yet you sit there, and calmly tell me you are *jealous*; there is nothing so hateful, so contemptible, so demoralising as jealousy.”

“Eustace,” said Agatha, steadily, “we are talking at cross-purposes; perhaps it was my own fault; I ought not to have jested.”

“*Jested?*” he interrupted her indignantly; “to jest on such a subject!”

“You thoroughly misunderstand me,” she continued, still quietly, for a sudden strength had come to her, and she felt free to speak all that was in her heart. “When I said I was jealous, I was only using the word as a figure of speech. It was foolish, and I beg your pardon for it, for you cannot despise a jealous wife more entirely than I do myself. Jealousy is not in my nature; it may touch the noblest I suppose, for all are frail and sometimes weak, but it can only *dwell* with the meanest natures, with the most selfish and exacting dispositions. I love you, and have perfect faith in you; I cannot at all understand the love which has not perfect faith for its concomitant. Yes; I trust you entirely, because my love for you from the very first was founded on esteem and reverence. If I doubted you, and knew that I had cause for such doubt—if I were sure that the love you once gave to me was given to another, I should not be jealous—I *should let you go*. I could never humble myself to all those fruitless toils and watchings which a cruel jealousy imposes, but I am afraid I should despise you. I should submit without a struggle, but I am not sure that I could bear it and live.”

“You need not fear; you will never be called to *that* trial. My love for you, Agatha, is as my own life; it is part of my very being; no mere human love can ever be your rival. If I were sinful enough to be false to you, my heart would not let me wander from you, even for a moment. You are infinitely dearer than when I took you as my bride from Sutton Magna six years ago, for now I know you better. I know all your worth, your truth, your strength of character, your sweetness and womanly tenderness of soul.”

“Then why this coldness?” said Agatha, almost sobbing at this sudden revelation of her husband's strong, intense affection.

He took her in his arms, half reluctantly, as it were, and wiped away the tears from her face, saying, in the saddest tones she had ever heard from him, “You think me cold, Agatha?”

“Yes; have I not reason? Have you not shut yourself up from me of late, withdrawing your confidence, speaking only to me of that which is patent to all the household? Has not your manner changed?”

“I suppose it has,” he replied curtly, but not unkindly. “My poor little Agatha!”

“You pity me and torture me at once, Eustace. What does it all mean?”

“You do not accuse me of unkindness?”

“Oh, no. But oh, my love, do be frank. Do, I implore you, tell me, what is this strange, intangible barrier that rises up between us? Even now it is here; while you clasp me to your bosom I feel the change—the coldness, the reserve, which seems not you, but something which is forced upon you. Have I at all offended you?—have I been remiss in any wifely, motherly, or social duty?”

“Never, my darling! I have not a fault to find with you. You are only too good to me, too kind!”

“Ah, how can one be *kind* to a person one loves so dearly? Kindness is the expression of benevolence, of amiability, of self-denial, perhaps. My bearing to you, my smallest dealings with you, spring from a far deeper, far holier source. But tell me, have I been mistaken? Say there is nothing, and I will believe you implicitly. Say it is only my own foolish fancy—my naughty, exacting temper, perhaps—and I will think no more about it.”

“I cannot tell you you are mistaken. There has been a change. I know it, Agatha; I know it too well, for it has cost me very dear.”

“But it will not go on?”

“I cannot tell. I am afraid it must go on.”

“Eustace, for mercy's sake, speak out in plain words what you mean. If you love me do not torture me with this show of mystery. If any terrible calamity is in store for me, let me know it, that I may face it and ask God to give me strength to bear it.”

“Agatha, what if I told you I must give you up?”

“Give me up! I am your wife, the mother of your children. The world would cry shame on you if you thought of such a thing; and what is more, far more, God would be very angry with you. You cannot mean it?”

“I do not say it will be; yet I feel that I trifled with my conscience when I asked you to become my wife. What have such as I, sworn servant of God's altar, to do with the loves of husband and father? I would rather yield my own life than give you up, Agatha. Yet it may be—it may be that I am called to so costly a sacrifice.”

“There is no law, either human or divine, which says an English priest shall not have a wife.”

“There is no human law, I know; but I am not sure that there is no Divine decree on this subject. There is no Anglican Church, properly speaking; we all belong by birth and inheritance to the one holy Catholic Church. My son is not the less my son if he fling off my control, deride my just authority, and call himself by another name. Claude would be an Aylmer always, and his children's children after him would be Aylmers even if this day he left us and renounced his name and inheritance for ever. Whether we like it or not, we, who are baptized, are all members of the one true Church—some of us, alas! rebellious, unruly members, needing the sternest discipline of our Holy Mother.”

“Eustace! you mean the Church of Rome. Oh! I have feared this. You will cast aside the last remnants of our purer faith, and join the ranks of that apostate Church. Forgive me; I must say so, even if I give you pain.”

“It does give me pain to find that you do not think with me. I had hoped that at least we were one in thought and religious conviction; I had hoped that gradually, perhaps, I might make you see the necessity of bowing to that which is inevitable. Agatha! what is more glorious than self-sacrifice? Is it not akin to martyrdom?”

“This is not self-sacrifice, it is self-immolation, and it is worse than that; for you cannot sacrifice yourself without sacrificing me! And as for your forsaking me, Eustace, it is cruel, it is wicked; and as surely as you carry into effect this monstrous project, God will punish you. Give me one single instance in which the Scripture says that the minister of Christ shall not marry; or, having married, shall put away his wife!”

“The canons of the ancient Church—”

“Are nothing to me unless God's word confirms them! I acknowledge no other guide than Holy Writ; and I will never consent to any separation you may propose. You may desert me and I shall not proclaim my wrongs to the world, but I shall nevertheless protest against the outrage.”

“Agatha, you are very cruel. I am called to the bitterest trial of my life, and you make it still more bitter. If you only knew what it cost me only to contemplate the relinquishing of ties that are so sweet, so precious, you would not thus reproach me.”

“You are not called to this trial, my husband. God has never said to you, or to any man, ‘Renounce family ties and all the sacred joys and duties of the head of a Christian household.’ Man has said so much, I know; and one man, I feel assured, is urging you by every means in his power to a course which will dishonour you, as it insults society and injures me.”

“We will say no more, my dear, just now.”

“But I must say more! I cannot live in this horrible uncertainty. Am I to leave you? You cannot quit your people—unless, indeed, you renounce entirely your allegiance to the Established Church of England?”

“I cannot give you an answer at present; I am not fully decided in my own mind; I shall not decide till after Christmas. It may be that I shall see it to be my duty still to remain within the pale of the English Church; and if it be so, Agatha, I cannot believe that I am called to part with you. I sinned in forming the marriage tie against the dictates of my conscience; but, having formed it, I am surely not required as a priest of the Anglican Church to break away from solemn vows, and to render virtually null and void one of God's most holy ordinances. We will leave it till after Christmas, my dear Agatha.”

And Agatha was forced to be content; but she could not dress and go down to dinner; she was far too wretched and too ill. It was but a short reprieve, and even in her dreams the words “after Christmas” haunted her. She could tell her trouble to no one but to God; but to Him she could pour out all the fulness of her nearly broken heart, and surely He would hear and comfort her.

Chapter 34. CHRISTMAS EVE

“Will it snow?” said Gertrude Aylmer, anxiously looking seaward on the morning of Christmas Eve; “it is cold enough for anything.”

“To be sure it will snow, goosey,” replied Claude; “did you ever see clouds like those and snow not follow soon? I am happy to say it will snow! The temperature tells me so; the weather-glasses tell me so; the clouds tell me so likewise, and we shall have a real grand old-fashioned Christmas-day. I am right glad of it.”

“But how shall we get our visitors from the station? If it once begin to snow there will be drifts, and you know what Hollow-lane will be, and there is no other proper carriage-road to Blackmoor.”

“Oh! we will contrive. At any rate we will make the attempt. If we are snowed up, all Overdale will come to dig us out. But that won't be yet awhile, and the train is due at 3.45. If the worst comes to the worst, we must see after the sledges. Where is Ernest?”

“I have not seen him since breakfast! I suppose he went off with Rosamund and Ada to the church. They have a long day's work before them; they will hardly have finished by dinner-time. Mr. Vallance has been showing them how they do it on the Continent.”

“I wish he would show himself off the stage. Of course he spends Christmas with us?”

“I suppose so; and a pretty kill-joy he will be among us. I wish the Cardinal Archbishop of Rouen, or the Pope, would command him back to the place whence he came! I hate the man.”

“So do I; but, Claude, I'll tell you what I wouldn't tell any one else—*I am afraid of him!*”

“Nonsense; he cannot hurt you. You are a British subject and on British soil, and in the present day young ladies are not forcibly abducted and carried off to convents. Neither will he dare to poison any of us. He is unscrupulous enough, I daresay, for anything, but there is just this, that he *dare* not work us any desperate harm.”

“He dare do anything, Claude. But I am not afraid of being carried off, or of being poisoned. I am not sure what I am afraid of, but I *feel* that he will work us harm as certainly as the tide is coming in yonder. There is something not right with us now; there is a shadow upon the house. We do not know each other's hearts as people dwelling together in one family should do. Even all our merriment has a sort of undertone in it that seems to say mirth may give place to sadness at any hour.”

“I suppose, Gertie, philosophers and poets would tell us that it is always so with the joys of earth. And as Tupper, who I am sure was born to engender mingled *ennui* and exasperation in the minds of his readers, lugubriously says, ‘Boast not thyself of to-morrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.’”

“For shame, Claude! Martin Tupper never said that it is in the Bible somewhere.”

“I don't believe it is. Where would you look for it?”

“In Proverbs, I suppose; it sounds like it; but really I would not say. I have quite left off studying the Bible since I gave up reading it in the schoolroom. The truth is, Claude, there is so much religion in the house that I feel nauseated. I am perfectly sick of all these services, and of all the mummeries and nonsense practised now among us. I won't go to church oftener than I can help. I would have a shocking cold, only I should have to be nursed up for it, and that would interfere with the fun I mean to have.”

“I tell you what it is, Gertie; I am half inclined to swear that I will never go into yonder church again while they play such confounded fool's pranks. It does me no good—quite the contrary; for I get into a passion when I see the governor and Messrs. Gregson and Bonner bowing down to the thing they call the altar, and all the congregation, except the few that have retained their senses, following suit, and crossing themselves as vigorously as if they had been born Papists! I say, Gertie, how well they do it to time! Have they been *drilled*, do you think?”

“They have practised, no doubt; I tried, and could not do it properly. Still, one must go to church somewhere sometimes!”

“I don't see it. I begin to think all those things we were taught in our childhood, and all that people set so much store by as religious truth and principle, are very superstitious. It was all very well in the earlier ages of the world, when mental power was but slightly developed, and when learning and reason were at their lowest ebb; and it is all very well now for weak minds, and for idle, foolish women, whose time hangs heavily on their hands. But for a man in his full senses—a man who means to play his part in the world and hold his own—a man of liberal

notions, bold intellect, breadth of view, and freedom of judgment—it is all nonsense and worse than nonsense. Even the old clinging to dogmas and creeds, which we cannot quite throw off because of that which was grafted upon our childish natures, tends to fetter the spirit of free inquiry.”

“Claude, what sort of clergyman will you make?”

“*No sort!* I am resolved on that head. If I am what people call sceptical, because *I can't* believe what my reason and common sense disprove, I have a conscience; and I am not going to stand up and utter blasphemy, calling God to witness that I believe a lot of things I hold to be mere rubbish. How I do despise those Evangelical fellows who swear falsely and think no harm of it—they are not commonly honest, you know. The moderate High Church party are the sincerest, because the Prayer-book *does* teach 'baptismal regeneration,' deny it who can. The Venns, the Elliots, and the Simeons didn't teach it, I know, but more shame for them. There they stuck to their ecclesiastical honours and emoluments, teaching one thing at the font and another thing from the pulpit; in every sermon contradicting the dogmas of their Church. No, they were not *true* men; they had no soul of honour; and I should think—though I suppose the Recordites would declare I blasphemed in saying *so—very elastic consciences!* and though they wrote pious diaries by the mile, and though their spiritual experiences read remarkably well, I cannot respect them. No, I shall never take orders.”

“Oh! Claude, have you quite made up your mind?”

“That I have! Made it up as firm as yonder rocks! Surely, Gertie, you don't wish me to turn scamp and liar? I should be both if I went through the Ordination Service.”

“Oh, no; but what will the *pater* say?”

“If the *pater* has the smallest amount of discrimination left, if there is an atom of perception remaining in his composition, he knows now that I do not aspire to succeed him as rector of Overdale. He knows that I have no intention of going into the Church. We never exchange a word on the subject, but we understand each other. If the worst comes to the worst he can but disinherit me; he cannot quite make a beggar of me. The greater part of our mother's fortune is mine inalienably.”

“I should think, if you explained to him, he would not wish you to act against your convictions. And there is Ernest, more than willing to take all you relinquish.”

“Yes, I suppose there is no question of that. We of the first family are admirably paired; you and I run in harness splendidly, and Rosamund and Ernie exactly suit each other; only there is a littleness, an affectation about him that is not in her. He is the most terribly self-conscious fellow I ever met with.”

“I wonder Eton does not knock it out of him.”

“Oh! he is Lord do Kew's cousin, and he has his own party. Besides, nothing save a series of earthquakes, or the end of the world, would take that sort of character out of itself. But I never talk to him; he puts me out of all patience.”

“And, moreover, I think papa should have one son who sympathises with him. It would be rather too hard if you both disagreed with him, you know.”

“Well, I suppose it would; only the question is, where will agreeing with him take one to?”

“He cannot go much farther, unless, indeed, he become a—what shall I call it? I think I will copy the *Guardian*, and say a '*vert!*' and then I shall not offend the prejudices of either party. I should think him a *pervert* you see, but the Romanists would hail him as a *convert*; so it is best to omit the first syllable, leaving the blank to be filled up according to your auditor's proclivities. But I hardly fancy papa will proceed to such extremities. He could not be a clergyman if he became a Romanist, because they do not admit married men to the priesthood. And there is mamma, and there are all of us, you know.”

“*We* should not matter, but mamma would. However, there is a way of getting out of all such obligations. The Church of Rome is mightily accommodating, especially in the case of well-to-do '*verts*' of good family. She will stretch a point here and forego a point there till all is quite square and safe, and then she will come down with a vengeance, and make you do exactly as you are told. Up to a certain limit she will consent to any number of reservations, and grant special favours by the score; but the rubicon once passed she gives no more quarter. You must do her bidding in the letter and in the spirit to the very smallest particular or she will punish you, as she alone knows how to punish.”

“But the Church of Rome cannot annul marriages, Claude—good British marriages? I do not know what she may be able to do in her own territories on the Seven Hills, or in other countries where she reigns supreme; but

here, at least, she is powerless. She cannot interfere with the law of the realm.”

“Not with the law, I grant you; but she may tamper with people's beliefs, and give them a false conscience. A marriage that is never legally annulled may become void to all intents and purposes, and no one save the parties concerned can make or mend in the matter. You have lived long enough in the world, Pussy, to know that married people do separate sometimes.”

“Yes, bad people—people whom it is a disgrace to know!” and Gertie's face flushed with indignation. “But mamma and papa, who love each other so much, who are so happy!—what can make you think of such a shocking thing?”

“I hardly know, Gertie; but now I come to think of it, it was something Mr. Vallance said. He was speaking to Mr. Bonner of some one who had 'gone over'; some one who was a beneficed clergyman near Blackingham, and he sent his wife and children away, and lived the life of a recluse, and then he gave up his living, and retired to Upcott, the celebrated Roman Catholic college and seminary that mamma knows, between Blackingham and Sutton Magna.”

“And what became of the wife and children?”

“I do not know. I did not stop to hear the end of the tale; but Vallance was expatiating on the merit of such a sacrifice, lauding the fellow up to the skies, and extolling him as a saint of the first water. I just stopped to say that I could see no saintliness in breaking solemn vows; and that I thought his conduct, so far from being meritorious, was downright rascally. Vallance began to say something in his usual capable tone, but I hurried off, leaving him still speaking in those musical cadences of his, and the poor fool Bonner purring assent. Then it struck me that he might try to prevail upon the *pater* to follow the example of this precious saint of Upcott!”

“He might *try*, but he would never succeed. Papa never would be so foolish, so wicked, so horribly cruel, as to take such a course. Why, it would kill mamma; and that reminds me, Claude. Do you think she is quite happy now?”

“No; I am sure she is not happy. How can she be, with things going on as they are? Not one of us is happy. Mamma keeps up best; she pretends to be contented and cheerful; and though she speaks bitterly sometimes of Mr. Vallance, she never utters any reproach against papa for following his counsel. Aunt Jane is miserable, I am sure; indeed, she told me she was the other day. You and I are not as comfortable as we might be; and I am certain Rosamund's devotion does not produce a peaceful frame of mind. When not excited she looks as wretched as any despairing wretch who has scarcely a hope left for this world or for the next. She does seem a little brighter now she has Ada Chennery here; but they are a very serious couple of friends, though I must say there is a calmness in Ada's face that one looks for in vain in Rosamund's. But, Gertie, all that I have said is between ourselves.”

“Certainly. I never repeat anything that passes between us when we have one of our regular long talks. I wish I could forget that story about the man who deserted his wife and went to Upcott.”

“I wish I had not told you. I must confess it made no pleasant impression on my own mind. But now I think I must go round to the stables and give orders about the carriage. The cart goes for the luggage, I suppose? And mind you are looking your very best to-night, Gertie. Wear your new blue silk, and the pearls Aunt Jane gave you on your birthday. I cannot have you outshone by Helen Galbraith. I want Ralph to admire *you*.”

“Ralph may admire me as he would a picture, if I happen to be in good looks and becomingly dressed; but I know what is in your mind, Claude, and the sooner you get it out the better. Ralph Mornington cares more for one smile of Rosamund's than he would for all the favours I could bestow.”

“The more simpleton he! He might just as well fall in love with Dame Katherine Aylmer, our ancestress on the altar-tomb in the church yonder. He has just as much chance of winning the marble lady as he has of pleading his cause with Rosamund. She would not even listen to him. Now I should like Ralph to be my brother.”

“He must wait for Maude, then. Now go; I will put on the blue silk and the pearls, but not for him.”

“For whom then?”

“For myself and for you, for mamma and for Aunt Jane. You all like me to look well. See, there are the first flakes falling. How black the sea is! If much snow fall, I wonder who will come to the midnight service.”

Claude made a hasty luncheon, and went off to Black-moor to meet Ralph Mornington and the two Galbraiths. Agatha sent cloaks and rugs in abundance, and gave special directions about the foot-warmers. An old woman who lived near the station was to attend to them preparatory to the homeward journey; for, as the day waned, the cold grew more and more intense, and already the ground was white over with softly falling snow. Then all the

children came down, and had a game of romps with their mamma and Gertrude; and for a little while Agatha forgot her anxiety, and Gertrude made herself irresistibly charming to her little sisters. Ah! how dearly she loved Agatha! Though she treated her with all due deference as Mrs. Aylmer, and called her "Mamma," she really looked upon her as her elder sister, and she felt for her what she would have felt for Rosamund, had there been any points of affinity between them. They were all sitting on the hearth-rug; Maude and Eustacia engaged in some sort of combat with Gertrude, and Beatrice busy with her mamma's hair, which she had pulled down into a confused silky mass about her shoulders. Agatha's face was quite radiant for the moment; the cares of the wife were temporarily dispelled by the joys of the mother; and the ' bloom was on her cheek again, and her eyes were bright with pleasure as the child's laughter rippled so merrily in her ears; and now Eustacia was tying together mamma's ebon curls and sister Gertrude's golden locks, and uproarious was the fun when the awkward little fingers failed and failed again. The mirth was at its height, Gertrude behaving almost as badly as the younger ones, Agatha declared, when there was a sudden uprising, a merciless tug at the half-fastened black and golden tresses, and a wild scream of "Papa! papa!"

Yes, "papa" stood behind the group; and at the first glance Agatha saw the mingled sadness and tenderness in his face, and the bright bloom faded from her own. But she smiled and put up her hand; she was still sitting on the hearthrug, and the children were trampling upon her dress. The hand was taken and tenderly pressed, and then Mr. Aylmer drew up a chair and sat down, so that his wife could lean against him, while the children swarmed all over him, Maude sitting on one knee, Beatrice on the other, and Eustacia, little tom-boy that she was, climbing on to his back and almost strangling him with her fat, round arms. Gertrude protested she could not find a place; she professed to be in an agony of jealousy, and made the children shriek with laughter, while she pretended to pout, and have what Miss Maude called "*the jigs*," a complaint to which she was herself extremely liable when she could not have precisely what she wanted.

Presently, however, room was made for Gertie, and she got three fingers of her papa's hand, and professed to be satisfied, and promised to be good, if she might be forgiven for "the jigs," which Maude assumed ought to be cured by a sojourn in the corner, the offender's face being turned away from the rest of the company. The discipline of "the corner" was evidently something with which Miss Maude Aylmer was quite familiar. A happy half-hour passed away, and then nurse came to fetch the children to tea, and Gertie ran away to dress, charging her mamma not to forget her own toilet, and to be sure and choose the prettiest dress she had, that Stephen and Helen might see how well she looked.

Agatha half expected her husband would go; but when Gertrude had shut the door he drew her closer to him, and laid his cheek against hers, as if he were very weary, and as if he found in her his surest, sweetest rest. He did not speak, and Agatha was only too happy to go back to the dear old time. A deep, thankful content filled her heart. Oh! this was indeed a joyful Christmas blessing. It was all that she could ask. She was only sorry that friends were coming; she would have liked to sit there for hours, with that strong arm round her, and her hand held in his, her happiness far too deep for words. Ah! how could she doubt? How could she ever have doubted? *He* never could be so deluded, so misled, so steeled to all the pure and fond affections of his heart, as to leave her even for a while! It had been a bad dream—a miserable nightmare—such as sometimes visits the strongest and the best among us; but now it was all passed; the cloud had melted away, the barriers were gone, and once more they were to each other, earthly, all in all. Surely it was so, or else he had never come and held her to his heart, and told her in a hundred ways how dearly she was loved.

The minutes were flying, and she knew she ought to go and dress; but ere she rose to go she said, half timidly, "Eustace, you do love me as much as ever?"

The vehemence of his answer rather startled her.

"Love you, Agatha! Love you, my darling, my own wife? I never loved you half so well! My dearest, remember this: whatever betide, I love you more than words can tell. There is nothing in this world so precious to me as you are, and next to you my children. And, Agatha, I never loved anyone truly till I loved you; and love at forty is not like love at twenty—it has a strength, an intensity, a durability that youth knows nothing about."

"Ah, I never will be jealous again, not even of Mr. Vallance," she said, caressingly.

"Hush!" he replied; and she wished she had not mentioned that name—it seemed like a spell to bring back gloom and sad foreboding.

But she put away the passing thought. Her husband was by her side again; still he kept her hand firmly clasped

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in his own; all her children were gathered under one roof; her darlings were healthy and blythe, countless blessings were around her, and oh! greatest blessing of all, the crown of her joys was given back to her again! It grew late, and she must go now, and she flew to her dressing-room, but instead of ringing for her maid she fell on her knees in a rapture of thanksgiving, and there remained, pouring out her gratitude till Gertie came tapping at her door to say the guests had arrived, and to scold her for not being ready.

“I am coming, Gertie dear,” she said, brightly. “Gertie, I could not dress, I was so happy, and I had to thank God for all His goodness.”

“Darling mamma!” said Gertie, pressing her young stepmother's rosy lips. “Is it not a happy Christmas Eve?”

Chapter 35. IN THE DEN

“Come to my room, old fellow!” said Claude to Ralph, when after dinner they found themselves sitting alone over their wine. Stephen Galbraith had joined the ladies in the drawing-room, and Mr. Aylmer and Mr. Vallance had gone off to the study, where as usual they were closeted on what was presumed to be most important business. Ralph complied, not unwillingly; he had had no opportunity yet of conversing with us friend, and there were several subjects he was anxious to discuss with him.

Claude's “den” was a very comfortable room looking towards the stables; the view might have been objected to by some, but Mr. Claude Aylmer preferred it on several accounts, chiefly of a practical nature; and whatever might have been thought of the outside, the inside was eminently cosy, not to say luxurious. There Mr. Claude kept his own special properties—his guns and fishing-tackle, his assortment of pipes and meerschaums—for I am sorry to say smoking was one of his most vaunted accomplishments—his favourite books, many of them Tauchnitz editions of the popular novels of the day, which he had bought during his Continental travels; curiosities, guitar-music, and a few choice engravings and statuettes.

“Do you smoke yet?” he asked, holding a case of costly cigars towards Ralph. Mr. Mornington shook his head; he objected to smoking on equal grounds of taste and sanitary law, and he drank only water and light wines. Old port, and nut-brown sherry, and spirits generally were his aversion.

“But you don't mind my having a whiff!”

“Puff away, old fellow! Never mind me, if you choose to make yourself into a chimney. No—no whisky, thank you; I have had more claret and Burgundy than I usually take; and if I might say what I think, you would be the better without any more alcohol in your system just at present.

“I can't smoke a dry pipe, Ralph, and I can't do without a pull or two after dinner. I shall take to the meerschaum, since you refuse to join me in a cigar. I have some splendid stuff here, imported on purpose for a few of us that like a really good mellow tobacco.”

“There is *nicotine* in it enough to poison every mother's son of you,” replied Ralph, sniffing at it, and putting it down in great disgust. “Here you are, Claude, under twenty, and your pipe and your glass are as essential to your comfort as if you were sixty. You are a slave to your bad habits. I would not be in such bondage on any consideration.”

“Hold hard there! I know who used to smoke and puff away among the geraniums. I remember quite well who burnt a hole in his trousers pocket, down in the Clewer Fields, by thrusting a dirty pipe out of sight when the head master put in an awful and unexpected appearance.”

“And I remember too, Claude, and remember it gratefully, for I think that cured me. I lost my *portemonnaie* through that hole, and in it was all my quarter's allowance, a lock of hair, and a love-letter. No young animal in the world is so senseless as a boy, unless indeed it be a girl; but as a rule I think girls are less infatuated in their teens than boys are, and then they come to their senses sooner. A well-brought-up girl does not do half so many things she is ashamed of in after years as a boy does with equal advantages; but I suppose it is the undesirable privilege of our sex to be allowed to sow wild oats, while our sisters must not cultivate a single tare. And I think at sixteen I was inordinately senseless, smoking cigars that made me as sick as a dog, drinking bad brandy that gave me splitting head aches—I'm very glad it did!—making calf-love to every fast or pretty girl, and going in for unlimited *Ess Bouquet* and pale lavender kid gloves. What a fool Ralph Mornington used to be!”

“And he is a wise man now, having reached the mature age of twenty-three?”

“He is growing wiser, I hope, for every month of his life he is finding out his errors of judgment, and his mistakes in word and action. *Experientia docet.*”

“Well, you are fortunate in your governor; he is a man who lives his life in the world, also he is a man of mark; a Liberal ministry could scarcely be formed without him now. I should not wonder to see him First Lord of the Treasury one of these days. The school in which you have been brought up is a fine one, sir; your father has done more for you, I guess, than either Eton or Oxford. As for the rector, his experiences are all ecclesiastical, and savour of the chapter and the cloister; I can't get a respectable notion from him. He has gone higher and higher since you were here last, Ralph; it has been one continuous *Excelsior*; how long he means to go on climbing

heaven knows, and also Herbert Vallance—not that *he* has any connection with heaven, but quite the contrary.”

“How long has he been here?”

“About a month. The worst part of it is that he is not going away again at present; he has taken lodgings at the Post-office.”

“That is serious; of course, Claude, your father's proclivities are very well known; indeed, just now he is talked about more than anyone. People say you would hardly know Overdale church for what it really is—that is, for a building dedicated to worship according to the rule and, practice of the Reformed Church of England”

“People' for once say the truth. There is an immense cross over the communion-table—I beg its pardon, the *altar*—on it stands two huge candlesticks, and two smaller ones with triple lights, also lots of vases, filled with choicest flowers, arranged by the young ladies. The altar-cloth is exquisitely embroidered, and there is lace enough about it to trim half-a-dozen dresses, and real lace too, not the tawdry stuff one sees so constantly in foreign churches. Such frippery! Then below the altar step there are two huge candelabras, one on the right hand, tin other on the left. They'll be lighted up, old fellow, to-night. Are you going?”

“Yes; I shall go on principle. I wish to see and hear for myself what this movement really is. You have processions, of course?”

“Of course, and old Jevons—you remember him, don't you—he's a nice old chap, only he swears so when he thinks only his own chums hear him; he walks first with a big gilt cross, and then follow the choristers—miserable clodhoppers in white surplices, that make continual work for the washerwomen of Overdale—and then the clergy.”

“Is there any incense used?”

“Yes, on high festivals. We shall have it to-night, I daresay; the *pater* has only gone in for incense lately, and when we have it we are obliged to get over a boy or two from Hoveness—acolytes of Father Delmar, for our fellows here can't manage to swing the pots in orthodox fashion.”

“The *censers*, you mean.”

“I sit corrected, the 'censers,' of course; but they are pots for all that. I suppose, Mr. Mornington, I am not well up in their Romish jargon, that is all. Well, nobody here can swing a censer properly, even the rector makes an undignified dash of it, so Father Delmar very kindly helps us. I have not been in the church since Advent Sunday evening, and Bonner preached a sermon about God's purpose in the Incarnation, but what he intended to tell us I have no idea. I remember that he said man who was made in the image of God fell away from God and lost the Divine image, but that once he was restored to it for a short time only, and became again perfectly pure and sinless. That, of course, was in *baptism*. Then he talked about sinning away the grace received in Holy Baptism, and I wondered how soon I sinned away the grace I got in mine; and while I wondered the sermon came to an end, Bonner hopped off his perch, and we sang the '*Dies Irae*,' those who liked it on their knees, those who didn't standing, a few only sitting. It's a terrible, long, monotonous affair, but I believe they did it very well; and all the while the *pater* knelt on the highest step of the altar, without any support, adoring the cross, with his back turned to the congregation.”

“How do the congregation like these innovations?”

“Some of them don't like it at all, and there's a schism in the parish as a natural consequence. But the church keeps full enough. Folks come from a distance. The Seadown people, who rightfully belong to a chapel-of-ease in the suburbs of Hoveness, like the novelty, and throng to us, even when the weather is most unfavourable, Some of our own parishioners, too, have taken up the movement *con amore*—the young ladies in particular.”

“But what do you say about a schism?”

“Just this. Two or three families bore the nuisance as long as they could, and protested against it; but finding things grew from bad to worse, they made up their minds, as a matter of principle, to give up going to church. They gave the rector warning of their intentions; but of course he was not to be swayed by the prospect of desertion, for he treated them as contumacious, and warned them in turn of the nature of the sin they were going to commit—the deadly sin of *schism!*”

“But what do they do on Sundays? They have not given up all church-going, I suppose?”

“You remember Mr. Bellamy, of the Dene—the richest and most influential of our farmers? He is also a very gentlemanly man; indeed, I believe his mother really was a lady, a portionless orphan, who married, as the world would say, 'beneath her.' Well, he was the first to protest, and the first to withdraw. He spoke very plainly, I

believe, but with all due courtesy. The result is, he reads prayers and preaches himself every Sunday morning and evening in his own large kitchen. He began with his own family and servants only, about five weeks ago, I think. Others were glad to join; the fishermen came up from the Chine; and now he has such a congregation that the kitchen will not hold one-half; and it is cold work sitting in the doorways and passages this wintry weather.”

“I honour Mr. Bellamy, Claude. I hope his work may be useful, and I wish his kitchen were larger. Can't he turn one of his big barns to good account?”

“He is thinking of that, I believe; but he and the rest of them are thinking of something more ambitious still. I hope the *pater* won't expire of apoplexy when he hears of it; he has not yet, I am pretty sure, for it is scarcely talked of at present. But Bellamy means to build a chapel, and have a regular minister for it.”

“How about the ground? I thought it was all in the hands of the two houses of Aylmer and Chennery?”

“So it is, all but the Dene. The Dene is an ancient freehold, and it has belonged to the Bellamys for several Centuries. I fancy it was a slice of the Priory land that was parcelled out at the Reformation. The Aylmers got back nearly all they lost, but this Dene estate remained with the people who had bought it from the king; at least, so says the version I have heard: anyhow the Dene is Mr. Bellamy's to do with as he likes, and he can build conventicles, or synagogues, or anything he chooses, on every acre of it. And if it were otherwise, I am not sure but we—I mean they—might get what they want from old Chennery.”

“From Mr. Chennery? I thought he was a staunch old Tory—an old-fashioned, stupidly-prejudiced 'Church and Queen' man.”

“He was; but *tempora mutantur*, you know. Nothing under the sun is essentially conservative. He is in such a way about Ada, because she has taken up with High Church religion, that I should not be surprised if he gave his money to help the chapel, just out of pure animosity and spite.”

“I wonder he lets her visit here.”

“He can hardly help it occasionally. She does not come very often, and she has always been Rosamund's bosom friend. Besides, she has a large fortune of her own, and she is just of age. It is generally believed that she will found a sisterhood, if she does not actually 'go over' and become a professed nun, and I am more than half afraid Rosamund will go with her.”

“Miss Aylmer! surely not, oh, surely not!” and Mr. Mornington perceptibly changed colour. Claude remembered what Gertrude had said a few hours before, and was vexed to see her words confirmed. He puffed away for a few minutes in silence, then he said abruptly—“I say, Ralph, you are not thinking of my sister Rosamund?”

“I don't know that I am obliged to confess to you, Claude Aylmer.”

“Oh, well!” returned Claude, tartly, “I don't want to pry into your affairs. I want no forced confidences, only a fellow may be pardoned for being a little inquisitive where his own sister is concerned. Moreover, I wanted to warn you, for your peace of mind's sake, not to stake your happiness, or any portion of it, on such a venture as falling in love with St. Rosamund would be.”

“Suppose your warning comes too late?—Suppose I did fall in love with her two years ago?”

“I sincerely hope you did not, because you might just as well fall in love with 'a bright, particular star,' and think to wed it. I don't believe you are very bad in for it yet, and I would advise you to take cooling medicines directly, and allay the fever.”

“You do not think Mr. Aylmer would object to me as a son-in-law?”

“He could not, if he cared to have a son-in-law at all; but I imagine he would be shocked at the idea of anything so profane as an earthly marriage for Rosamund. I quite believe she has made some kind of vow, privately, of course, but it would not be the less binding for that. Of course you, the eldest son of Mornington, of Mornington, and well spoken of already in certain circles, would be a most respectable match, even for Miss Aylmer, and I should be delighted. But why can't you go in for Gertie?”

“Simply because I care for Rosamund.”

“You cared for mamma once, and you did not break your heart when she married. On the contrary, you seemed greatly to enjoy the dance given in honour of her wedding.”

“That was only a foolish boyish fancy; I had plenty of such—merely clouds before the sun! This is a different thing altogether; it is a real attachment that has stood the test of two years' separation. I resolved I would not speak till I was sure of myself; but now I need hesitate no longer; and now I have seen her again feel she is the

only woman in the world who can make me happy.”

“I am very sorry, very sorry, to hear it;” and this time Claude spoke with a gravity unusual to him. “You will expose yourself to the mortification of a refusal, for Rosamund, I am certain, is far too much occupied with devotional exercises, and church affairs, and the like, to condescend to anything so purely mundane as earthly love-making.”

“May not this absorption proceed from an energetic mind and an intensity of sentiment, which lacks any natural object on which to expend itself? I have heard of girls devoting themselves to the cloister,—practising all kinds of extravagances, and professing all sorts of unaccountable dogmas—yet turning in due time into very good wives and mothers. Woman's natural place is by her own fireside, not in the cloister; a marriage of affection is her happiest destiny; and it is astonishing how soon girls with the most over-strained notions come to, this sensible conclusion, when opportunity presents itself. They soon get rid of their little crotchets, and their peculiarities gradually die out; and they end in being very comfortable, happy matrons!”

“Girls with *crotchets* may; but Rosamund's peculiarities are not crotchets, they are the convictions of a life-time; they have grown with her growth, and strengthened with her years; they have been fostered by surrounding influences, and confirmed by parental authority. And even if she would be persuaded, my eldest sister is not the wife for you; if she marries at all it should be to some one of her own type. *You!*—an ultra-Liberal, verging on Radicalism, friendly with Nonconformists, a follower of Cobden and Bright, and holding Church views diametrically opposite to her own—how can you wish, even for an hour, to make her your wife?”

“There is no accounting for tastes; but I did not know—I can hardly now believe it—that her opinions are so fixed, her resolves so definite.”

“I beg you will take nothing for granted. Forget that I have spoken, and watch for yourself. If, in a fortnight's time, you feel that Rosamund Aylmer is the woman you would take to your bosom, and make the mistress of your household, *propose*; and may all success attend you! You have my sanction, my dear fellow, and I will bless the union.”

“Thank you. I will certainly make my own observations, and form my own conclusions; and in the meantime we will drop the subject. I must confess I should like a wife who could understand me, and feel with me, and work with me if necessary. A neutral, passive wife must be a stumbling-block to a man who feels his career is before him; but an antagonistic wife must be absolutely fatal to one's progress. Now, I want to know something about my old friend, Roberta!”

“Roberta is in dire disgrace,”—and Claude told the whole story of her deposition,—“but her disgrace is chiefly in consequence of her contumacy. Her errors of doctrine might be pardoned as being her misfortune rather than her fault; but her rebellion admits of no excuse; and I am quite sure that the rector, if he could, would excommunicate her.”

“How shocking! Don't laugh, Claude. What has she been doing over and above teaching doctrines which she believes she finds in God's Holy Word?”

“She has been disobedient, openly so! The rector was thunderstruck when he received from her a long letter about a fortnight ago—a letter written in lady-like, gentle language, but with all Roberta's characteristic boldness. She cannot, of course, and would not, go to the Sunday-school, when he has dismissed her thence on the grave charge of heretical teaching; but she has invited the girls, who were nearly all young women, to come to her at her own home; and she has formed a Bible class, which she meets every Sunday afternoon. Every one of her old scholars attend, and some of the elder girls from other classes have joined them. Then she was forbidden to continue her visits to the almshouses, and in this case also she refuses obedience. She declares she must go so long as the old dames wish to see her.”

“And the only cause of her exclusion lies in the views she takes of religious truth?”

“The only cause! For years there has been a sort of guerilla warfare between her and the rector, but he has always been heartily glad of her co-operation in parish work. Then, as Mrs. Aylmer's friend, she has been a good deal here: we little imagined it would ever come to such a breach as this. It is not Roberta's fault; she loves us as much as ever. I declare I thought she was going to kiss me and cry over me the other day when I met her. She would do anything but give up her principles,—‘be false to her faith,’ she says. I am very sorry, for she and I were always the best of friends.”

“And does she still come to church?”

“No; and that is naturally another ground of offence. She goes to the Dene on Sundays, and Miss Grierson goes with her maids and several others. And what is more, it is whispered that *if* a chapel is to be built, Roberta will give a thousand pounds.”

“Claude, I feel as if *I* ought not to have come here. I ought not to be your father's guest, for I shall feel sorely tempted to help them.”

“Why should you not help them? And you are my guest, not the *pater's*. In a day or two I believe the subject is to be broached openly. There is to be a meeting at the Dene, and a committee will be formed, and then the rector must hear of it. I wonder if old Chennery will put his hand in his purse. He is mortally savage about Ada; she is such a lovely girl, and this fortune left her by her godmother is immense. He is disappointed in Kate's marriage, you know; and he expected Ada to make a great match, and now she won't ever go into Society. She lives in the church, and plods about the lanes in splashed and shabby attire. I confess it is enough to exasperate a less irritable man than our friend Chennery. I should not wonder if he came down with a cool hundred for the chapel. He would be rather glad to break with us at the Rectory.”

Chapter 36. TWELFTH NIGHT

Ralph Mornington was considerably astonished at what he heard and saw in Overdale Church on Christmas Eve or, rather, very early on Christmas morning, for a sort of ante-service was conducted from ten o'clock to midnight, consisting chiefly of carol-singing by the choristers, and silent prayers and voluntary meditations by the congregation, interspersed with plentiful crossings, bowings, and genuflexions. The "altar" was magnificently arrayed; countless tapers blazed before it, and on it were arranged lighted candles, something that looked very like a *pyx*, and half a dozen or more splendid bouquets of brilliant green-house flowers. The decorations, with holly and other evergreens, were certainly very effective.

The bells rang merrily in the tower till a quarter before twelve, and then they began to chime in the usual fashion for service. Precisely as the clock struck twelve the clergy entered, preceded by old Jevons bearing the gilt cross of which Claude had spoken. Mr. Aylmer and Mr. Vallance wore robes unlike any the Overdale people had ever seen before; except, perhaps, such of them as baa occasionally visited the Roman Catholic church at Hoveness on high festivals, and such of them as had visited the Continent. Messrs. Gregson and Bonner, less handsomely but still strikingly attired, came next; they looked meek and mortified, and Ralph hoped they would be allowed to partake plentifully of the good roast beef and of the turkey and pudding which might be expected to figure on the rector's board about sixteen hours later in the day. He was not much in favour of stimulants; but he thought this was really a case of a little wine for the stomach's sake, and he hoped Mr. Aylmer would have some of his best port on the table, or else some of his very choice Madeira to cheer the spirits of these emaciated, brokenhearted-looking young men. Claude guessed that Mr. Vallance had been taking them in hand, and prescribing for them such austerities as had very sorely tried the flesh they were to mortify and bring into subjection. Poor Bonner looked very hungry, as indeed he was; and little Gregson, who was suffering torments of neuralgia, was ready to groan whenever any chanting or intoning was required of him. Poor little Gregson! he was the son of a Dissenting minister, and being therefore a "vert" from Nonconformity, a seceder from the ranks of heresy and schism, a prisoner escaped from the lowest depths of the dungeons of false doctrines, it stood to reason that he should expiate the sins of his childhood and youth in such heavy and bitter penances as the Church should decree. Doubtless it would take months of austerities, and countless "celebrations," and unceasing vigils, to wash away the inborn, inbred stain of Nonconformity. And the poor fellow, having rather a weak constitution, suffered considerably in the process. Sweet slumbers refused to visit his hard, cold couch; the very plain and scanty food which Vallance allowed him disgusted him, and he longed with a guilty longing for the delicacies on which other people carelessly feasted. The Church commanded him to subdue the flesh, and it was getting so far subdued that it promised very quickly to set the spirit free. Long fasts, hard beds with insufficient covering, watchings at midnight in a cold church, and incessant work of one kind or another, were trying the young man so severely that there was absolute danger of his expiring under the process of "wholesome humiliation." Even Gertie was very sorry for him, and a little womanly sympathy, which she one day unluckily evinced, proved the crowning point of his misfortunes. He fell in love as readily as he had fallen into a state of "version," and grovelled thenceforth in an abyss of hopeless affection, the sorrows of which, coupled with the discipline of his daily life, reduced him to a state of pitiable nervous weakness, and handed him over a prey to that cruel and relentless demon, *neuralgia*.

The procession went up one aisle and down another, the tapers guttered in the blasts of wintry air, and Father Delmar's acolytes swung the censers to the envy and admiration of those who wished to follow their example. And the moment the clergy entered the church the people—or at least the greater part of them—rose reverently, and remained standing till their "spiritual pastors and masters" had taken their places within the chancel screen. The lectern, which all through Advent had been draped in the orthodox violet, was now covered with cloth of the richest crimson, delicately embroidered, and the robes of the officiating clergy were other than they had worn for several previous weeks.

The service commenced by singing the hymn, "Christians awake, salute the happy morn."

"All very well," said Claude, "if they had gone to bed first; but to tell people to awake and salute the morn in the middle of the night is impertinence as well as stupidity."

He, and Gertrude, and Ralph, and the young Galbraiths wished the service over long before it came to an end.

They quite comprehended Miss Grierson's difficulty in not being able to find the places in the Prayer-book, for every now and then was an interlude of something which did not seem to be in the book at all; and now Mr. Aylmer crossed from one side of the chancel to the other; and now he turned his back on the people; and now he stood on one side of the altar and faced them; and now Mr. Vallance performed mysterious evolutions, and finally the robes which the two "priests" wore were exchanged for others heavily embroidered with gold thread, and glittering, as it would seem, with jewels.

Claude wondered where they had come from, and he suggested that they had been kindly lent by that courteous gentleman, Father Delmar, as it was not known that the ecclesiastical wardrobe of Overdale included such resplendent vestments. Ralph thought Father Delmar would probably require them for himself and his helpers, who were then doubtlessly in the self-same hour offering mass in their own chapel at Hoveness. The celebration of the "Eucharist" came last; then the Benediction was pronounced, and the worshippers were free to go home and seek their pillows. The Rectory party, however, found a second supper hid out for them, and everybody present seemed to appreciate it, including Mr. Aylmer himself, Rosamund, and Miss Chennery. The fasts and vigils were over, and the high festival of Christmas had commenced. Claud hoped that the poor curates would partake of nourishment before they retired to rest; and as he dispensed ladleful after ladleful from the ample bowl of "Bishop" he had himself ordered, he wished he had asked them to cone in and take pot-luck with him before they went to their lodgings. The "pot-luck" he knew would be excellent, for he had said to Agatha before going out: "I say, little *mater*, give us a good feed when the performance is over; people always want a nice supper after the *pantomime*, and I've told Foster all about the 'Bishop.' He can make it, only you just give a few directions."

And Agatha promised; she was an excellent house-keeper, and hospitality was one of her characteristics. Her stepson always told her that in about sixty years time the governor and she should have a stately tomb in Westminster Abbey, on which they should recline in effigy, side by side, holding between them a scroll on which should be blazoned the words "*Given to hospitality.*"

Christmas Day, and the days which followed it, were bright enough; a hard frost set in, and the pure white snow lay unmelted on the ground removed from the sea till after the new year had set in. And within the Rectory all was brightness, too; and the cold, which reigned supreme without, seldom found entrance and never was harboured there. Agatha was happy as the birds in May; the other cold, that had touched her so much more closely and keenly than that of the clear, firm frost and the sparkling snow, had melted away, it seemed to her, in the warmth and quiet radiance of that happy Christmas Eve.

Long afterwards all there assembled remembered that happy Christmas-tide; there are some who must remember it still—remember it in anguish and bitterness of spirit, remember it in loneliness and pain, remember it sadly and sorrowfully, till earthly times and seasons shall be for them no more.

Anniversaries are pleasant enough when we are young, when they bring only joyous reminiscences, while the circle is yet unbroken. The first breach is made, and they are pleasant no longer; there is a vacant place at the board, an empty chair against the wall, a voice missed from the morning hymn, and the blank is felt by all, though none perhaps dare to speak of it. Some are estranged, perhaps; some are in another hemisphere, and some are gone to that land where partings are no more; till at last, it may be, the solitary lingerer keeps his Christmas-tide with grave musings and sad, sweet memories for his only guests. But then, as he counts the years since *all* were gathered about him, he looks onward to the hour of restitution, when, the days of his mourning ended, he shall rejoice in the glory of heaven's eternal sunshine, and God shall give back to him the treasures of the past. So it comes to pass that as we get older the joy of anniversaries is far from unmingled; and there comes a time when we are glad to get Christmas over, when we are silent about our birthdays, and fail to celebrate our wedding-days, and keep in solitude the days that were once the red-letter days of all our life. So will it be till earth's vain shadows pass away, till on the other side of Jordan we mount the happy hills and walk the shining streets of "Jerusalem the Golden."

But while that Christmas-time lasted Agatha, as I told you, was serenely happy. She was not one to find troubles in trifles, neither was she one to meet sorrow half way; hers was a very simple faith; she took gratefully from the hand of her Heavenly Father all the joys she possessed, and trusted Him for the time to come, secure that strength would be given according to her need, and that all would work together for her good, if not in this world in the world to come, when all that is now wrapped in mystery shall be made plain, and where the saints shall

know even as they are known.

Twelfth-night came, and there was a juvenile party at the Rectory. All the little Chennerys were there, of course, and all the young people whose parents and friends were on visiting terms with the Aylmers; and when Agatha had said to her husband, "May I ask Roberta? she has always been with us on these occasions," he replied, "Ask whom you will, my love. Roberta? certainly, if you and Gertie wish it."

And Roberta, who at first felt inclined to stand upon her dignity and say "No," came and helped Lady Jane, as had been her wont years and years ago, to make merriment for the little ones. Agatha herself was almost as wild as the children. Claude declared that it was, all he could do to keep Mrs. Aylmer in order. Miss Maude and the younger Chennerys, and others of the same age, agreed that she was the best of all their playfellows. She had not yet passed her twenty-sixth birthday, and her own childhood was often renewed in that of her little girls. There is frequently an overflowing spring of this almost childish gaiety and elasticity of spirit in the purest and tenderest and deepest natures among us; they *cannot* grow old, and they "keep their memory green" till extreme old age.

Even Rosamund and Ada were content to join the games of the evening, and very mad, wild dancing, enough to send a dancing-master into fits, went on to uproariously noisy tunes. *Galoppes*, which, I am afraid, all fashionable coteries would call *romping*, were the order of the night; and turn-the-trencher and crying forfeits went on till supper-time with undiminished spirit. Maude was Queen, and Harry Chennery was King; and their Majesties' joint reign seemed highly favourable to noise, unlimited merriment, and continuous fun. Ralph and Claude constituted themselves "Masters of Ceremonies," or "Stewards of the ball;" and they declared they had never enjoyed a grown-up party half so much. After all, children were the best company in the world.

And where were Mr. Aylmer and his shadow, Mr. Vallance? They had appeared at tea-time, and Mr. Aylmer had had a romp with his own Maudie and Eustacia, and Mr. Vallance had propounded riddles for the amusement of the elder juniors; but when the games began they were missing; and they had retreated, as every one believed, from the noise and bustle to the quiet study. Not so, however; they left the house, crossed the garden, and entered the church, where they shut themselves up in the vestry, which seemed to have been prepared for their reception. Let us follow them thither.

Mr. Aylmer drew his chair to the fire, and sat shivering over the blaze, for the night was bitterly cold, and the vestry was not so warm as the drawing-room had been. He looked profoundly wretched, pale, and stern. Vallance, on the other hand, was quite himself; and he took his seat in the chair of state, and looked seriously but gravely at his friend.

"Well," he said at length, "your decision?"

"I cannot give it; I cannot come to a decision!" burst from Aylmer's lips. "Herbert, is this sacrifice needful? Does God demand the severance of ties which He Himself has blessed?"

"Did He bless those ties? Did you not sin against your conscience when you married Agatha Bevan? What had *you*, devoted to the service of God, to do with wife and children? Once before you had contracted such bonds, contracted them thoughtlessly, not having received the doctrines which afterwards you were taught. Those bonds were as fetters to you, and God broke them for you, and you were free. And then He said, 'My Son, give *Me* thy heart'; and you said, 'Here it is, Lord; henceforth I am Thine alone. Henceforth I renounce all earthly loves, all fleshy ties. I am Thy priest, and as such I must minister at Thy altars, unshackled by those affections and those obligations which keep us from unbroken communion with Thee, and hinder the work Thou hast given us to do.' Was not such your feeling after the death of Lady Augusta?"

"It was! it was! I thought I could live in a world apart from those domestic loves, and hopes, and fears~ which men commonly seek as the consummation of their wishes; I thought to soar upwards into a region of exalted and angelic purity. I dreamed that I could renounce all mere human feeling, that I could, if need were, give up my children at the bidding of God's voice through His holy Church. But I was mistaken; I was more earthly than I believed. I saw Agatha, and loved her passionately, deeply, as I had never loved before. You know the rest—she is my wife, *my* dear and honoured wife, infinitely dearer than in the first days of our wedded life. She has been, she is my second self; words cannot express how intense is my love towards her; I have tried to crush it, and in vain. One look, one tone of her gentle voice, one touch of her hand demolishes all the icy fabric I have been weeks in building up about my heart, and I come back to my old allegiance. And, Herbert, if I could break my own heart I cannot break hers. I am willing to endure any suffering that falls upon myself alone; but I cannot blight her young life, repay her tenderness with cruelty, her devotion with desertion. A good wife is from the

Lord, and children are from the Lord. He has given me both—why should I resign them?”

“They were not given you by God, you took them, God often permits men to *take* that which displeases Him. In your heart you had vowed yourself to Him, and you broke that vow. Is it not so?”

“It is, it is; but God forgives us our sins.”

“He does not forgive while the sin is persisted in. You mock Him, you provoke His judgments by living in sin, and asking His pardon while you refuse to give it up. Broken vows are sin; your married life is an outrage against God, and open disobedience to the Church.”

But Eustace continued as if he had not heard. “You have seen my home now, its purity and peace; you know Agatha, and must have discerned at least some of her goodness; you have played with my children, and their innocent prattle and pretty little ways must have won even your heart, which is closed to all earthly loves; and you ask me to give up *all—all!* wife and children, and home; to sever myself from the Church to which I have belonged, and to which I have striven to be a faithful son, and to exchange all this brightness and sweetness for the cold monotony of the cloister. Can you wonder that I hesitate?”

“No,” said Herbert, kindly, “I do not wonder; to flesh and blood such a sacrifice must indeed be agonising; it must, I know, almost rend asunder soul and body: but it is not I who call, it is the Church. I have no alternative; I am commanded *by* those whom I cannot disobey to bring before you and press upon you the duty you have so long ignored.”

“Oh, my God!” said the unhappy man, covering his face with his hands; “can it be that *Thou* callest me to this terrible ordeal? Take my life rather!”

“Nay,” said Vallance, gently, “God demands your obedience, not your life; you must live to serve Him in His holy Church. But I have thought of a plan. I do not wonder that with your Agatha always before you, near you, you find the sacrifice all but impossible. Send her and the children away for a time, let me take them back to Rouen, you would know then if the separation be possible, if you could bear it. We will wait a little longer.”

Chapter 37. CHINESE PRIMROSES

It was the second Sunday in Epiphany, and Mr. Vallance preached the morning sermon. It was a very rainy morning. Nevertheless, the church was crowded; and Miss Grierson, with her maid, on her way to the Dene, finding that perseverance in her intention would surely be rewarded by a thorough wetting—of which she had a wholesome horror—turned into her parish church, and took her old place, “just to see,” as she said afterwards, “what really was going on now.”

Nothing fresh, however, was going on: only one circumstance roused the spinster's wrath to the utmost. She was very fond of flowers in her room, and her Chinese *Primulae* having apparently exhausted themselves for the season, she betook herself to a certain Mr. Garland, who was a nurseryman in a small way, and from whom she generally purchased such plants as were not reared in her own little greenhouse. Miss Grierson prided herself on buying everything she wanted, as far as was possible, at Overdale, while other people made a practice of going into Hoveness for shopping regularly once a week. She contented herself with the Overdale shops on common occasions, and went up to London twice or thrice every year, when, of course, she laid in a stock of multifarious nature, ranging from a new dinner-service to a threepenny candle-saveall!

Now on the preceding day Miss Grierson had visited “Garland's,” knowing that he had several splendid *Primulae*—pure white, and rosy lilac—with very lovely foliage; and two at least of these choice plants, just coming into full blossom, Miss Grierson made up her mind to have for the ornamentation of her dinner-table, for she was going to give her state semi-annual dinner party in a few days, that she might secure Lady Jane Aylmer and Mr. Mornington, who still lingered at the Rectory. She had seen the *Primulae* on Friday afternoon, and had been upon the point of stepping into Garland's shop to tell him to send them to her house on the following day; but Roberta Roberts and Helen Bellamy came up, asking if she would recommend a harmonium from “Breve's,” at Hoveness, or whether it would be better to take a journey up to town, in order to choose a really first-rate instrument, Mr. Bellamy having at length consented to please his daughter by buying a harmonium, which would also be valuable for sustaining the “service of song” in their Sunday services. Such consultations were delightful to Miss Grierson, and she entered into the conversation with so much spirit, and stayed talking so long, that ere she was aware it was on the stroke of her dinner hour; and, being the soul of punctuality, she hurried home in great dismay, leaving her errand at the florist's till next morning.

And next morning she duly presented herself at Garland's shop, but, alas! the *Primulae* were gone. Mr. Garland was “extremely sorry; if he had only known he would not on any account have let them go. But Mr. Vallance saw them, as he came home from the afternoon service, and stepped in and ordered them to be sent to his lodgings immediately. If Miss Grierson could wait, there would be some more plants ready in a week or two; but he could not say they would be as fine as the first ones. Miss Grierson should take her choice of the very best, and the forwardest he had.”

But Miss Grierson was wrath exceedingly, and though she felt she was unjust, her choler extended to the innocent and unfortunate Garland, who, though he deserved no blame, meekly took the reprimand, only faltering out profuse apologies and lamentations that Mr. Vallance should have been so stupid as to select and pay for flowers upon which a lady had set her heart.

“But what can *he* want with *Primulae*?” she said, savagely, glaring at Mr. Garland's budding camellias. “*He* is not going to give a dinner party, I suppose? What can a miserable bachelor, half monk, too, want with flowers? Flowers, indeed! I wish I had the choosing of a bouquet for him. I would make it up of monkshood, and hemlock, and deadly nightshade, with plenty of sting-nettles, emblematical, every one of them! Mr. Vallance, indeed! I am surprised at you, Mr. Garland, I really am! If I were a tradesman I would not have him for a customer at any price; no! not if he paid double for all his goods; but I suppose it's all grist that comes to your mill.”

Mr. Garland could only meekly clasp his hands and incline his head to one side, while the offended lady wound up with a peroration on the sordidness of trades-people in general, and of florists in particular, and of Mr. Garland as singled out from all the brotherhood. Finally she swept out of the greenhouse, where most of the conversation had been carried on, and in high dudgeon walked down the village street towards the post-office, having no business there, as it would seem, but that of tormenting Hetty Oakley, who, somehow, was involved,

she privately believed, in Mr. Vallance's present enormity.

But Hetty was not herself; she would say nothing, and her whole soul was absorbed in skeining white lamb's wool, and she only replied to Miss Grierson in monosyllables. She was not uncivil; Hetty could never be that, she was too much a lady to be rude to any one; but she was certainly not so obliging as usual, and Miss Grierson had never known her to be so provokingly silent; it was impossible to make her converse with her ordinary happy freedom. Moreover, Miss Grierson, putting on her spectacles to look at a new crochet-pattern, perceived that Hetty had been eying, and that she was not nearly so pretty as usual, poor Hetty not being of that class of heroine which can weep all night, sob convulsively, and deluge several pocket-handkerchiefs, and yet look charming in the morning, or only interestingly pale and languid. Pale she was; there was very little of the rose on her fair rounded cheeks; but her sweet, sparkling dark eyes were dim and heavy, her features generally were swollen, and her nose—I am sorry to confess it—had apparently stolen the bloom which was missing from her cheeks.

“Hetty Oakley, what is the matter with you?” asked Miss Grierson, sternly; but everybody knew, luckily, that Miss Grierson's sternest manner often veiled a great deal of real kindness.

Hetty replied that she had a very bad headache. Her lips trembled as she spoke, and the tears were ready to rise again. It was something new to see aught but smiles on those pretty, pouting lips. Hetty's great charm was her brightness; it was even more striking than her beauty, it indeed it were not that in which the very radiance of her loveliness consisted.

“A headache!” said Miss Grierson, crossly; “and pray what makes your headache, child? What have you to do with headaches, a young, healthy, blooming girl like you! They don't improve your appearance, Miss Hetty, I can tell you; you are as nearly ugly as you can be this morning. I should think I never looked *much* uglier myself, and I was said to be the plainest girl in all the county.”

“I am really very sorry, ma'am,” replied Hetty, humbly; “but I cannot help it, and, if you will excuse me, Miss Grierson, I will go back to the sitting-room. I am not fit for business this morning, and my sister will receive your commands.”

“I have no commands to give; I don't want anything, Stop, Hetty! what does Mr. Vallance want Chinese primroses for?”

But Hetty was already beyond hearing, and out of sight. So Miss Grierson turned to Annie, who was nearly as pretty as Hetty, but very much more of a child.

“Annie, child, what is the matter with your sister?”

“I really don't know, ma'am, except that her head aches badly. Mother says she has eaten something that has disagreed with her.”

“*Something* has disagreed with her, doubtless; but people do not generally cry over bilious attacks; and a great girl like Hetty should know better than eat mince pie till she is sick. Annie, have you seen Mr. Vallance's flowers? *my* flowers, I might say, only he took them.”

But Annie had seen no flowers; she never went into Mr. Vallance's room, and she had not heard of anything being sent in from Garland's. She should have thought if he wanted flowers he would get them from the Rectory. Garland's plants were nothing to Mr. Aylmer's. She had heard say the glasshouses were splendid for the time of the year—quite a show.

“Nothing could be more splendid than the *Primulae* I wanted,” said Miss Grierson, angrily; and, finding that nothing was to be gained from a protracted stay, she left the shop, and marched home, feeling as if all the world had combined to put her out of sorts.

Next morning, as I told you, the accident of the weather, and perhaps a little curiosity, took her into the parish church instead of into Mr. Bellamy's kitchen; and there during the reading of the Psalms, and standing up, of course, she beheld a sight that “struck her dumb upon the spot,” as she afterwards told her friend, though I am not aware that she was joining in the chanting.

“Yes, my dear,” she said to Roberta next day; “there were my Chinese primroses in the church, on the communion table—there they were, *pots* and all, though the pots had pretty painted covers over them. Four of them, Roberta—two white, and two pink or lilac; I never know what to call that colour; and there they were among the lighted candles, and all those gold-looking things; the trumpery Mr. Vallance brought from abroad, I suppose. Now, did you ever, Roberta? flowering-plants in *pots* on the communion-table! I wonder I did not do something dreadful; I did drop my Prayer-book with a fine clatter just as they were all whirling round for the

'Glory be to the Father.'"

"I do not suppose plants in pots are any worse than cut flowers," said Roberta; "and I see no harm at all in flowers on the altar, or anywhere else. When Our Lord said, 'Consider the lilies of the field,' He made all flowers holy—at least, to my thinking."

"Roberta Roberts, *you* are not showing the cloven foot, I hope?" interposed Miss Grierson, with the sternness of an inquisitor.

"No, indeed! I had only half finished my sentence. I was going to say that though the flowers in themselves were quite harmless—sweet, pure things, and fit for the holiest place under heaven, if not for heaven itself—I still did object to them, used as they now are in Overdale church, as the badge of a party, a sign of a sensuous and unspiritual worship, more pleasing to Anti-Christ than to God. Nevertheless, Miss Grierson, if that were all, I would not openly quarrel with them; they might have a flower-show every Sunday in the chancel if they liked, and though I could not approve, I would still attend church, if only the simple truth were preached, and the prayers read and chanted in the old-fashioned way, with no mingling of Popish ceremonies."

"Child, if they preached the truth they would never trouble themselves to stick primroses in pots on the communion-table; they would be occupied with more serious matters. They would think more of saving souls than of decking out the thing they call the *altar*."

"I believe Mr. Aylmer to be perfectly sincere, Miss Grierson; he really is most anxious for the salvation of his hearers."

"Only he is mistaken in the way he goes about it. Flowers and lace, and incense and frippery, will no more save souls in a church than in a ball-room; for incense read perfumes, and I do not see much difference."

"Do not let us be too harsh in our judgments of individuals; while we earnestly abjure the practices we believe to be unscriptural, let us be careful not to despise those who, in all sincerity, have adopted them; though I understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, and have not *charity*, I am nothing."

"True, true, quite true! 1 Corinthians, thirteenth chapter and second verse—I know. But, Roberta, may we not stretch charity too far? May we not pride ourselves on our liberality till we turn into latitudinarians? If a thing is right it is right, and if it is wrong it is wrong, and we ought to testify for the truth; and I do like plain-speaking."

"I know you do; I think you like it too much."

"Perhaps I do," returned Miss Grierson with much candour; "it is so easy to cultivate our favourite virtues, and if they are exclusively fostered they become vices. Plain-spokenness, or sincerity as I call it, has perhaps degenerated into harshness and downright uncharitableness. Yes, I see, truth-speaking may be as displeasing to God as lying."

"Assuredly! Nothing, I should think, could be more hateful to God than the truth *not* spoken in love—the truth uttered hastily, harshly, rudely! The real truth, perhaps; but spoken to humiliate the person spoken to, and to exalt the speaker—to shame, to grieve, or perhaps *to* torture. *Then* the truth, instead of wearing her beautiful garments of Love and Mercy, is clad in the foul rags and tatters of spite, selfishness and self-glorification."

"One says things so often thoughtlessly."

"I do, I know, sadly too often. When one has a ready tongue and a tolerably quick wit it is such a temptation to come out with a neat rejoinder, quite regardless of the pain you may possibly inflict. Now I think the people who habitually say, 'I always must speak the truth,' are the most disagreeable people in the world, and they do quite as much mischief as those who go about in society, tattling, and fibbing as a natural consequence. Why do they make such a profession of truth-speaking, except indeed that they are conscious of needing an excuse for their want of charity, or because they have a dim suspicion of themselves that they are not exactly truthful?"

"Oh, dear! it is very difficult to steer clear of extremes. One may stretch politeness and Christian courtesy even into insincerity; one may sacrifice truth to a little want of courage, to a false kindness, which hesitates to inflict a little temporary pain in order to cure a dangerous malady; and equally one may adhere to truth religiously, and yet violate at every breath the precepts which tell us to love our neighbour as ourselves. Who is sufficient for these things, Roberta?"

"No one by his or her own unaided strength, but God will give wisdom and restraining grace; only we must ourselves strive not to offend, and think before we speak."

"Ah! there's the rub. It is not easy to think before you speak when you are in the full flow of animated conversation."

“My dear aunt told me long ago that it was one of my vices; yes, she called it a vice to speak the truth *not* in love. And she cautioned me strongly against becoming that too common stumbling-block in society—'a *disagreeable Christian*.' But we are getting quite away from our text. By the bye, what was Mr. Aylmer's yesterday morning?”

“Mr. Vallance preached; and his text was, 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' And I must admit that there is a wonderful charm in his voice and delivery, and he is more eloquent than I can describe. I could see that he maintained a mysterious sort of influence over the greater part of his auditors. The rich, deep melody of his tones, and the extreme beauty of his language, evidently exercised a deep power over their feelings, and it *was* their feelings, I should say, not their minds; for Mr. Vallance appealed far more to their emotions than to their intellect.”

“And yourself—could you endorse the sentiments you listened to?”

“Indeed I could not! only now and then, like a strain of heavenly music, came faint echoes of the truth as it is simply revealed in the Bible. But the greater part of the sermon was bad—yes, *bad*, Roberta; I do not hesitate to say so, since it insisted on 'oral confession' as that which Holy Scripture authorised, and which was the usage of the Catholic Church,”

“He did not mean the Romish Church simply, I suppose?”

“Oh, no; he meant the universal, the Christian Church! He attempted to prove his doctrine by quoting several passages of Scripture, especially dwelling on that one in James—'Confess your faults one to another.' I longed to get up and tell him he was arguing ridiculously as any child, since such confession clearly related only to confidences between Christian people, not to formal and regular confessions made to any one class of society. Why specially to a priest, unless you believe he is able to give you absolution? But he did not argue much; and he went very cursorily over what he called the prop of his position. 'Here,' he cried, 'is to sin—sick, wearied souls the balm so deeply needed and so long vainly sought! Here is a way of relief opened; here may you lay down the burdens which oppress you! Let the children of our holy Church walk with a fitting submission in the way of her ordinances; and they are the blessed and consolatory channels for the conveyance of the Spirit—channels through which, in a manner peculiarly efficacious and direct, the burdened soul may obtain the pardon it implores!' Then he went on to say that the pastors of the Catholic Church were the appointed dispensers of bet blessings—to instruct, reprove, console, as need required; that they would guide and defend the sheep of the flock till they delivered up their trust to the Chief Shepherd, from whom they had received it. Also—in language I cannot attempt to remember, but with a wonderful power and pathos, that riveted even my attention, and made me for the moment falter—he described the perfect repose of the mind unburdened of the guilt that had long pressed heavily upon it; the blissful peace that followed the blessed sentence—'Thy sins are forgiven thee;' and then with thrilling force, and in a burst of calm eloquence, he spoke of the strength which the obedient child of the Church would instantly receive, advancing evermore to those heights of holiness from which at last he was to be translated to the realms of spotless purity and everlasting bliss. I cannot describe to you the effect those words had upon me, though all the while I knew it was but a brilliant falsehood; or, at least, so leavened with falsehood that the few grains of truth presented could scarcely be discerned. It is difficult to know whether gold is gold if it be mixed up with a mass of dross and impure metal; one would have to take up a virgin nugget from California and examine it, in order to be quite sure of its true value, if it were lying in a heap of false and gilded stuff. The *true* stands the test—the crucible, the wear and tear of life; and the false does not, that's one comfort. But it is not easy always to apply the test and heat the crucible, or even to scrutinise the specimen carefully in the hand, Woe to those who go about to delude the multitude!”

“I am glad I was not there, Miss Grierson; and yet I have heard Mr. Aylmer say nearly as much. I have heard him say that within the pale of the Church, and through the channel of her ordinances, could peace alone be found; and he spoke, too, of the necessity of pouring out the burden of sin before one who had *the power to absolve it*.”

“And yet he will pray—'O Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world, grant us *Thy peace*.'”

“Mr. Aylmer and his party do not deny that forgiveness and peace come from God alone; but they put obstacles in the way; they prevent the free access of the sinner to the throne of grace; they multiply mediators; they hold up the cross, but they teach the penitent that only as the Church decrees can he approach it. As for the Saviour, He is to them an ideal God, not the Friend of sinners, the Redeemer exalted to give repentance and

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remission of sins. The last time I spoke with Rosamund—we never converse now, you know—we were speaking of the Divine Mystery of the Atonement, and she declared that she was seeking daily to *deserve* its inestimable benefits, and to be prepared, by deep repentance, and diligent use of the ordinances of the Church, to receive the Holy Spirit. The simple coming to Christ, the trusting in Him, without priest, or sacrifice, or mediator, she could not receive. In vain I told her that Christ was nearer to her soul than any man could be; that without any intercessor, without any offering, she might cast upon Him the burden of her sins and be at peace. Poor Rosamund! girl as she is, hers has been a weary life of self-repression and painful seeking after rest.”

“And Gertie is as painfully thoughtless, and almost mocks at religion! Roberta, what is Mrs. Aylmer doing?”

“Agatha is feeling more deeply than ever the great and terrible error of semi-Popery, which is being taught here in Overdale. I think she clings now to the pure Word of God as she never clung to it before. I think she earnestly seeks to know the truth, and to be delivered from the snare which is being so skilfully woven for her feet, and for the feet of those nearest and dearest to her. Her position is a very critical and a very sad one, for she is a devoted wife; and now for the first time she is feeling that it is her duty in many cases to testify against the teaching of her husband. Much trouble lies before her, before us all, I fear; we shall have need of strength, and courage, and *wisdom!*”

“To be sure! and wisdom I too often lack; I go at a thing head foremost, you know! But I do wish I had those *Primulae!* I wonder if they are in the church still; the cold air will kill them. To think that I should live to see Chinese primroses, *in pots*, on our own communion table here in Overdale! My mother used to say, if I lived to be fifty, I should see strange things; but anything so strange as this she never would have thought of. Chinese primroses, *in pots!* in an English church as by the State established—it could not be worse if it were disestablished.”

Chapter 38. CLAUDE'S PACKING

Christmas was over, with its wonted solemnities and festivities, and the party that had gathered at the Rectory began to think of breaking up. Helen and Stephen Galbraith were to stay a few weeks longer. Stephen had been overworking himself, and his medical friends advised him, as a matter of something more than expediency, to take a holiday and thoroughly recruit his energies before he recommenced his labours; while Helen had long been promised a lengthy visit to her cousin, Mrs. Aylmer. Claude was going back to Oxford, and Ralph was to spend a week or two at Chenney Park before returning to his father's house.

He had watched Rosamund very closely, and felt obliged to admit that she *seemed*—to say the least of it—perfectly indifferent to him, receiving his attentions with a graceful, cool passivity, which was infinitely more perplexing and more annoying than would have been positive avoidance, at the same time treating him with the kindness due to her brother's chosen friend. He told himself that in any case Miss Aylmer was not the wife for him; and sitting alone over his own fire at night he would cogitate till he grew too much absorbed in his subject to think of going to sleep, and then he generally came to the conclusion that it would be far wiser on his part to leave Miss Rosamund to pursue the even tenor of her way, undisturbed by so startling a declaration of attachment.

There is something very unaccountable in love, deny it who can. The most opposite people seem to fall in love with each other; the most contrary natures seem every now and then to flash into sudden affinity. One is absolutely startled sometimes at the freaks of Cupid, who certainly delights in confounding all the fine theories and upsetting all the grand schemes of the most sober-minded people in the world. Certainly one never can account for half the matches which are continually being made in this Inconsistent mundane sphere of ours, and a great comfort it is that we are not called upon to account for other people's vagaries, and only in a few exceptional cases to excuse our own.

Certainly I shall not try to account for the fact that Ralph Mornington fell in love with Rosamund. What he ever saw in her to attract him so strongly I am at a loss even to conceive, for they seemed to have scarcely a thought, a habit, or a proclivity in common; and both were people of remarkably decided views and the most pronounced opinions. Father Newman and Hugh MacNeil, the Pope and Mr. Spurgeon, would be quite as likely to join issue, as this devoted daughter of the Church, and a young man of the most Liberal notions, rather in advance of his contemporaries, and ready to rush full tilt into the broad arena wherein are discussed the vexed questions and the astounding propositions of the nineteenth century.

The evening before Claude's departure Ralph came to him in his den. "I say, old fellow, help me with this toggery," said Claude, as he entered. "I'll be hanged if I can get half the things I want into this big trunk; they are my own special properties chiefly, and I thought I wouldn't trust Sprawson with them. There's a preserve-jar smashed in, and my *Elzevir* Horace is all over raspberry jam, and I have been ramming something down with my shot-belt and fishing-rods, and it turns out to be a *raised pie!* Those women fancy there's nothing to eat at Oxford, I declare, and there's all the gravy-stuff gushing about among my clothes. I'll never try to pack again. I quite appreciate the legend of the man who emptied his drawers into a sheet spread upon the floor, bundled it up, and pushed it into his portmanteau. I say, Ralph, did you ever behold such a mess?"

"It's an Irish stew of books, clothes, and implements generally. Here's a flannel shirt all pickle. Let's turn them all out and begin again. As I live, your fine dress-shirts at the very bottom."

The two young men set to work, but even with Ralph's amendments they made but little progress. "It's of no use," said Ralph. "I'll call Gertie; she's a feminine gender, and I suppose knows how to do it. But I am not sure; I know Sprawson was packing for her last summer. I'll go and sing out in the corridor. I say, Ger, you're wanted in extremities!"

But Gertie was somewhere beyond his call, and while he was thinking that he must humble himself to Sprawson and implore the aid he had rather scornfully rejected, Rosamund came from her own room with her work-basket in her hand, and she was at once waylaid by her impatient brother—"I say, Rosamund, I want your advice."

"That is something quite new in your experience, is it not?" said Rosamund, with a smile.

"Well, I am not particularly fond of advice—who is? It's a decided case where 'it is more blessed to give than

to receive;' at least, them's my sentiments. But I want counsel now and *help*. Come along to the den; you'll see. I shouldn't wonder if you don't manage it better than Gertie."

"Manage what?"

"Come and see. If you succeed, I'll for ever acknowledge the superiority of your sex; in some instances, that is to say."

Rosamund followed the impetuous youth, and of course found the den a scene of unparalleled confusion—chairs, tables, and floor covered with, Claude's belongings. And she found, too, Ralph Mornington, for whose presence she had not bargained when she consented to assist her brother. Now Rosamund was quite aware of Ralph's preference. What woman is there whose instinct does not tell her that she is beloved? But she heeded it as little as it is in feminine human nature to heed such matters. If he made any unwonted demonstration she felt annoyed, and received his attentions with an increase of gravity and coldness that might have discouraged a far more sanguine lover. Her mind was far otherwise occupied, and it refused to dwell upon such commonplaces as lovers and love-making. Lovers were for Gertie; as for herself there arose before her mental vision a strange and shadowy vista, cold and dark, untried, uncheered by all that makes life loveliest and sweetest in the estimation of ordinary people. Ralph was nothing—could be nothing to her. She only hoped he would go away without making any direct avowal, and she kept out of his road, and felt glad when it came to the last evening of his stay, for the hour that was fixed for Claude's farewells was to witness also Mr. Mornington's departure for Chennery. She was not prepared for this encounter in the den, but it did not much matter—Claude was there, and she could be very busy, and go the moment her work was done.

She moved and spoke with her usual grave and high bred courtesy; she talked to Ralph as coolly as if he had been old nurse, and proceeded to survey the properties which were lying about her in such wonderful confusion.

"Oh, Claude," she said, unable to refrain from laughing, "and oh! Mr. Mornington, did you really know no better?"

"I knew that shirts and such things should go on top and heavy things at the bottom," returned Ralph, laughing too. "I'm not such a very incapable person as Claude seems to be. His Continental travels have not done him much good; he ought to be wrecked, and left for eighteen months upon a desert island! Also, it seems to me that *Elsevirs* and jam should not travel side by side; nor a bottle of badly-corked pickles repose in the bosom of fancy flannel shirts; neither would I compel shot-belts; and pouches to be so familiar with raised pies."

"I protest against the pie," cried Claude; "I thought was a *cake!* Cooky never sent me away without a cake before. Chuck it behind the fire, Rosamund; it's all mash and jelly-stuff."

"No, indeed; it will be quite as good to eat, though it is ruined as regards appearances. What have you in that valise?"

"All my heavy books, to be sure. I wish the *Elzevir* had been among them."

"So do I; but empty the valise, pray."

"Why, it is strapped up, and the books are as snug as babies tucked up in bed."

"Never mind; they must be turned out. Your light things must go in the valise; your books and heavy things generally, with such clothes as will bear cramming, must go in the trunk. Now then, please."

"Well, I never! There *is* sense in that! And to think that it never crossed my brain! Women are of use in the world, Rosamund, even when they are—well, let's say *churchy*. Just see, Ralph, how easily and neatly the things go in! It's having a method I suppose. I shall remember in future: light things in the valise, and heavy things in the trunk."

"And I would let eatables go in the hamper," said Ralph. "Pickles, and jam, and pie would not assimilate."

"That reminds me," said Claude, starting up. "Foster asked me about the brown sherry; the governor said I might take a dozen or two if I liked, and I did like, in course; for why? There isn't any like it that I know of, though Chambers, of Magdalen, does give a ruinous price for his. I'll go and see about it. Just hand Rosamund those things."

It would come now, Rosamund felt sure. Well, perhaps it was best to have it over. Half-a-dozen words and it would be settled for ever. She went on packing, quietly talking all the while; and Claude's last pair of socks were fitted into the last spare corner before Ralph could make up his mind to take advantage of his opportunity. If she had shown the least consciousness, if she had been in the smallest degree discomposed, he would have rushed at once into the very pith of a declaration; but that quiet, settled face, that lofty air, that pensive—almost

melancholy—expression seemed to daunt his courage, and he scarcely knew how to commence the conversation. Another minute and the packing would be finished, and she would go away. He knew she would not linger a moment when her task was done. In fact, she was turning to leave the room when in desperation he began to speak.

“Miss Aylmer, may I ask you to stay a minute? I have something to say.”

She turned back, gravely inclining her head. Then she seated herself in Claude's easy-chair, folded her hands in her lap, and waited for Ralph's communication.

“Yes, Mr. Mornington; I am listening.”

“Miss Aylmer—Rosamund, do you not know what it is I wish to say to you?”

“Perhaps I do, Mr. Mornington; nevertheless, as I am not quite sure, I must beg you to say it in as few words as possible; I have an engagement at half-past eight.”

There was a slight colour in her cheeks now, but not one touch of that sweet, shy consciousness with which such confessions are commonly received. The wonder was how a man of Ralph's temperament could ever have brought himself into such a position with such a piece of animated marble. In the settled mien, the collected tone, the cold, passive, almost hard demeanour, he read his answer before he asked the question. Nevertheless, having gone so far, it was necessary to go farther—he must receive his sentence. *His* brow was crimson; *his* voice was husky and unsteady: *his* hands felt nervously among the buttons of his waistcoat. Even if a man is not very deeply in love, a serious proposal must be always a momentous episode in his career. The results of proposing are often all that is delightful, but the crisis itself is a very terrible ordeal; and even an accepted lover must, I think, be glad when it is fairly over, and he and the lady of his affections are pledged to one another. How much worse, then, must it be when the unlucky hero has to take a leap in the dark, or still more disastrous when he is hoping against hope, and feels all but certain that he will be decidedly refused. Ralph's sensations were not of the pleasantest when he very uneloquently put his feelings into words, and begged Rosamund to accept him as a suitor.

He spoke with much hesitation, and he knew afterwards that he had not distinguished himself, while Rosamund was perfectly mistress of the occasion. A flush of rose that eminently became her, was the only sign of the stirring of the depths within. She answered, “Mr. Mornington, I had hoped you would have spared both yourself and me this needless declaration; you must have known, had you thought calmly, that I was not the person to whom you should propose. In a very few months you will be glad that you proposed in vain.”

“Is it in vain, then?”

“Utterly in vain. Let me say it at once; I have no thought of marriage—I have no heart to give away; such affections as I have are entirely and irrevocably pledged.”

Ralph started.

“I came too late, then?” he said, with some bitterness. “If you had come years ago it would have been too late. Understand me, Mr. Mornington, I am not speaking of any human love; my heart is given to God.”

“And I could never value the affection of any woman whose heart was not first given to God. But God has given us human affections, and surrounded us by human ties; and He has endowed us with capabilities of loving; and the sacred tie of marriage is one which He Himself instituted, and which He blesses specially. You need not love God less because you love a fellow-creature.”

“We will not argue the subject,” she said, wearily. “I know nothing of this love of which you speak; I shall never know anything. Wedded happiness is for some, but it is not for me. You would have me drink of earthly streams; I have tasted of the eternal spring. You would have me choose a rose of earth, when I may grasp the unfading flowers of Paradise. I have given *all* my heart; I am pledged wholly, unreservedly, irrevocably; I cannot draw back. It disquiets me even to be addressed as if I, like other women, were destined to find my chief joy in the sweets of domestic intercourse. But I have answered you; try to forget that you ever thought of me in such a light”

“No, I shall not forget. Oh, Rosamund, what might you not have been! what sweet and hallowed happiness might not have been yours but for the superstitious faith which bids you cast away all the good gifts of your Heavenly Father, and devote yourself to a life of solitude and self-repression!”

She started visibly.

“I said nothing about any life-devotion, Mr. Mornington; I have uttered no vows.”

“You have not pronounced any publicly. But a dark web is being woven about you; and you are only too

ready—too willing—to be fatally entangled. Pray God that you may be the only one who shall thus outrage the ties and affections which He has created for your good and happiness; and I pray that you, too, may be delivered from the snare, that your eyes may be opened before it is too late.”

“Too late for what?” she demanded.

“Too late to retrace your steps, too late to escape the unnatural lot you are proposing to yourself. Yes, I know \there are some rare moments when one's perceptions are heightened to intuition, when looks and tones speak volumes, and when every word has its own special message; and this is one of such moments. Rosamund, let me speak as if I were your brother. Since we commenced this conversation an inspiration has come to me; and I know—yes, *I know*—that you are dreaming of devoting yourself to the *cloister*. Do not be afraid; I shall not even to Claude disclose your secret; no hint of mine shall point him or any one to the dreary truth.”

“There are no cloisters in the Anglican Church,” she replied with some hesitation.

“That is one of Mr. Vallance's prevarications. There are semi-cloisters, there are sisterhoods. Neither do I believe that you are still in your heart a member of the Church of England.”

“I am not a professed member of any other Church. I am not sure that I ever shall leave the Anglican communion.”

“And I have no right to press upon you the claims of the Church to which you still openly belong. Only let me say one thing. I have really loved you—nay, do not look displeased. I am not going to press *that* love on you any more—I want you to hold me as *your friend*. Your friend in need, if need arrive; your friend, whom you may call upon for help in any and in every emergency; your friend upon whom you may rely, should the dark hour come, when you know not where to turn, when you have proved the hollowness, the *treachery* of some you trust. Call me when you will, and send for me wherever you may be, and I will come and help you with all the help of a true heart and a stern, manly will, backed by British law.”

“What visionary dangers are you foreboding?” she said, smiling sadly. Then, giving him no time to reply, she continued: “But I thank you heartily; I am glad you have spoken because it has shown me what you really are. I accept your friendship, as you offer it, though I may never avail myself of it, though in years to come, in all the bustle of such a life as yours will be, in all the sweetness of the home joys that should be yours, you remember this night but as a dream, and think of me as one whom the world has utterly forgotten. Good night.”

She held out her hand, and there was a deep melancholy in her voice as well as on her countenance. Had she a presentiment of dark days of dread to come, when she *might* need a friend—such a Mend as Ralph had pledged himself to be? But what if she put herself beyond the reach of any earthly Mend?

Presently Claude came back, and noting Ralph's serious mood, he said, “I say, old fellow, you haven't said anything to St. Rosamund?”

“I have proposed to her, that is all, and she has rejected me.

“Of course she has. She would reject the combination of all rank, and wealth, and goodness, and intellect in the person of a suitor! Was she very grand?”

“We will not speak of it, if you please; at least not now.”

The next morning Claude started for Oxford, and Ralph went away to Chennery Park.

Chapter 39. THROUGH THE CLOISTERS

Rosamund Aylmer went back to her own room and shut herself in. The hour she had intended to spend in the drawing-room must be sacrificed. It was impossible to go there now. She could not listen, much less join in the light-hearted conversation that would be sure to be going on around the piano, where Gertie and the Galbraiths usually congregated in the evening. Neither would she, if she could help it, see Ralph Mornington again till she bade him good-bye in the presence of all the others.

Calm as had been Rosamund's bearing, and coldly as she had answered Ralph, her spirit was stirred within her as it had never yet been stirred. Oh, if she had only refused Claude that evening when he asked her into the den, or if she had only had the presence of mind to frame some excuse in order to leave the room when her brother went away to speak to Foster! But perhaps it was better as it was. It must have come out some day, and now it was all over and done with.

"All over and done with!"

With a curious sense of involition Rosamund found herself repeating her own words again and again, as if they were a sort of spell which should put away for ever from memory the episode of that evening. She stood before her fire, which was slowly dying down to the embers, and leaning her elbows on the low mantelpiece, and her face on her hands, soon lost herself in thought.

"Yes, all over," she was saying to herself once more, at the close of half an hour of half-dreamy and altogether wretched meditations. "All over—what may be called the romance of my life! No words of love for me, no one to love me best, no one to whom my voice is music and my smile as sunshine, no pleasant home of my own, no sacred joys of motherhood! And it might have been. I did not know, till I knew that it might be, that such a life had any charms for me; I did not know that it would cost me one pang to put from my lips this proffered cup of earthly joy! I thought I had closed my heart to earth; I thought the sacrifice complete. I deemed that spoken vows would only publicly seal the solemn renunciations made so long ago as in God's sight and hearing. Yes, my God, I am vowed to Thee. I cannot go back. Go back, did I say?—let a few brief words of kindness, a faint emotion, a brief flickering of the human passion that I suppose smoulders in all breasts till the hand of death extinguishes it for ever, render null and void the steadfast purposes of a life-time? Ah! I am very weak; what wondrous vitality have these human affections! It is very hard to kill them; they will not be starved down, and if they were violently slain—murdered, as it were—I believe their ghosts would haunt one perpetually. And yet *does* God demand that we should relinquish the exercise of natural affections—of affections which He Himself has blessed? Might I not serve my God as Ralph Mornington's wife, as any good man's wife, as well as I could serve Him in the solitude? Hush I hush! rebellious heart. My duty is to submit and not to question. Oh! what a vain, weak, foolish girl I must be that the first word of love—what we *call* love—should thus probe my soul to its centre, should shake the resolves that I deemed firm as adamant. But it is over; it will never come again, I will take care of that. And Ralph—ah! it is not real love on his part; it was a mere youthful impulse. He began to care for me, I truly believe, when I was quite a child, and it was *only caring*; it was not love, the real thing that only comes to one once in all one's life, that has never come to Ralph yet, though it will—it will. He will know some day that I never had, the inmost place in his heart of hearts; he will find some one fair, and gentle, and ready to be loved, some one who *may* listen to him, and give herself to him, and be so proud of him. I wonder if he will ever think of Gertie? Yet—no; she is hardly deep enough for him; she is very sweet though, such a pretty darling. Oh! my one own sister, must I give you up too—must all, *all* be surrendered?"

Then Rosamund remembered her engagement which she had pleaded to Ralph; the time was long past, and for this once it must be omitted. She could not do anything she had intended to do that night; she felt so wretched, so restless, so strangely miserable. And yet she had practised self-discipline for years, and she had been rigidly strict with herself even as a child. The duty which she had perforce left unperformed was a very simple one and quite self-imposed, and no one but Rosamund would have given a second thought to its occasional neglect. It was only that on three nights in the week she gave an hour to two young servants, an under-housemaid and a little kitchenmaid, teaching them to write and cipher, and hearing them read aloud, and sometimes reading to them herself. Scarcely anyone in it house knew that she did this; only Agatha knew it, and some of the servants, yet

Rosamund held it as a sacred duty, and discharged what she believed to be her obligations towards these two girls as regularly and religiously as she did her visiting in the village, under the acknowledged authority of her father.

She was just thinking that she would go and tell Rhoda and Sarah that there could be no lessons that night when Rhoda came to her door, telling her that tea was ready. She explained about the reading, and then desired Rhoda to bring her up a cup of tea; she did not intend to go downstairs again. And when Rhoda, through the footman, conveyed this message to the drawing-room, no one took much notice of it; Rosamund so frequently withdrew after inner to her own quarters, and was not seen again till early prayers next morning.

Meanwhile Rosamund mended her fire; she always had supply of coals and wood at hand that she might not be disturbed. And then Rhoda brought up the tray, and she fain would have lingered to have a talk with her young mistress; but Miss Aylmer was in no mood for conversation, and at length said, plainly, "I cannot talk to you a-night, Rhoda; I do not feel quite well. I am sorry I have missed your lessons, but I wish to be alone now." Of course Rhoda could only vanish; but before she left the room she rather officiously lighted the candles on the dressing-table, and then withdrew, hoping Miss Aylmer would be better in the morning. Rosamund, whose head was aching, found the light of four candles rather oppressive, and the fire blazing at the same time added considerably to the illumination; so after she had taken one cup of tea she rose to put out the unnecessary toilet candles.

Rosamund's room was of course comfortably and handsomely furnished; but it contained none of those elegant and luxurious appliances which young ladies of the present day, with well-filled purses, love to affect. Agatha had caused some of the furniture to be renewed not long before; but for the most part the room remained as it was when its occupant was a child. The filagree crucifix still hung in its place, and some beautiful engravings and drawings hung upon the walls, especially a Madonna del Sisto, a water-colour copy of the Madonna of Ghirlandajo, and an etching from Cimabue. But there were no ornaments scattered about, no jewel case, no costly toilet accessories. Gertie's room was full of pretty trifles; it was a bower of refined taste as well as of dainty comfort. Rugs and mats were many and soft; her draperies were fanciful list in excellent keeping; and her dressing-table was brilliant with crystal scent-bottles, ivory-backed brushes, lovely little bits of porcelain, and rings and chains and bracelets always lying about in dazzling confusion.

There was neither gold, nor flashing gems, nor ivory, nor crystal, nor Sevres nor Worcester china on Rosamund's plain toilet; but there was something there to-night that took her by surprise—a note fastened to the pin-cushion, and addressed to herself in Mr. Vallance's well-known handwriting. It was carefully sealed, as his notes and letters always were; it would never have done to trust his correspondence to the evil chances of adhesive envelopes; and he made it his practice to seal everything, even to the most trifling billet containing the most commonplace order to a tradesman.

Rosamund opened the missive; it was not the first she had received from the same source, but hitherto they had always reached her through the hands of a servant. She read—

"DEAR MISS AYLNER,

"Meet me to-night in the church, at half-past ten o'clock. Do not fail.

"Yours, HERBERT VALLANCE."

Rosamund's brow crimsoned, and her cheeks flushed with indignation; all her womanly pride was roused, her womanly delicacy was alarmed. It was just like an assignation; and, to say the least of it, it was a clandestine appointment with a man in a lonely church at almost midnight hours. But then, was he not her spiritual director—had she not promised him implicit obedience? Still she shrank from keeping this appointment, which he had made without any reference to her convenience. That he was a man to be trusted she well knew; she might as safely meet him as one of the old marble Aylmers in the chancel. There would be no thought in his heart save that which concerned her spiritual interests or the interests of others; but to a girl of fine and delicate instincts to sin against the laws of propriety is always painful. He ought to have been more considerate; he ought to have arranged for an interview elsewhere and at reasonable times. He must know that she would be seriously compromised were she seen abroad and unaccompanied at such an hour.

There was a struggle, but it was soon over; the habit of obedience prevailed. She must go, and no one must know that she went; but she heartily wished that it were over. She looked at her watch; it was nearly ten. It would soon be time to set out, for she would have to go through the shrubberies, and through a little wood which skirted the churchyard. It would scarcely be safe to go down the drive, and out by the great gates into the high road, for

she would almost certainly be seen by the people at the lodge. A sense of dishonour, a feeling of humiliation crept upon her, at the thought of being compelled to elude the notice of her father's servants.

She drew back the curtains, and gazed out into the night, but it was so dark she could see nothing beyond the window pane; it did not appear to be raining, but the wind howled mournfully among the leafless trees, and something like terror seized upon her at the thought of the lonely walk that lay before her. Had Vallance resolved to try his power? Did he wish to know to what extent she might be trusted, and whether the habit of blind obedience was thoroughly established? He must have known—he did know—that he was exacting from a young lady of birth and breeding a very unusual, a very painful, even a very terrible proof of her submission. It was an ordeal which would test how far she had surrendered herself to the spiritual powers embodied in his person, to what extent she really was enslaved.

Never before had Rosamund Aylmer crossed the threshold of her home after dark without attendance, and with something like a shudder she drew over her head the hood of her large cloak, and turned away from her own cheerful, safe fireside to encounter the real and imaginary dangers of the dismal outer world. The chief danger, perhaps, was of taking cold, for it was not likely that she would meet a living creature on her way from the Rector to the church; but her heart beat fast and thick when she closed behind her the side door which led from the old schoolroom suite into a little shrubbery, and found herself in the open air, alone, and in such utter darkness that she began to think it possible she might miss her way, and be unable to find the church or to return to the house; the evergreens grew high on either side of the winding path she must pursue, and she had to feel with her hands as she groped along, now and then getting a thorough sprinkling from the laurel leaves wet with the heavy storm of an hour ago. The ground, too, was soaking, but that she did not care about; Rosamund was accustomed to go abroad regardless of weather—only to darkness she was not accustomed, and the loneliness of night was not like the solitude of day.

The paths were familiar, or else she had never traversed them. She knew every turn, and when she had been out a little while the darkness was not quite so impenetrable. Through the gloom she could now and then recognise the outline of a well-known tree or shrub, and at last she found herself in the fir-wood, which was the northern boundary of the churchyard. But here her nerves began to be really tried. She was not what is called a nervous person, nor had she more than a tinge of superstition in her character, yet she shook from head to foot as she glided under the shadow of the pines to the gate which led towards the cloisters—the ruined cloisters, where slept till the morning of the Resurrection the mouldering dust of the long past centuries. Once she passed in a little opening, and looking back through the trees, she could see the lighted windows of the house. She almost thought she could hear the piano, and the voices of Gertie and Helen in their favourite duets, and she gave a bitter sigh, and involuntarily asked herself once more, “Why must it be?” It was a sore penance she was undergoing, and the worst was yet to come. It would be pleasanter far in the bright drawing-room, with warmth, and flowers, and books, and music, and the converse of dear friends. But she turned and went on, and the wind wailed eerily through the broken arches of the damp and dreary cloisters, and her feet stumbled over the broken and sunken gravestones, and the sound of the sea mingled its melancholy refrain with the deep, mysterious murmurs in the black pine branches. She almost expected to behold some pale monk or shadowy prior start forth from the dark stone recesses, and gaze upon her with dead, reproachful eyes. At length the cloister-walk was accomplished—what a long one it had seemed! And now she was in the shade of the great church, which she could see dimly rising into the cloudy air; and now she entered the porch, and pushed back the door which opened into the northern transept! Oh! the vast, solemn, echoing old church! It was not all darkness; there was light in one of the sidechapels, and light also in the chancel; a few faint rays seamed on the tall arches, on the stately cloister-walks, and on the ancient tombs where crusaders and men of might clad in their stone panoply of armour lay with hands uplifted, or else crossed meekly on the up-heaving breast. Rosamund loved to contemplate the pale, recumbent figures; she loved to stand by those gorgeous tombs, and touch reverently the icy hands, and contemplate the sculptured features in their long repose. But now they were to her awful, spectral forms, and she hurried by the stalwart knight of Malta, and crossed the knave towards the south transept, scarcely daring to tarry while she made the customary “obeisance to the altar.” A little arched passage led from the south transept, and in it a lamp was burning. At the end of this passage was an exquisitely traced archway, very ancient, long defaced by whitewash, and only lately restored by Mr. Aylmer; and in the archway was a door, at which Rosamund knocked three times, according to a certain formulary which had been prescribed for her some years before. Her journey

was ended, for the door was immediately opened, and there stood Mr. Vallance.

He bowed his head gravely and took his seat in a high carved chair, while Rosamund humbly knelt upon a hassock placed for her accommodation. The manner of Vallance was stately and almost imperious, that of Rosamund was of profound and abject submission. The spell of the confessional was upon her; this man knew her whole soul, and to him she must lay bare its most secret workings; she must even tell him all that had passed between her and Ralph Mornington; she must tell him for the moment she had faltered, and turned back with a vain, sinful longing to the joys of earth; she must repose in him such confidence as a mother would scarcely require of her daughter. It was even worse than this, for he asked her questions which no mother would have asked—strange questions, of which she could not clearly see the import, but which drove the blood from her heart, and coloured her cheeks with burning blushes; he had never questioned her so closely before, and yet she had made to him many a full confession. It was over at last, and absolution was solemnly pronounced. Then he bade her be seated, as he had somewhat to say to her.

“You asked me some days ago, Miss Aylmer, a question of extreme moment; I have not yet answered you.”

“No,” she replied, “and I have earnestly longed for your answer. I need *rest*; this weary state of doubt is killing me. Had it not been for this, there had never been that hour of weakness; yet if you tell me that I must still wait, if it be the will of Heaven, I am content. I can bear it as I have borne it.”

“You need bear it no longer.”

“When you speak to me of a life of devotion, of severance from all earthly ties, is it as to a member of the English Church in an English sisterhood, or is it as to a daughter of the Church—of Rome?”

“You believe yourself that the Anglican Church is schismatical?”

“I do; is it not so?”

“It is in error. Yes, it has cut itself off from the parent stem, the true Catholic Church. It is a branch—though, mark me, still a branch, but severed from the source of life. ‘The branch cannot bear fruit except it abide in the vine.’”

Rosamund was not startled at this terrible and impious misconstruction of Holy Writ; she only replied, “Ought we not, then, with trembling joy to return to the bosom of our Holy Mother? Oh, Mr. Vallance, in spirit I have returned; in heart I am a true Catholic—may I not openly acknowledge myself an obedient child?”

“There is but one true Church of Christ,” he said, solemnly, making the sign of the Cross. “She is the refuge of sinners, the home of the weary, the ark of safety, which shall bear all within her sacred precincts above the billows of a stormy world to the haven of eternal rest.”

“And that one Church is—”

“The Holy Catholic Church. Her arms seek to enfold you, she is ready and willing to receive you, but she requires from her children implicit obedience and *self-sacrifice*. In tenderest love she waits to clasp you to her bosom; but passively as an infant must you rest in her embrace, with ill the unquestioning submission of a little child you must attend to her behests. She must dispose of you as she in her Divine wisdom and immeasurable love deems best.”

“I surrender myself,” said Rosamund, kneeling again and bowing her head on her hands; “but, Mr. Vallance, I have long thought—I have wondered—may I ask? You are a priest of the one Holy Catholic Church?”

“I am, Rosamund. I thought you knew it long ago.”

“I did know it, yet I could not feel sure; but why—”

She looked appealingly.

“But why suffer myself still to be numbered with the Clergy of an apostate Church? Because it is the will of those who have the authority over me. I can aid the cause of our Holy Church in England far better by seeming to remain within her ranks than if I threw off my outward allegiance and carried the true standard under which I fight.”

“But,” and Rosamund almost gasped, “is it honourable—is it *honest*?”

“It would not be in any other case,” he replied, calmly; “but here it is ours simply to obey, never to question. They whose control we acknowledge are the delegates of Heaven, and it is frequently required of us, as a test of our obedience and self-surrender, that we take a course against which our individual will and judgment may protest.”

“But I may profess myself a Catholic?”

Overdale

“Not at present—that is, not immediately. You will be silent till I speak with you again.”

“One word more,” said Rosamund; “does my father know that you are of different communions?”

“He does know it, but he has not known it long. It is late. Hark! that is midnight striking. Meet me here again at the same time this day week.”

“May it not be at an earlier hour?” she faltered.

“It may not,” was the stem reply; “it is a complete, an unquestioning obedience which our Holy Church requires. Though the flesh may shrink, let not the spirit waver. Be here at the time appointed.”

Chapter 40. THE LIFE EVERLASTING

That winter was unusually severe, and the poor and the weak suffered proportionately. Many little children and old people were gathered to their rest, Some of Roberta's almshouse—women died, and at length, in February, while the snow lay heavily on the ground, it was rumoured in the village that old Miss Roberts drew near her end.

There was little intercourse now between the Rectory and Walnut Cottage. Roberta had not been to see Agatha since Twelfth Night, and Lady Jane, who would have paid her wonted visits, was shut up in the house with heavy cold, and apprehended bronchitis. Gertie had set off once; hoping to reach the cottage, but she had been driven back by the snow—drifts, and as none of the Roberts' household came to church, nothing was known about them so far as the Aylmers were concerned.

But one morning Sprawson came to Lady Jane, who was now pretty well recovered, and only waiting for a change in the weather to go out as usual.

“My lady,” said she, in an emphatic whisper, “have you heard about old Miss Roberts?”

“I have heard nothing, Sprawson. Is she worse?”

“They say she is going, my lady. I heard it last night at the post—office. I would not tell you till this morning, for I knew it was news that would touch you, and I didn't want you to be unnecessarily disturbed.”

“Tell me what you heard.”

“Old John, their man—servant, was at the post—office, and he was talking to Hetty Oakley, and, says he, 'Ah, Miss, there's changes in Overdale, and there will be more yet. There's bad times coming, but I wouldn't mind if the missis would have stayed with us a little longer. It will be very hard upon poor Miss Roberta.' So then I turned round and said, 'And what's up with your mistress, and what is hard on Miss Roberta?' And he made answer, 'My missis is going home at last. We oughtn't to grudge her the rest and the happiness, I know; but we feel the parting, Susan and I. We've been in her service more than forty years, and I was groom to the old gentleman, her father.' Then I asked further, my lady, and I heard how Miss Roberts was took with what seemed be common influenza ten days ago, and how nobody thought much about it at first, till she grew so weak that Miss Roberta was alarmed and insisted on sending for Mr. Barton. And when he came he said at once that it was cry serious, and the day after he was called in he brought that famous doctor from Hoveness, and they both told Miss Roberta that her aunt could not rally, and that the end was very near; and Miss Roberta asked *how near*, and they said a few days, perhaps two or three—they did not think it could be so much as a week.”

“My dear old friend! My poor Roberta! I must go them, Sprawson.”

“I knew your ladyship would say so, and that was why I did not speak last night; it would only have troubled you that you must wait till morning. But, my lady, you are far from well yourself.”

“I am greatly better—feeling quite myself indeed. Where is Mrs. Aylmer?”

“She is in the nursery, my lady. I have not spoken to her or to anybody.”

Lady Jane found Agatha among her children, and she told her at once the sad news from Walnut Cottage, and expressed her determination to go thither as soon as possible.

“Of course you must go,” said Agatha; “I would go myself if I dared, but I know I ought not on baby's account. The road to Walnut Cottage must be clear by this time, and the snow is quite hard. You will drive, of course?”

“I think I had better; I do not want to be laid aside again this winter.”

“No, indeed. You must go in the brougham; it is not more than twelve minutes' drive. How soon would you like the carriage to come round?”

“It is past ten now. I should wish to go as soon as ever I can.”

“Very well, I will give the order at once, and I had better tell my husband about Aunt Judith; I am sure he will want to see her.”

Agatha issued the order for the brougham and then went to seek her husband. He was just going out in a great hurry with Mr. Vallance, but he laid down his hat and gloves, and listened gravely to what his wife was saying. There was more than gravity, there was deep sadness in his face when she had finished her recital.

“It is very sorrowful,” said Mr. Aylmer, thoughtfully.

“Do you think so?” replied Agatha. “It seems to me that after so many years of suffering and weariness it must

be good to know that at last God is calling one to rest She has been ready and waiting a long, long time.”

“Ready! yes. I should hope so indeed. She has been a truly good woman. She attended the services of the Church as long as her infirmities would permit, and she came for years, during which many people would have considered themselves confined to the house. Yes, she is a good woman; but she holds peculiar views. I will go to see her, my dear; doubtless she will desire to receive the Communion of the Dying.”

“Does she not hold *sound* opinions?” said Mr. Vallance, compassionately.

Before Mr. Aylmer could reply, Agatha answered, “Her belief is of the soundest, for it is based on the Word of God. Her whole trust is in Christ; she has loved Him, served Him, and glorified Him for more than half a century. Such a life as hers, growing out of such a faith, speaks for itself; there cannot be the shadow of a doubt in such a case.”

“Can we ever on this side of the grave feel fully assured that all is well with us?” said Vallance, solemnly:—

“The grey-haired saint may fail at last,
The surest guide a wanderer prove;
Death only binds us fast
To the bright shore of love.”

“Hush!” said Agatha, gently; “I think you cannot know what you are saying. It is *Christ* that binds us fast to Himself, and so to the place where He dwells. And the true saint will never fail at last. How can he when his Master's word and honour are concerned to bring him safe to glory? But there are refuges of lies that will fail, delusions that will vanish away, hopes false as the mirage. The Lord deliver us from all these snares of the Evil One, and grant that in life and in death we may rest only on Him who is the one Mediator, the only Saviour of sinners.”

Roberta, looking forth from the chamber window, saw one of the Overdale carriages come toiling along over the trodden snow; it stopped at the gate, and her first hope was for Agatha. But her heart rejoiced to see Lady Jane, as one whom her heart regarded with peculiar affection; they had been friends for years, and the disparity in age made little difference in their intercourse, save that the younger lady listened with a reverential deference to the pleasant and holy sayings of her elder, Lady Jane often said that her light never shone quite clear till God sent old Miss Roberts to help her both by word and practice.

Roberta met her in the hail; her eyes were heavy with want of sleep as well as with sorrow, and she was very pale.

“Oh, Lady Jane,” she exclaimed, yielding herself to her friend's sympathetic embrace, “it is come at last! She will leave me now, my more than mother!”

And her tears fell like rain upon the kindly bosom on which she leaned.

“Roberta dear, you must not grieve so; it will be bad for her; nothing should disturb her peace now.”

“It will be such a blank; I have only her!”

“You will have her still. There are worse partings than this one.”

“I know it and I want to be resigned. I think I am— at any rate, I am glad to know that it will be just as God pleases; but it is so hard. I did not know that there was so much self-will and rebellion in me. I am like a child to whom some precious thing has been generously lent, and he has had it so long that he cannot bear to part with it to its lawful owner—he forgets that it was *only lent*.”

“Lent for life, but given in death, Roberta! Our beloveds are more truly ours when the spirit has forsaken its frail tabernacle. ‘I believe in the Communion of Saints.’ And soon the brief separation will be ended, and then—no more partings, no more last embraces, no more sad farewells,”

“Are you come to stay?”

“If you will have me,”

“It will be a great comfort to both of us. *She* spoke of you last night.”

“Then I will send back the carriage, and the coachman can take a message to Agatha; she would have come, but it was scarcely prudent—not right, indeed, because of baby.”

Lady Jane was soon installed in the sick-room as Roberta's helper. It was quite true: the end was very near, the shrunken face was almost white as the pillow that it pressed the small shrivelled hands lay nerveless on the counterpane, and the faint breath came and went, not painfully, but feebly—so feebly that Lady Jane thought it would be gone before the February sun went down.

About two o'clock there was another arrival; it was Mr. Bell, who came for one last look at the kind friend he had loved, and honoured, and esteemed so thoroughly.

He had scarcely dared to hope for more than a look, for Roberta's letter spoke of hourly increasing weakness, and long spaces of what amounted to unconsciousness.

But the sweet old face lighted up when Mr. Bell reverently touched the withered hand and said—
“Nearly home, my dear old friend.”

There was a positive radiance in the faded blue eyes as she replied— “Yes; the Lord has brought me to Jordan's brink. I shall soon be over now. Oh, how good He is! He has sent the very friends I so wished to see in the flesh once more. It was only a wish though I should not have grieved at seeing your faces no more, for all is well, and I am not alone.”

“Christ never leaves His own to traverse the dark way by themselves. Besides, He has gone before, and the way has been lighted ever since. It is only following in His track. It is simply going to Him who Himself, on the eve of that last solemn journey, said, 'Father, I will that they also whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am.'”

“Yes, where He is; that is heaven. But He has been with me so much of late that I thought heaven must be begun. Five—and—fifty years I have called Him mine; and He does not leave me now. My days are nearly fourscore; He has never once failed me, nor have I in any instance trusted Him in vain. All His promises are sure. Remember that, all of you, I have lived nearly fourscore years, and I have found Him 'ever faithful, ever sure'; and remember, too, that when heart and flesh fail, and this world's light grows dim, He is the only Rest, the only Peace, the only safe Foundation.”

“I wish that many of our friends could hear you say this,” said Mr. Bell, his voice faltering with emotion. “And such testimony is most precious to us all. Holding fast to Christ, and rejoicing in Him, we may indeed say, 'Come and see how a Christian can die!'”

“Tell them all how I found it. And oh, Mr. Bell, be faithful, be faithful! Do not teach your people anything but Christ. Do not teach them the Church—not any Church. Yet I love my Church. Her words are very sweet and tender; and I think I should like to hear them once more.”

“You mean you would like to partake once more of the Holy Communion?”

“Yes. In remembrance of Him through whose might I am treading the dark valley. Not as a mere rite—don't think that; not because my Church enforces it; not because it cleanses my soul one whit; but because I would join with these dear ones once more in celebrating my Saviour's precious death before I go to Him, and see Him face to face, and know the full measure of His most wondrous love,”

“Can you bear the full service?”

“I think so, I feel so much revived; it is so sometimes, just before the last, I believe. I asked that I might have strength given me for this—to tell those about me of God's great goodness for all these eight—and—seventy years; and you see how kind He is. Even in this I am gratified. Roberta, tell John, and Susan, and little Kitty; they must all take part in it; they must join in praise and prayer with me once more.”

The simple preparations were soon made, and the sacred service commenced. It calmed Roberta; it seemed to bring her nearer to that world where signs and symbols are no longer needed; and when in the prayer for “the whole state of Christ's Church Militant here in earth” it came to the clause, “and we also bless Thy holy Name for all Thy servants departed this life in Thy faith and fear,” she could join without a pang, though she knew that when next those words should fall upon her ear, she whom she loved best in the world would be of the Church Triumphant. But

“The saints on earth and those above
But one communion make.”

It was but a very small congregation, gathered in an upper chamber—the chamber of Death; but the Master of the Feast was there, and in the breaking of bread they felt and knew His presence. “Therefore, with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Thy glorious Name.” Those words brought that little band of worshippers very near the spiritual world: how vast is the communion of saints! So they ate and drank in perfect peace, in remembrance that Christ died for them—in remembrance that Christ's blood was shed for them; thus obeying His dying command, and showing forth His death “*till He come!*” Also they broke the

bread, and drank the wine, in communion with all their brethren in Christ, of all climes, and creeds, and ages; and in communion with those who, being already freed from the burden of the flesh, had sat down at the Marriage-Supper of the Lamb. One with Christ, they were one with all His children on earth and in heaven. And of such is the *true* "Catholic Church."

Then came the angels' song, that has echoed on earth through so many centuries of sin and sorrow: "Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, good-will towards men;" and then the blessing of peace, and all was over; and they who had to turn back to this world's conflicts and toil rose up strengthened and refreshed; while she whose course was ended, to whom the golden gates were even then unfolding, lay serenely waiting for the summons, which could not long delay.

It seemed as if she would slip away and be gone before they knew it; but once more she was roused: Mr. Aylmer arrived, bringing Agatha with him. "She cannot see any one now," said Mr. Bell; "she is too far gone, Roberta."

But Roberta knew that it would be a comfort to Agatha, and it would not disturb her aunt; so she brought Mr. and Mrs. Aylmer upstairs. In awed silence they stood by the bedside, watching the slumbering face, from which all expression, save that of calm rest and peace, had passed. But once more she opened her eyes, and caught sight of Agatha; and, she signed to Roberta to give her some wine. Then she spoke: "Bless you, dear child! my poor Agatha! the Lord give you strength and keep you faithful. Keep close to Christ, child; do not let Him go; let all the rest go, if it must be, but never quit your hold on Him. Is your husband here?"

Agatha drew him forward, but he did not speak. Aunt Judith's voice now was sunk to a whisper, and her words came one by one with effort. "Don't distress yourself," said Mr. Aylmer, soothingly; "and do not try to speak."

"Only to say," she gasped, "that I who am—almost home—bid you follow me! There is but one way!—you know it. Not the way of ordinances and rituals! Ah, don't trust them; they will only bring you sorrow if you do. They are nothing to me now but pleasant resting-places by the way. It is only Christ who can suffice when one comes to the dark river. Now read the *Commendatory Prayer*."

Once more they knelt; and when they rose, the light that never falls on earth or sea was on the dying face. The eyes were unclosed, the pale lips parted, the whole countenance beaming with a quiet, settled joy. And so she lay a little while, motionless and scarcely breathing, till suddenly they heard her speak. The words came slowly yet clearly: "Granting us in this world the knowledge of Thy Truth, and in the world to come the *Life Everlasting!*"

And hers was now the Everlasting. The eyes closed, something like a flash passed over the quiet face, and ere Mr. Bell could say "Amen!" it was all over. Hers was now and from henceforth the communion of the skies!

They could not weep, they who watched the spirit's flight; it was so like standing on the threshold of the heavenly world that it seemed as though they had to turn and painfully come back again to the things of time, when they left that solemn, restful chamber.

"I felt as if I were almost there," said Roberta, later; "as if I were only following after, a little way behind!"

Lady Jane could only whisper to herself, "So He giveth His beloved sleep."

And Mr. Bell's parting words were: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

Lady Jane remained with Roberta, helping her with all necessary arrangements. The funeral was a very simple one; it had been Aunt Judith's wish that money should not be needlessly lavished on her interment. "Bury me decently," she had said one day in the early winter to Roberta; "for the body is precious, because God made it, and that which is sown in corruption and dishonour will be raised in honour and glory; but don't spend money that might be better bestowed. Buy some comforts for the old women with what would be spent on hearses and mourning-coaches; it is only a very little way to the churchyard."

So her old servant, and Foster, and another or two from the Rectory, and Mr. Bellamy, who deemed it an honour to carry the ashes of this saint to the grave, bore her one sweet spring-like day to the sunny corner she had herself selected.

All the snow was gone; a sudden thaw had set in on the night of Miss Roberts's death, and on the day of her funeral the sun was shining on a glittering sea; soft airs blew from the south; the grass showed green on many a turfy mound, and fresh from the newly-springing verdure gleamed forth the pure white snowdrops, as meet emblems of the "everlasting spring" of the world beyond the grave!

Chapter 41. MR. VALLANCE'S OPINION ON THINGS IN GENERAL

Rosamund's second interview with Mr. Vallance was not quite such a penance as the first had been. An unusual thing does not seem half so unusual when it happens for the second time, and we get hardened to circumstances almost as easily as to wrong-doing. Besides, on the second night of her visit to the church there was a half-moon, and it did not seem nearly so terrible, nor so decidedly improper, to walk about when it was possible to see the path, and to discern one object from another.

When Rosamund went home that night Mr. Vallance remained in the little vestry, staring moodily at the decaying embers of his fire. He had a pass-key for his lodgings, so that he did not disturb the Oakleys, however late might be the hour of his return; and it was generally believed in the village that he spent a part of every night in the church in prayer and pious meditations. It was past midnight when he closed the north transept door upon Miss Aylmer, leaving her to pursue her journey through the cloisters and the wood alone by the dim light of the clouded and setting moon. It would have seemed only common courtesy that he accompanied her—at least so far as the shrubbery, where she would be within call of the house; but gallantry of any kind was foreign to Vallance's nature; in society he was polite enough, and to some extent he paid the chivalric attentions which are expected from gentlemen towards the softer sex; but as regards those who were really under his influence—I might almost have said *in his power*—he maintained that lofty and almost stem demeanour which became him, he imagined, as a priest, an ecclesiastic of superior rank, and a spiritual guide. When once he had addressed a woman as “a penitent” he never again, except upon occasion, addressed her familiarly; nor did he ever offer her those courtesies which society demands from men of a certain class in their every-day intercourse with women. Thus he did not dream of accompanying Rosamund in her lonely midnight walk, though he knew perfectly how painful must have been the venture, how horrible even, to a girl bred and sheltered as she had been. But it had long been Rosa-mend's lesson that the more it cost one to obey the more perfect was the discipline, and conquered repugnance was sometimes of more avail than conquered fears or the mere mortification of the flesh.

Presently Vallance stirred up the dying fire, replenished it with fuel, trimmed his lamp, and placed ink and paper on the table before him. Then he drew forth his gold pen and commenced to write; and the morning was far advanced when his task was completed. Hastily he looked over the pages he had written so rapidly; there were many of them, and they far exceeded the limits of any ordinary letter: the packet when folded and sealed partook rather of the character of a despatch. The last portion of this letter or despatch he read aloud to himself. It ran thus:—“And now I come to the young ladies; as I told you before, Most Reverend Father in God, with the second daughter I have no influence whatever; Miss Gertrude Aylmer shuns me, and does not even take the trouble to disguise her dislike and distrust. She is strongly opposed to that movement in the Anglican Church in which we are so deeply interested—the movement that is already Catholicising—Miss Gertrude would say '*Romanising*'—the national Church of this country. She is by no means religiously disposed: it seems to me that, girl as she is, and carefully educated as she has been in the doctrines of the English Church, she has imbibed the, sceptical notions of the age; her brother Claude is her chief companion, and her affections are at present concentrated in him—and *his* tendencies are decidedly rationalistic. Neither of these young people can be touched in the ordinary way. Disappointed affections and blighted hopes would probably cause a revulsion of feeling; and if either of them became attached to any person, something might be done in the way of interference. Nothing short of the utter misery of despair would drive Gertrude Aylmer to seek repose in the arms of any Church, so-called. Even if she embraced a religious life, I do not feel sure but that she would turn to one of the sects more readily than to the Holy Catholic Church. I have even heard her say, contemptuously, that she '*preferred Methodism to Romanism*'—though all her experience of Methodism is derived from a few rough, uneducated fishermen, who meet for prayer and singing psalms several times during the week in a wretched little hut down upon the shore. I believe Miss Gertrude has surreptitiously attended these meetings more than once: little passes at the Rectory of which I have not cognisance. I would prevent this if I could, but I fear I cannot; parental commands go not very far with this self-willed, independent girl, and I would far rather she embraced infidelity itself than that she should become indoctrinated with the dogmas of these Methodists, who are terribly in

earnest—almost as much as we are. Indeed, Most Reverend Father, I can see very clearly that the great obstacle in the way of our progress, the true hindrance to our success, is *English Nonconformity*. Dissenters are not what they were, they are not what Continental Catholics suppose them to be, they are not even what they will be ere long, for they are growing to be a mighty power in the nation. They used to be formerly, generally speaking (of course there were exceptions), men and women in the inferior ranks of life; their chief strength was to be found in the back streets and alleys of our great towns, and their aristocracy and wealth was derived from thriving tradespeople, chiefly men who had 'got on' in life. Now all this is changed. Dissent, with all its lack of prestige and State countenance, and time-honoured associations, is *per se* stronger than Episcopalianism. It numbers among its pastors and leaders some of the profoundest thinkers in the world; its journalists are men of mark; it has a literature avowedly its own, and of which it may well be proud, since it permeates and to some extent sways all classes of society; it is vigorous, daring, original, full of vivacity, and as brilliant as it is forcible. Some of these Nonconformists are the leading men of the age; they are to be found in Parliament, wielding weapons of argument and eloquence that are all but invincible; their spirit is in the Cabinet, their influence is felt in every movement of the day, in every question of the times, be it great or small. You will say, Most Reverend Father, 'So be it! Grant that these Dissenters are men of learning, eloquence, depth of thought, brilliancy of expression—men of bold determination, unflinching courage, calm, strong judgment, and daring as they are dispassionate! But, without *union*, without a head, what avails their manifold gifts and graces?' There is the grand mistake, the error which *we* are making, and which the Established Church of England makes with infinitely less excuse. *She* has sacrificed unity to uniformity. They—the Noncons—have sacrificed uniformity to union. Which was the wiser? The result is showing itself even now.

"There is *no union* in the Church of England as by law established. I say it advisedly—at present there is not even uniformity. To deride the Dissenters because they are only *sects* is simply irrational in a Churchman, as he arrogantly calls himself. The Anglican Church at this moment is a mere mass of factions, and the factions and shades of factions she embodies far exceed the number of the sects; also these factions hate each other, and show their enmity in anything but a Christian-like spirit. The Evangelicals are absolutely rabid on the subject of Ritualism, and we of the true Church should fear them were they not narrow-minded to a proverb! Their journalists are weak bigots, their literature is puerile as it is feebly passionate. They profess to be in charity with Dissenters, and they talk in rounded periods about their dear Nonconforming brethren, and make a flourish of their friendship on public platforms, where it seems to tell. But the Low Church is really the most bitter enemy of Dissent; it offers the left hand of fellowship while it inflicts a covert stab with its right hand. I believe the reason of this bitterness is that the Evangelicals feel that the Dissenters have beaten them in honesty and courage! Their creed and that of the openly tolerated but secretly despised Noncom is essentially the same, only the Noncom gave up all for truth, and the Evangelicals *did not*, and to this day they deny the leading doctrines of their Church, yet hold fast to their preferments. No disestablishment or disendowment for them. The loaves and the fishes, whatever else may fail!

"That is my dispassionate view of Evangelicalism in this country, especially as relates to Nonconformity, the true master-spirit of Ecclesiastical England. As for the Broad Church, like the Low Church, it is of all hues and shades—rather I should say of all breadths, as the Evangelicals are of all depths of lowness. Some of them one cannot but admire though one cannot commend, but after careful observation it appears to me that we have much more to dread from this section of the Established Church than any other. High Church plays into our hands, both directly and indirectly; Low Church is too feeble, and her insignificance daily increases; she is too feeble, I say, too childishly self-complacent, too much absorbed in her own petty warfares and small tactics, to do *us* any harm. We need not oppose her; let her have her way if it pleases her. But Broad Church *does* teach the people to think for themselves; and we cannot disguise the fact from ourselves, that the ablest Bible critics, the greatest teachers of the people, are of the *moderate* Broad Church party. The extreme faction defeat their own ends, for this *is* not the age of infidelity. But what I fear, Most Reverend Father, in Broad Church, is its coalition with Dissent there are Broad Church Dissenters as well as Broad Church Episcopalians, and *the, combine*, making the strong yet stronger, strengthening the bulwark of Protestantism against which *we* have to contend.

"You desired me, Most Reverend Father, to give you my own uncoloured, unbiassed opinion of things in general, and these are my true convictions, which, after much deliberation, I reduce to words for your satisfaction. I have had rare opportunities of judging. As an Anglican clergyman I was freely admitted, when in my real guise I

should have been shut out. Also, by holding back my true sentiments, I have learnt much of the religious mind of this country in all quarters. I have conversed with the leading Noncons of the day—they supposing me to be an Episcopalian of moderately High views, yet open to conviction. I have talked with Broad Churchmen of all breadths, they imagining that my proclivities were in their own direction. I have conversed with Evangelicals, as they name themselves, and I have meekly listened to their rant, and shook my head, and frowned solemnly over the wickedness of the times and the perversity of people who *won't* look at God's Word and God's character through Evangelical spectacles! And this is my judgment, this is my calm, fixed opinion: that though we may strengthen our hands and aggrandise the interests of our Holy Church; though Ritualism may slowly but surely merge into Romanism; though wealthy converts may throng our Confessionals; though we multiply our churches and colleges in this land—yet, *England will never be won over, will never be forced over, will never be gathered into the true fold*, WHILE NONCONFORMITY REMAINS AS IT IS AT PRESENT!

“Yet do not be disheartened—we shall gain much, we shall effect much, though Dissent will prevent our being a dominant power. Were there no Nonconformity, and no Broad Church, our way would be quite simple: a very little casuistry, a very little tact, a little more patience, and the citadel would be won. But these Dissenters! I confess I cannot see how we are to deal with them; they strove for *toleration* with an indomitable perseverance and a most heroic endurance, which gave them what they sought! They fought next for *liberty*, and a long and seemingly doubtful battle they had for it; but their sturdy force, their unflinching, dauntless bravery gained them the victory. Toleration is a thing of the past; they would not thank the Establishment now for mere toleration—for granting what they could at any time take for themselves if it were wanted. But liberty is theirs, and they will keep it at all costs and at all risks; and now they will have *equality*!

“Most Reverend Father, I humbly suggest that the attention of our holy Church should be at once directed to this gigantic impediment of Nonconformity. We may count upon the Established Church as ours, and we may appropriate her private wealth and her individual devotion; but her income, her *revenues*, her buildings, we shall not be able to touch. If the whole Episcopalian Church rushed to-morrow to the feet of our Holy Father the Pope, it would be but a paltry triumph and equivocal success. Nonconformists to a man would rise. They would stand up, arrayed in all their strength, and armed with that cool determination which has been their characteristic ever since the Act of Nonconformity came into force. Never was it more apparent than it is now. They would sweep away the State Church as a thing effete for good, but for mischief potent. The Broad Church would join with them. We should have a vast number of converts, but that would be all. It seems to me, Most Reverend Father, that something must be done to sow the seeds of dissension in the camp of these our formidable opponents. In their union they are too strong for us. Let divisions arise, and much of our difficulty is smoothed away. The broken-up state of the Established Church is greatly in our favour. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.'

“You say in your last dispatch we must as speedily but as silently as possible win over to our holy Church the aristocracy of England, and her ecclesiastics who are men of family. You say if we gain the nobility, *all*, in fact, is gained—the patrician element will take the lead. Not so, Most Reverend Father, *the people* rule here; it is not with us as in the States of Europe; there is another aristocracy in England than that of blood; there is an aristocracy of intellectual power, and an aristocracy of wealth. Once Catholicise *the people*, and our work is done. England fights once more under the banners of His Holiness, and a fig for all the peers and peeresses who ever proved their sixteen quarterings! But here steps in the antagonistic element of Dissent, which has taken strong hold of the invincible *'people,'* and which animates them to strive and to endure, and also to wait till their full equality is won.

“So then, Most Reverend Father, since you encourage me to state my opinions, I would in conclusion sum up the gist of my remarks in two brief sentences:—

“*First*—The Church of England, by its multiplied divisions, equally with its Ritualistic movement, is playing into our hands as pleasantly as possible—giving us, in fact, little else to do than to bide our time, and discreetly step in at the proper moment.

“*Second*—The true bulwark of Protestantism is Nonconformity; it cannot be crushed; it must *be dealt with* gently, softly, prudently, *subtly*; and though its creeds, its whole policy, its ecclesiastical government, are dead against us, I do not despair of its being weakened and crippled, if not virtually destroyed, if only the right method be pursued, and the right man be entrusted with the task. It will be hard work to imbue Nonconformists with our principles, but it can be done, and *it must be done*, or we shall lose the day in England!

“The movement in this parish has resulted in a secession from the ranks of the Establishment. A rich and

highly respectable farmer, named Bellamy, withdrew himself and his family from attendance on the services of the parish church. He had the wit to see whither they drifted. He set up a sort of conventicle in his own house, and was soon overcrowded. The Methodists and he joined suit, and a large barn was set in order and appropriated as a place of worship, and that, too, was soon filled to overflowing. Now the ground is marked out for a small church, which is to be governed, I believe, on what are called Congregational principles — principles which I detest from my soul, since they are of all other principles most subversive to the interests of our Holy Father the Pope. They are the principles of both Independents and Baptists; the latter are very damnable heretics, and it is much to be regretted they cannot be dealt with as in the good old times, when the Holy Church could hand over obstinate rebels to the civil power. These two sects, together with the Unitarians, constitute the pith and marrow of English Nonconformity. The Methodists are formidable, and in their present condition are unassailable; but there is a fine project for *comprehending* them within the pale of the Established Church, and *then* they may be managed. Their return to the ranks of the Episcopal Church is much to be desired. As they at present stand, they are our uncompromising enemies; and they wield a mighty power, and exert a peculiar influence over the masses. *They must be absorbed into the Church of England.* I repeat that nothing can be done with them as they are at present.

“As regards Miss Aylmer I have little to say; she waits only my permission to declare herself of our communion. For reasons which will be apparent to you I still defer the period of her profession. Aylmer himself still weakly hesitates. I regret that it was deemed necessary to separate him from his wife. She is a very lovely and polished young woman, and devotedly attached to him. A few months ago she might have been won over; now it is impossible, and therefore the separation has become a matter of necessity. Of the other members of the family I have, nothing further to communicate. Mrs. Aylmer and Lady Jane are impregnable as regards their religious belief. I could have wished that Lady Jane had not appeared among us at this crisis. Of Miss Chennery I am not so secure as I could wish to be; she seems to have taken alarm at something. Possibly Miss Aylmer has been indiscreet. There is a reaction at Chennery; the squire has insulted Mr. Aylmer, and attends Merriedale Church, which is as near to him as Overdale; and he has given a hundred pounds towards the building of the new, schismatical church on Farmer Bellamy's ground. The present Mrs. Chennery is very unlike her predecessor; she is violently opposed to what she calls 'priestcraft.' Still Ada must be secured; she is of more consequence even than Rosamund Aylmer.

“To-morrow I shall carry these sheets to Hoveness, and confer with Father Delmar and Mr. La Motte. I shall go unaccompanied by Aylmer.”

Chapter 42. PREMATURE

Rosamund Aylmer went to Chennery Park soon after Ralph Mornington quitted it; she had much to say to Ada, who was the only person with whom, at this crisis of her history, she could freely communicate, and the weight of concealment had grown to be a heavy burden on her heart; it would be a relief to speak openly to the one friend in whom she had full confidence, and to whom she was permitted to speak; for after some hesitation Mr. Vallance allowed her to say what she would to Ada Chennery.

Rosamund was rather sorry to find Kate staying at the Park, for between herself and Mrs. Nugent there had always been a sort of unexpressed antagonism, while between the sisters Kate and Ada there had never been the smallest sympathy. Kate, as I told you, had not pleased her family in her marriage; Charles Nugent was a careless and rather idle fellow, with a small patrimony which he squandered somewhat recklessly, trusting to certain 'expectations' of a fortune which sooner or later he must inherit from a bachelor grand-uncle to liquidate the debts which he was incessantly contracting. The moment a man begins to depend upon 'expectations' he is done for as regards his success and well-being in temporal affairs, and Charles Nugent had been trusting to his expectations ever since he was first promoted to jacket and trousers.

Of course there was the usual feud between step-mother and step-daughter. Mr. Chennery's second choice was as dissimilar from his first as can be well imagined.

The first Mrs. Chennery had been in her grave just thirteen months when her successor was duly installed as mistress at the Park, and very quickly she demonstrated her intentions of ruling all around her. She seemed to have taken a dislike to all her husband's children, and they were not slow in returning the sentiment. Feud succeeded feud, wranglings and disputes became the order of the day. Open war was at last declared, and all the old servants were summarily dismissed.

Kate was miserable, and she seized the first opportunity for escape; and that opportunity unfortunately presented itself in the person of good-for-nothing, thriftless Charlie Nugent. Ada remained in her father's house, though Kate, out of pure compassion, invited her to share her home. But she underwent a daily martyrdom, while she sought for comfort in her religious duties.

The squire loved his children, but, as is too frequently the case, the new wife's influence was so paramount that she guided him whithersoever she would, and gave just the colouring she chose to all the words and actions of her step-sons and daughters. Mr. Chennery, who had always prided himself upon being "master in his own house," was now content to take his impressions second-hand, and to receive any sort of bias, according to the will and pleasure of his sovereign lady, Mrs. Chennery II. A very miserable and divided household was that of Chennery Park, and the most miserable of all its inmates was poor Ada, who was under the ban of her own father, tormented by her step-mother, and isolated as regarded her sisters and her brothers, who had one and all joined with the powers that be in opposition to the "Aylmer movement," as the Ritualistic progress in the parish of Overdale came to be called in that part of the neighbourhood.

The intercourse between Rosamund and Ada had not been as satisfactory as usual during the latter's Christmas visit; but that might have been because Rosamund, being interdicted from her disclosures of her true sentiments, had constantly to take refuge in silence, or to parry Ada's direct inquiries—a state of things which led naturally to constraint and apparent coldness. Now it was otherwise; and she would be able to speak from her innermost heart to the friend in whom she trusted.

The two girls sat upstairs in Rosamund's room on the day of her arrival. They had had five-o'clock tea together, and there was yet an hour before the dressing-bell would ring. Ada looked pale and worn as she leaned back in her chair; Rosamund seemed more animated than usual. She did not doubt but that her friend was fully prepared to sympathise with her, and probably to follow in her steps as soon as it might be expedient so to do.

They began by talking over Church matters, which is the form gossip commonly takes among Ritualistic young ladies; and at last Rosamund said, "I suppose you know that Clara Evison has joined the sisterhood of St. Ursula?"

"Yes, I know it; the news came first from Mrs. Chennery."

"I never thought Clara would have the steadfastness to carry out her intentions—I may say the courage—for

all her friends were so violently opposed to the plan. She must have gone through much persecution, poor girl. I honour her.”

“Rosamund dear, I am not sure that she was right in taking the step she did. I think one ought to obey one's parents.”

“Undoubtedly; but if the Church command, one must listen to the higher authority. I thought you were quite decided yourself, Ada. You have not changed your mind?”

“I have not! no indeed! I still desire to devote myself and my wealth to God's cause; but I have promised my father not to take any vows of any kind, not to pledge myself to any order, or to any community, till I am twenty-five.”

“More than four years to come,” said Rosamund, in some surprise: “Are you content to wait?”

“Yes, because it seems to be God's will that I should wait; it must be right to obey my father. And you, Rosamund, when do you intend to join the St. Ursula sisterhood? you will have no parental disapproval to contend with. Mr. Aylmer will only further your plans as soon as he understands them.”

“I am not going to join the St. Ursula community at all, Ada; I may say to you what I am not going to say to the world generally just yet. I shall some day, probably before six months have expired, commence my novitiate in the convent of St. Catherine.”

“St. Catherine's at Hoveness, do you mean?”

“Certainly! I know of no other St. Catherine's.”

“But, Rosamund, you astonish me! *That* is not an Anglican community, it is a *Roman Catholic* convent!”

“It is! I should not profess myself in any other.”

“Can it be that you are no longer of our communion? Oh, Rosamund!”

“I am still nominally a member of the Anglo-Catholic Church, and it is judged expedient by my spiritual guides that for the present I should remain so. Only to you am I allowed to confide the truth. And, Ada, I must tell you I thought that it was with you as with me—that you were willing and ready to fly to the shelter of our Most Holy Mother, the one true and Apostolic Church of Christ; that you needed only the assurance of those who are qualified to judge for us in these matters to renounce the errors of the Church of the so-called Reformation?”

Ada was very pale, but she replied steadily.

“No! I have no thought of quitting my own communion; that seeing to me the great mistake of the day! Instead of restoring our own dear Anglican Church to its pristine purity and splendour, people, when they reach a certain point, carry their devotion and their enthusiasm into the sister Church of Rome, from which it seems to me we must ever, to some extent, differ.”

“Shall I tell you why this is, Ada? The Church of England is not a true Church, it is a withered branch severed from the source of its life; it is an erring child, whom yet the parent Church regards with intense and tenderest compassion! Its priests are, to some extent, unauthorised, its sacraments are incomplete in efficacy as in design; and, therefore, though it may carry the yearning soul to a certain point, and through its ordinances impart some peace and joy, it cannot finish the work it has begun. It does not give repose and certainty, it has no firmly settled faith; and the spirit, longing for rest and unshaken trust, passes gradually into higher regions, taking with her all the blessings and leaving all the evil of the schismatical fold she leaves behind her.”

“I cannot think with you, Rosamund. I believe that the Anglican Church wields all requisite power and dispenses all blessing. There are many things in the more ancient faith which I admire and reverence, and which we, of another communion, would do well to imitate. But the Church of Rome has serious faults, some of its doctrines are certainly corrupt, and I cannot, will not number myself among her children! Rather will I cling to the beloved Church of my fathers, trusting the day will come when she may rise to those heights to which she now aspires. Ah, Rosamund, I am more grieved than I can express to find you deserting us.”

“And I am more disappointed than I can tell you, Ada, to find you so averse to a step I believed you were quite prepared to take. We have gone side by side so long that it is most painful to know that our paths at length diverge. Have you yielded to persuasions? Have you fallen under unorthodox influences?”

“I will tell you, Rosamund. I have been *startled! dismayed!* Forgive me if I say aught that may be displeasing, but I suspect Mr. Vallance of treachery! I do not believe that he is an Anglican priest, and something whispers to me that he is a Jesuit!”

“Well, if it be so?”

“If it be so it is horrible, it revolts one's sense of truth and honour. Rosamund, dearest, surely you of all people cannot advocate deceit?”

“We are not to judge the actions of our spiritual guides; we have only implicitly to obey. To argue cases of this sort is dangerous presumption. But I may rely upon your silence; you will not speak to any one of my own intended profession till it is publicly announced?”

“Of course I will not; you may trust me as of old. But oh! Rosamund, best and dearest friend, pause ere you consummate this fatal design! Think before you sever yourself from the outer world, before you give yourself up to the wretched monotony of a life which knows no freedom and no change!”

“Ada, has Ralph Mornington been talking to you?”

“Yes; and I must say he talks very reasonably. But I really think he would have spoken in vain had not Mr. Vallance—shall I say, *forgotten himself*?—had he not, in an unguarded moment, shown himself in his true colours. I will never make any confession to him again. I was shocked more than I can describe. I was indignant, but so ashamed that I did not express my feeling. He let me go, thinking, no doubt, that the chains which bind heart and mind were more closely riveted than ever; but in that hour the scales fell from my eyes, and I saw as in a flood of sudden light whither I was tending.”

“Mr. Vallance offended you; he asked you questions which you were not prepared to answer?”

Ada's fair face grew crimson; she was glowing to the very tips of her fingers as she answered— “Do not speak of it, Rosamund; the very thought of that last confession humiliates me. I feel degraded when I recall it, and I cannot help recalling it, for it haunts my memory perpetually. How could he dare to speak to me as he did! my own father would as soon have committed a crime as have asked of any woman the questions Mr. Vallance asked me!”

“Your father would have no right; your confessor has every right to put the questions he thinks are necessary.”

But Rosamund coloured deeply as she said this. The severest test of her submission, the cruellest of all her penances, had been while kneeling before Vallance, and listening to his singular interrogations. Her own cheek had burned with maidenly shame, and her own brow had flushed with indignation, but she had crushed down the angry thought, deeming it a sin, and taking this outrage upon her feelings as necessary though exquisitely painful discipline. She would rather have fasted till exhausted nature succumbed; she would rather have gone on pilgrimage barefoot and penniless; she would rather have given her uncovered shoulders to the scourge, than endure this torture of confession; but then, the greater the agony the more complete the penance, and she had learned now to believe that not only the flesh but the mind must be subdued, that the subjection of the will must be complete, that she must meekly and unquestioningly obey at whatever cost.

But Ada, with all her gentleness, was of another mettle; besides which, the dogmas of a morbid faith had not been impressed upon her in her childhood, as had been the ease with Rosamund. Rosamund herself had been Ada's chief guide and teacher, though Mr. Aylmer himself had done much for her in the same direction; and for the last few months she had gone with him step by step in every new movement that he saw fit to make, the direction being always Romewards. Still, when she had reached a certain point she found that she could go no farther, and as standing still in such a position is scarcely possible, it very naturally came to pass that, slowly and almost unconsciously, she commenced to retreat. Then came Ralph Mornington; and a few moderate sentences from him sank deeper than all the ultra-Protestant sarcasms of Mrs. Chennery, or the passionate and strong declamations of the squire. When once the mist begins to clear away, it is wonderful how fast one begins to see things as they are. For once Mr. Vallance had erred! he had made a most fatal mistake; he had taken things for granted, and he had been premature. Such mistakes will occur when men are cunning even as serpents, and *not* harmless as doves.

After that day Rosamund became reserved; and she declined any further conversation on religious subjects. She was deeply grieved at Ada's change of sentiment; and she felt lonely and depressed. Mrs. Chennery was cold and restrained, and, as the days went on, barely civil; while the squire's boisterous mirth and rough and ready wit, frequently at the expense of Rosamund, partly disconcerted her, and reduced her to a pained silence that might have been mistaken for sullenness. She did not remain so long as she had first intended, and Ada did not press her to stay; she could no longer talk with her freely, for she felt sure that all her sayings would be reported to Mr. Vallance, and that Rosamund herself was not enjoying her visit was quite apparent.

So she went back to Overdale a fortnight earlier than she had intended; but long before she had returned Mr.

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Vallance knew, from her own lips, of the defection of Ada Chennery. He met her by appointment early one morning, in that very Fernydell where six-and-a-half years before Lady Caroline Fripp had tormented Agatha Bevan. There he learned every particular, and he was much dismayed at what he heard; he even grew angry, and charged Rosamund herself with having blundered in her intercourse with her friend. Surely that Fernydell had a sort of *malaria* about it which influenced the temper and made people angry and uncivil!

Chapter 43. MR. AYLMER SPEAKS OUT

The brightness that had shone in upon Agatha's heart slowly but surely faded. The warm, tender glow of that happy Christmas Eve was succeeded by the cruel frosts of Lent and the grey hopelessness of a gloomy Eastertide; and when April with its buds and blossoms and fitful skies to an end, all in the house knew that a crisis must be at hand; things could not continue long as they were; for better or for worse there must be some alteration.

A strange spell seemed to be laid on Agatha; she could not speak the remonstrances she framed. In solitude, with tearful eyes and quickly beating heart, and with all the anguish of despair, she would hold imaginary conversations and rehearse the scene that would be enacted, could she only summon courage to speak boldly, as she ought. And at such times nothing seemed easier than to say all she wished to say; it seemed as if she only lacked opportunity, which must be made if it did not quickly present itself. But when the opportunity did come, when for a few brief minutes she was alone with her husband, his inexplicable coldness and reserve froze every outlet of feeling; something that was scarcely sternness, for he was, in some sense, kind and gentle still, repressed her when she strove to begin one of those expostulatory sentences she had prepared so often and so long.

Meanwhile she grew paler and thinner day by day; the strain was telling upon her health; the suspense was becoming well-nigh intolerable. She began to understand now, poor thing, the secret of all her misery; she could trace the floods of threatening sorrow to their source, and she was visited by some dim previsions of her fate.

She began to see that no remonstrances would avail; that struggle would be useless; that nothing that she could do or say would sweep away the miserable barriers which had grown up between herself and Mr. Aylmer. Only God could make the darkness light and the crooked mazes straight. And she strove for faith and patience, but the very striving wearied and exhausted her; her life was becoming a burden, and but for her children she would have been thankful to know that the hour of rest was rapidly approaching.

And so passed the dreary April days, bright enough with flowers, and vivid lines of green, and singing birds, and glittering waters, and happy childish voices; but dark with fading hopes, and the protracted agony of dread of some terrible, crushing catastrophe.

At last came May—a May as beautiful and gladsome as that which had welcomed Agatha to Overdale seven years ago. Oh, that joyous time! How long ago it seemed! And that still more joyous May a year afterwards, the first sweet early summer of her married life—how far removed it was from the sadness of the present season! Then her lover—husband was ever at her side, now she saw less of him than of any other inmate of the house; then he shared with her all his aspirations and anxieties, and gave her all his confidence, rejoicing in the new happiness of possessing a wife who could enter into his pursuits and afford him a true and practical sympathy; now she heard from him only the commonplaces of the day, never now he consulted her upon his parochial schemes, or upon any scheme or undertaking whatever. It was long since she had heard him say, as once he said so frequently, “Will you come to my study, my dear? I want to talk over some little matters with you; I want your opinion and your judgment on several points.” She was still undisputed mistress of the house; the children were left entirely to her guidance, and, in nearly every instance, the servants; while Claude and Gertrude treated her with increased respect and undiminished affection. As mistress and mother she had all that heart could wish, but as a wife she was nearly as unhappy as she could be. Oh, if Mr. Vallance would only go away! That was her only hope. But then Mr. La Motte and the Jesuit fathers at Hoveness remained, and Mr. Aylmer consorted with them so much that even his most steadfast adherents shook their heads, were surprised at his infatuation, and wondered whether it would end in his “going over” before very long.

One bright morning Agatha sent all her children out walking—she had quite intended to accompany them, but when the time arrived she found herself so tired and unwell that she concluded to stay at home and rest herself. How well afterwards she remembered that balmy, radiant May morning; the air laden with the fragrance of hawthorn and lilac, the flower-beds on the lawn gay with brilliant blossoms, the hills resting in the pleasant sunshine against a heaven of soft transparent blue, and the sea like one vast sapphire glittering with millions of diamonds. The children came in dressed for their walk; the two elder girls jumping with glee, and Beatrice and the baby in the arms of their respective nurses.

“Oh, mamma! naughty mamma!” cried Maude; “you did say you would go with us; you said so when I came

down at your breakfast-time."

"Darling, I quite intended to go, but I am feeling very poorly; my head aches, and the sun would only make it worse."

"There is such a breeze!" persisted Maude; "it will blow your headache away. Aunt Jane always says the sea-breezes blow away *her* headaches, and I am sure they would blow mine away if I had any! Do come, mamma, please!"

"Not this morning, dear; perhaps if I rest now I shall be able to go into the village this afternoon with you and Eustacia. Now run away, and be mamma's best little daughter, and help nurse look after the wee ones."

So the children and the nurses set out for their walk upon the heath, and Agatha was left alone in the morning-room. She intended going up to her own boudoir, but she felt too languid to make the movement. She lay upon a couch close to the open window. Almost too weary to think, she fell gradually into a half-doze, from which she was presently roused by hearing the door opened and some one entering the room.

She had grown very nervous of late, and she started up quickly in an excited sort of way very unusual to her.

It was Mr. Aylmer who had broken in upon her partial slumbers.

"You are not well this morning?" he said advancing halfway across the room, and taking a chair opposite the empty fire-place.

He was evidently intending to stay awhile. He was very pale himself, looking sadly worn and dejected, and there was a nervousness in his tone and manner which in vain he tried to conceal.

A deadly coldness settled at Agatha's heart, for instinct told her that he was come to make some terrible announcement. The moment she had so long treaded was actually come.

"No," she replied, trying to speak steadily and naturally; "I am feeling far from well to-day, so, contrary to custom, I am resting in the forenoon."

"This spring has tried you very much," he answered, kindly, but still coldly.

She was indeed looking wretchedly ill; but there was no proffered caress; he did not even take her hand; he kept his distance, inquiring after her health just as if he were a mere gentleman friend making an ordinary morning call.

"Oh," said Agatha, the tears rising, in spite of all her efforts, "it is not the spring that has tried me—you know it is not that, Eustace!"

There was a brief and most painful silence; the time-piece ticked audibly, as time-pieces always do on such monotonous occasions, and the little birds sang in the thickets without, and a light wind stirred the leafy branches of the limes. The silence lasted scarcely two minutes, but in its agony of oppression Agatha felt as if it had endured for hours. She literally lacked breath to break it herself, and say something of that which lay hid in the sorrowful depths of her sinking heart.

The sweet bird-music made her feel irritable; the murmuring of the leaves confused her senses; the vibrations of the tiny pendulum were as loud and distracting as if they had been those of the Westminster clock itself.

At last Mr. Aylmer spoke.

"I will not profess to misunderstand you, my dear Agatha. I regret to know that I have caused you some unhappiness, some—"

The quietness of his tones was more than she could bear; she sprang up, exclaiming, with a passion he had never before witnessed in his gentle wife—

"*Some* unhappiness! O my God! how can he speak so? Is his heart turned to stone, is every natural affection crushed out? Does he care nothing that he breaks my heart with his terrible coldness and alienation?"

"Hush, Agatha, hush!" began Mr. Aylmer.

But the long-stilled emotions would have way; her feelings were strung to such a pitch that she could no longer control them. Indeed, she did not try; a vehement force hurried her on; the pent-up agony of months had made its escape, and nothing could resist its hurrying, impetuous tide.

"I cannot hush, Eustace! Nay, *I will not!* I must know what is before me. I am your wife, whom you promised to love and cherish faithfully till death, and I claim my rights. At least, I may say that you ought not thus to hide all your heart from me, to treat me as a stranger, to torture me to death with this unexplained estrangement, which springs from—I know not what, which is to me utterly inexplicable, so insupportably cruel. What have I done? In what have I offended you? Oh, why did you ever marry me if you were not quite sure and certain that you loved

me?"

"I loved you, Agatha, only too well; I love you still."

"You love me, and you can torture me?"

"Have I tortured you?"

"You know you have. Did you think I had no feeling that I could bear the change with equanimity, giving perhaps a sigh to the memory of the happy days that were gone, and then contenting myself with my children, and my position, and my household duties?"

"Many women have so to content themselves when God takes away their husbands."

"Yes, when God takes them by death. But this is a living death. We are here side by side, bound by the closest, most inalienable ties—the master and mistress of a Christian household, the father and the mother of these children whom God has given to us—and yet we are as strangers; we exchange no thoughts, we make no sweet counsel together. I know nothing of your plans, you do not care to ask about mine; we are husband and wife in name only. And yet I cannot call to remembrance one instance in which I have disobeyed you or willingly disappointed you."

"Agatha, dearest, you have never disappointed me. You have been all and more than I hoped for long ago. A more true and loving wife has never lived. Do not, I beg, imagine that I find any fault with you. It is one of my deepest regrets that I have never deserved you. The only difference I could ever have wished for would be that we should think alike on certain points as regards our religious faith."

"It is those very points which divide us. But, since I cannot force my convictions, and a feigned assent would be worse than useless, why punish me any more?"

"Punish you, Agatha? If you knew how far more deeply I had to punish myself you would not judge me so harshly."

"Do I judge you harshly? I hope no, I think not; but I could be more patient if I understood you—if you would only say what you mean. Anything is better to bear than suspense and uncertainty."

"Both are frequently appointed us as discipline."

"I confess that such discipline is more than I can bear. Rather, I have borne it so long that I cannot bear it longer. For weeks I have longed to seek an explanation; but your palpable avoidance of me, your coldness and reserve, seemed to freeze my faculties and take away all my courage. To-day I can speak—I am free—and now, I beseech you, tell me the worst; at any cost, let me know the whole truth, let me know the terms on which you and I, husband and wife in God's sight and man's, are henceforth to stand."

She watched his countenance closely as she spoke, and its expression did not reassure her. He was pale even to ghastliness, his brow was knit as with pain, his whole face was working as with terrible but suppressed emotion. And as he still kept silence, though once or twice he essayed to begin, she said, faintly, "Is all over between us?—between us who were so happy, who might for long years have been so happy, if that wicked man had never come to mar our peace? Will you leave me, Eustace? For mercy's sake say *No!*"

"You must not blame Mr. Vallance: he is the mere and partial instrument. It is I only who am to blame. Most bitterly I reproach myself that I ever exposed you to this suffering."

"If it were necessary suffering, I could be patient—as it is, I hope my God will give me grace to be patient. But let me know the worst, the very worst, please! Ah! I see it in your face; you are going to leave me!"

"I am not sure. But, for a while at least, we must separate; it is torture unspeakable to continue as we are now."

"If we separate," she said, quietly, but very sadly, "it will be for ever in this world; we shall never meet again. And, Eustace! oh, Eustace, we have loved each other so entirely! You have been so tender, so considerate, and I have given you all my heart."

And, making one step towards him, she threw herself into his arms and wept bitterly. She was not repulsed; for the first time for many weeks she felt his arms close round her, and he clasped her to his bosom, his own tears falling thick and fast upon her hair.

"Agatha," he said at length, in a voice that spoke his depth of anguish, "I suffer more than you; to see you suffer from the pain which I myself inflict is almost more than I can bear. Oh, if God would only take my miserable life!—you would forgive me if I were in the grave."

"I forgive all the pain I have endured! I forgive everything, if only you will not leave me. Eustace, if you go quite away I cannot bear it—you will kill me. Say you will not go—at least, not this year. Vallance has deluded

you; there is some horrible treachery at work—he has made you believe against your own sound judgment, against the Word of God, that the most acceptable sacrifice you can offer to the Father of all mercies, to the good, and gracious, and tender Father Himself, is the renunciation of those very ties which He has formed and blessed. Wait a little, and the delusion will cease; the mist of error will pass away, you will see with your own clear vision, and no longer through the hoodwinked spectacles of that crafty man Vallance. Eustace, I am certain that he is other than he appears. He says prayers and preaches in your church as an impostor, an arch-deceiver; he is no Anglican—he is a priest of Rome.”

Agatha expected an indignant denial; but Mr. Aylmer only responded—

“You are right.”

“I am right? It is so, then, and he has lived in this house and exercised his wiles! he has eaten our bread, practising all the time the most abominable treachery. Yes, it is treachery to appear what you are not, to go into a family and learn all its secrets, and betray them, using the knowledge you acquire, and the influence you attain, for the sole furtherance of certain purposes, which are sure to work misery and pain. I call it the blackest treachery, disguise it by whatever name you may; and evil must be the religion which interweaves with all its schemes and aims such tissues of artifice and falsehood! And you knew that he was a traitor, a Jesuit!”

“I did not know it till the other day, though I long ago suspected it. He would have confided in me, but he was not permitted to speak openly; his vow of obedience is very stringent. He will leave Overdale almost immediately.”

“Thank God! That at least is a blessing. But you will not accompany him?”

“No; I cannot well leave Overdale at present.”

“But you said we must separate; will you send me away?”

“My dear, irrespective of any conscientious scruples, it seems to me that you are in weak health, and that you require change—a very thorough change, both of scene and air. I have thought that several months on the Continent would be of use to you; and as Vallance is returning to Rouen you could not do better than accept his escort.”

“I will go away if you say I must, but Eustace, I will not have that man forced upon me. I could not endure his suave courtesy, his pretended kindness, and his hypocritical sympathy. Besides, I dread him as I would dread a sly, envenomed serpent. If you have the least love left for me save me from that man.”

“My dear, this is absolutely childish! Mr. Vallance entertains for you the profoundest respect. He would show you every kindness, and none can be kinder than he when necessity arises.”

“And the children?”

“They will go with you, of course. Do you imagine I could for a moment think of separating you from them? Gertrude, I think, will accompany you, if not Rosamund, and I do not see why you should not have Jane. I have planned it all.”

Agatha sat down with a stunned and hopeless expression; it was useless to struggle against her destiny. All had evidently been arranged, and it seemed that she had no choice in the matter. But at length she said, “I cannot decide; I can say nothing at present. I must think, I must pray; I must talk to Jane—only tell me plainly why you do it.”

“I thought you understood; why give me the pain of speaking, and yourself the pain of hearing? The time is come, then, when I must own to you that I am no longer a true son of the Anglican Church; I thought to remain in her communion, but it cannot be. I must in due course profess myself a Catholic.”

“I expected this,” said Agatha, sorrowfully; “but you need not continue to be a clergyman.”

“But I must; my vows are pledged. God’s oath is upon my head. Once a priest, ever a priest; there is no recall; and my vows are none the less binding because they were spoken in error and in blindness. I have deeply sinned against you, Agatha. The moment I felt for you the first thrill of affection I ought to have wrestled with myself till I conquered. I did strive; I did endeavour to crush out the rising attachment, though what it cost me I cannot describe—the more so that I saw I made *you* suffer. I yielded to the tempter, I made you my wife, and for a time conscience was lulled to sleep. We were so very happy—it seemed even that my intense love for you and the children drew me nearer to God and gave me strength and joy in my pastoral work. But it could not last; I could not progress towards the perfect truth without perceiving my own delinquency in the clearest light. I crushed out scruples; I hushed conscience with opiates and charms; but it awoke, as in such cases it ever will awake, and it

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stung me like a scorpion. Still I wavered, still I hung back; I could not make the sacrifice, for oh! Agatha, though I might school myself to seeming indifference, I loved you more than ever.”

“I am glad of that,” she said, faintly, through her tears. “It was, it *is* a sinful love; it must be slain, though we may still be dear friends, and I *may* love you in God. Dearest, you will go to Rouen for three months?”

The children came rushing in from their walk, to find their mother lying senseless on the couch where they had left her, and their father bending over her in unconcealed agony.

Chapter 44. CLAUDE INTERPOSES

A week afterwards, and everybody was busy preparing for the approaching journey. Lady Jane was to accompany her sister-in-law and the children; Gertrude, and, much to her stepmother's surprise, Rosamund, were to be of the party; and Claude, whose long vacation was just commencing, was to be their escort, for no persuasions, no representations on Mr. Aylmer's part, could induce Agatha to travel in company with a person whom she naturally shunned and disliked. She had declared that Lady Jane and herself, with proper attendants, could dispense with the protection of any gentleman; but when Claude offered his services Agatha most thankfully accepted them.

"I can't make out why you are going, little mater," said Claude, when it was settled that he should be their travelling companion. "You do not like it; you do not want to go. Why on earth make yourself uncomfortable? stay at home till you feel more in travelling order—it must be horrible to go from home when one is languid and poorly; then let us all go down into Cornwall and see the Lizard, and Marazion, and the Looe Pool Ralph talks about, and Tyntagil, and all the rest of it. Why go skedaddling over to Rouen when we had better stop in our own bonnie England?"

"Your father planned it all, my dear; it is his arrangement."

"What an obedient wife you are, my pretty mater! I suppose you would go to Japan, or even to Labrador, if his reverence willed it so?"

Agatha smiled faintly.

"My dear Claude, I thought it best to go; perhaps I am wrong. I wished very much that you were at home before I made up my mind."

"Indeed! Well, advise with me now; you will find me a most willing and sapient counsellor. If upon consideration we find that we had rather not cross over to *la belle Normandie*, we can change our minds, you know. A woman is never expected to abide by her first decision! Let us go over the ground carefully. It is your health, my honoured and reverend pater says, which induced him to contrive the project. You want change of scene as well as change of air?"

"Your father sees, of course, that I am act well, and I think I get weaker every day. I have not been as strong as usual since baby was born. It turned bitterly cold, if you remember, soon after Christmas, and I had that influenza. It was a very slight attack, but somehow it never seemed to leave me. I thought when simmer came it would quite go, but the warm weather tries me even more than did the east winds of April and the early part of May."

"Of course you have been up to town to consult Adamson, or had him down here?"

"No, I have not felt ill enough for that. Besides, we have every confidence in Mr. Barton, and when papa talked to him he said at once there could be nothing so good for me as travelling. You know we only go to Rouen at first, after that we are to explore the coast of Normandy, and go all over Brittany; and Gertrude proposes that we shall finish up with Paris, but I am not sure I can go about so much with a young baby, and the little ones would be a great trouble if we were a ways shifting our quarters."

"Oh, I'll help you with the brats; they will do anything for Brother Claude, bless them! Then Gertie is worth an army of nursemaids; she romps and tells fairy tales to perfection. I tell her she is going to be spinster aunt to all the next generation of Overdale Aylmers; but one cannot fancy our pretty golden-haired Gertie a frumpy old maid."

"Why frumpy?"

"Indeed I don't know; only that I have a prejudice against such unappropriated blessings; that is, a general, not an individual prejudice."

"And general prejudices are, as a rule, unreasonable and absurd. Look at Aunt Jane!"

"Ah, there I have no fault to find. Still, Aunt Jane would have been happier, and, I daresay, even *nicer*, if she had married."

"Do you not know why Aunt Jane is still single?"

"Not precisely. There was some disappointment, was there not? Some women can't get over being crossed in love; it sours them for the rest of their lives, and they abuse the whole sex in consequence. I suppose there are

very few, if any, old maids who never had a chance?"

"Very few, I should say; though I know there are women in the world who have never been asked to change their condition. Your Aunt Jane, however, is not one of these. More than twenty years ago she was to have been married. They would not have been rich; but Lord Ashdown gave his consent, and everything promised fairly. They were devotedly attached to each other, and quite willing to dispense with many of the common accessories of rank. Jane herself was ready to sacrifice anything; and as they were so unambitious, and yet by no means imprudent, there seemed no reason why their marriage should not speedily take place. All was arranged, when Arthur's mother was taken suddenly ill, the wedding was postponed for one fortnight, and he went into Yorkshire, where his parents resided. They lived in a beautiful but secluded spot in one of the north-western dales, where, of course, at that time, there were no railways, nor even any kind of public conveyance. Arthur reached the nearest town, and hired a swift horse, as the fleetest mode of transition across the desolate upland moors which he must traverse; but a tremendous storm set in, he lost his way, wandered about an uninhabited country for hours, drenched to the skin and sinking with fatigue. At length he met a shepherd, who directed him aright; and after some hours of heavy travelling he reached his home, to find his mother just gone. The shock and the long exposure to the weather told upon a constitution not originally sound, I should suppose, for from that day he was always an invalid. He had a severe illness, from which, however, he seemed to rally, though he still remained so weak and ailing that your grandfather insisted upon the further postponement of the marriage. And so it went on from week to week, and from month to month, till at last all the symptoms of decline were fully developed, and anything like permanent recovery was out of the question. He lingered on, poor fellow, in slow consumption, for more than a year, and Jane was very much with him. At last he died. Your aunt was with him to the last, and she has ever since regarded herself as his widow, and has been faithful to his memory, though several times urged to what the world would call a most eligible match."

"Poor Aunt Jane!"

"Happy Aunt Jane," said Agatha, with a sigh. "She kept the love that was her greatest earthly treasure to the very last. Nay, I doubt not it is hers still in all its richness and fullness, though purified now from every mortal taint. There are worse sorrows, Claude, than that of laying what you love best in the quiet churchyard—the precious dust to moulder softly away, while the happy spirit rejoices in the presence of its Saviour. Sometimes I think only the dead are faithful; they never change; no blight falls on their honoured names, no regret is mingled with the thought of them: they are indeed 'the dwellers on the shores of spring fulfilled.'"

"Mother,"—and Claude spoke very gravely—"why should we not speak frankly?—we understand each other. I tell you I know the meaning of this Rouen journey. I am not so many years younger than you are; but try to think of me as your very own son; indeed, I wish to be to you all that a dutiful son can be. I want to regard you not only as my father's wife, but as my own dear and honoured mother. Are you quite wise in yielding your consent in the present instance? This is your right place; here you are the lawful mistress. Is it well to quit your husband's home, even at his solicitation, things being as they are?"

"Claude, I have asked myself that question over and over again. I doubt if it be wise, but it seems to me that I have no choice; after all we women can exercise but a very partial and uncertain freedom. Indeed, I cannot find that I have any alternative."

"I shall speak to my father. I have a right; I am his eldest son, and I am arrived at man's estate,"

"As you will; only, my dear Claude, do not forget the reverence due to your father. I think you are justified in speaking, but do not forget to whom you speak. You know you are apt to get excited, and under provocation you might say hard things, which afterwards you would regret."

"Mother, I will try to remember that I am speaking to one to whom I owe all duty and all reverence; but it is difficult to revere where you contemn, neither is it easy to bear unreason with filial submission, and I cannot but hold my father to blame. He has listened to that crafty Jesuit till he has come to believe in all sorts of perversion of truth and honour. No, do not endeavour to defend him. I know the chief onus of the whole miserable affair rests on Vallance; but a man verging towards fifty years of age ought to have sufficient wisdom and strength of mind to obey the dictates of his own unbiassed conscience, and to know right from wrong, however artfully mingled and presented by an insidious, unscrupulous perverter. But I have seen for years, boy as I was, whither we were all tending. Do not hurry your preparations, Agatha—mother; do not go at all unless you choose. Stand upon your rights as a married woman; and absolutely refuse to leave your home unaccompanied by your husband."

“Hush, my dear! We must not speak thus about papa. Admitting that he is quite wrong, it cannot be right that you and I should be caballing together against him. But I will promise you there shall be no hurry, *if I can help it!*”

That evening Claude Aylmer sought his father alone.

He found him slowly pacing the cloisters, lost in meditations which were evidently of no soothing nature. The fine, delicate features were sharpened; sadness, sternness, and terrible self-repression showed in all the lines of the handsome but haggard face; the whole frame was emaciated, the erect, manly gait was changed, the tall figure stooped wearily as if it bore some heavy burden which was slowly pressing it downward, downward to the earth.

He would have passed his son with a mere inclination, but Claude stopped, and linking his arm through his father's, said—

“Can I speak with you for a few minutes, sir?”

A weary look came over Mr. Aylmer's already wearied countenance, and he replied, hesitatingly— “Yes; if you will not keep me too long.”

“I want to know whether this Rouen journey had not better be postponed. Mrs. Aylmer is most unwilling to leave home; and it is surely hard that in her delicate state she should be compelled to travel against her will.”

“Barton recommends a thorough change; Agatha is very nervous, and she has never got up her strength since the winter.”

“She never had any chance—people never do thrive physically when they are intensely miserable, and we all know how very wretched Agatha has been, and is, and will be, unless affairs begin to assume a very different aspect.”

“What do you mean, Claude? I think you might leave me and my wife to settle our own differences.”

“If there were any differences I would. I am not such a fool, though I am a young fellow with comparatively small experience, as to pretend to interfere between man and wife. I should as soon think of settling the quarrels of a couple of infuriated cats, who would both scratch me for my pains, as I should dream of meddling in a matrimonial altercation. But this is quite another thing; you are not angry with Agatha; she is not angry with you, in spite of all you have made her suffer; and yet all in the house, except the little children, know that your relations with her are entirely changed; and it is whispered in the village that—but no! I will not give utterance to so monstrous a calumny; I will not wrong you by repeating slanders which deserve to be punished, which shall be punished ere long, or my name is not Claude Aylmer! I intend making some people eat their own words, if they cannot, as of course they cannot, prove them.”

“Will you have the goodness to say plainly and *quietly* what you mean? I have not heard of any slanders.”

“You would be the last to hear them; but, sir, there are those in Overdale, and in Hoveness too, who say outright that Vallance is a Jesuit, and that you know it. Also, that you are at heart and in all your sympathies a Papist—a Romanist, or what you will; that you minister at yonder altar as a traitor, under false colours, and for fraudulent purposes. Further still, they say that you neglect your wife, and that you have it in your mind to desert her, and to take upon yourself the vows of the Roman Catholic priesthood! Now, sir, I ask you, is it not enough to make me mad to come home and hear such things, and not to be able to throw down the gauntlet, because this very expedition which is planned favours the suspicions which have been expressed so freely? If Agatha go—forgive me, father, if I seem to dictate, but really I think your own son has as much right to influence you as has that—that Vallance;—but if she go you ought to go with her, and remain with her, and bring her back again. I am most willing to take charge of her, but, in the present crisis of affairs, it is her husband, not her son, who should accompany her. Will you not join us, sir? I will take all the trouble, you shall merely attend to Agatha.”

“You do not know what you ask, my son; Claude, I will not try to mislead you—”

“It would be of no use, sir. *I* have had my eyes opened for some time. But for God's sake be candid; what can a religion be worth that makes a man of honour prevaricate, and play fast and loose with his own conscience? I remember the time, sir, when you would not have hidden or cloaked your convictions for the sake of all the world. I always thought there was the stuff in you, father, to make a martyr, if persecution should ever visit us again.”

“And do you think *this* is not martyrdom?” said Mr. Aylmer, fairly roused at length, and losing sight of the reticence which had been enjoined. “I tell you, Claude, if I had my choice—if I might rather go to the stake tomorrow, or pursue the course to which I am impelled—I would not hesitate. What were a few fiery pangs, a quarter of an hour of nature's direst agony, to the long, slow torture to which, by my weak indulgence of the flesh,

I have condemned myself and another? It is seeing Agatha suffer as she does, as she will, I fear, that inflicts the keenest pain. I could bear a life-long anguish if I might bear it alone."

"I understand you, father, in some sense, and yet what you say seems inexplicable! What do you mean by 'a weak indulgence of the flesh'?"

"I mean giving way to mere human affections, forming those ties which are lawful for men in general, but sinful to those who have vowed themselves to God's holy altars and to His cause."

"Sir! do you mean to tell me that marriage is incompatible with a pure Christianity?"

"Not at all. You ought yourself to be thinking of marrying soon—I do not object to early marriages; but then you have not entered into other and more binding arrangements; you are free to take a wife, to know the sweets of wedded love, to enjoy all the happiness of domestic life—such freedom I renounced five—and—twenty years ago."

"You mean when you took what are commonly called 'holy orders'?"

"I do, Claude. I know what you would say, that the Anglican Church demands no such sacrifice, that on the whole she encourages marriage in her priesthood; but long ago it was shown to me that the so-called Reformation was a terrible and almost fatal error. I do not say the Anglican Church so severed herself from the one Holy and Apostolic Church as to exclude her from all participation in the work and merits of our blessed Redeemer, but I do say she so broke away in her mad rebellion as to become a withered branch, in which the sap cannot circulate freely, which has only just sufficient life in its poor, drooping leaves, and feeble, unclasping tendrils to maintain something of the appearance of vitality. Its connection with the root still exists, but that is all that one can say. Such dried-up branches will never bear fruit; or, if they do, they will be dusters of the wild grape, not such as a vigorous, healthy vine would bring forth."

"I thought, sir, Christ said, 'I am the Vine, ye are the branches.' You would make out that the Vine is the *Church!*"

"Christ is the Vine, but He speaks and acts only in and through His own Church. But I will continue my explanation. I took orders, knowing no better, in this renegade Church, which is, after all, a branch not yet finally severed from the parent stock. I did not at first recognise my obligations; it did not seem to me that I was called to obey the dictates and observe the discipline of the ancient Church. I was a clergyman of the Church of England, and I might enjoy all the good things which she keeps in store for her obedient children! In such a frame of mind I married your mother; and I may confess to you that we were not very happy together—we never suited, we never assimilated—the Lady Augusta and myself. After a while I began to perceive more truly what was required of me as a true son of the Church. I saw that I had erred in assuming duties which were incompatible with the high standard of devotion to religion and to its sacred interests which I wished to make my own. Still, being a husband, I tried to be a good one, and I do not know that your poor mother ever felt dissatisfied. We had made a marriage of expediency, and the result was not a very warm affection on either side; nevertheless it never occurred to me to break the bonds I had laid upon myself. Eight and a half years ago your mother died, then I was free to follow out the dictates of my own conscience without doing any one a wrong. Then it was shown to me that henceforth I must consecrate myself solely to God's service—body, soul, and mind, and inly I vowed that so it should be, and that I would never again entangle myself with worldly duties and obligations. I need not go on; you know how it all happened: you know Agatha, in her young, bright beauty, with all her gifts and graces, came among us, and before I knew how greatly I was, tempted I loved her *passionately*; and I tell you, Claude, the love of a boy of twenty is as 'moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine,' compared with the deep, strong, intense sentiment that takes possession of a man of forty, when for the first time he learns what it is to love truly and fervently and with all his heart. I struggled, Claude, against what I felt in my soul to be a sin,—I confess to you my weakness, my shame,—I struggled, but only faintly, and there came a time when passion conquered, when all thought of obstacle was swept away, and I married Agatha Bevan."

"And you did a good and holy thing, sir. You married a pure-hearted Christian lady, who would be an honour to any man whose name she bore. You gave us, your children, an excellent friend; young as she is, she has been a mother to me. Her gentle words, and the recollection of her sweet face, have kept me out of many a scrape, saved me from many a sin; and as for her own little ones she is a perfect mother—yet in the mother, as is too frequently the case, the wife is never merged; she is true to you, father, as the needle to the pole. You do not know how dearly she loves you, or you would never think of banishing her."

"Spare me, Claude. I love you, my boy, for your championship of your gentle mother, and to you I look to be

Overdale

her comforter and guardian when she and I meet no more.”

“Good heavens, sir! you are not in earnest?”

“I am! For the present at least we must part. If she do not leave Overdale I shall leave it; it will only precipitate matters a little.”

“Sir, you are representing this as a partial and temporary separation; you tell Agatha she is to go away *for a time*. Speak the truth to me; I will not till the right time comes disclose it to her or to any one. If I am to be my mother's sole friend and guardian, it is right that I should know her exact position and her probable prospects. Your last farewell will be when we set out on this ill-omened journey?”

Mr. Aylmer bowed his head; the anguish of his spirit was too deep for words. Claude went on—

“I thought so. Oh! my poor mother. Sir! one word more—I must say it! I warn you that you are killing her, torturing her to death slowly and mercilessly. May God preserve me from the delusions into which you have fallen. I see it all! Oh, sir, I feared, yet I never thought all that has been going on in yonder church so long would end in this!”

When father and son parted Mr. Aylmer was left standing on the spot where for the first time, drawing Agatha to him, he had said, “I was thinking of a far-off time—a time that may be very sorrowful.”

Chapter 45. FAREWELLS

Claude's interposition was of no avail; a secret but irresistible impulse seemed to sway the household, and by Midsummer eve all was ready for the departure of Agatha and her children. Lady Jane wore the saddest countenance that had been hers for many a year, but she made her preparations in silence, scarcely heeding the ominous shakings of the bead and the piteous ejaculations of Sprawson, who as well as nurse and Foster, and several others of the faithful old servants, knew quite well what was impending. Mr. Aylmer avoided his son, and indeed he avoided everybody; he spent his time almost wholly in the church, except when, as people said, he was not walking about the parish, "more like a ghost than the living rector they had known so long."

Mr. Vallance was absent; Messrs. Bonner and Gregson seemed to be flagging in their zeal; the Misses Harrison redoubled theirs, while the walls of the new Congregational church were fast rising from the foundations. The Harrisons and others of the so-called orthodox clique had laughed at the idea of Mr. Bellamy and a handful of schismatics, half of them poor fishermen from the Chine, and farm-labourers, being able to find the money for anything beyond the merest barn that would shelter them from sun and rain.

"And quite good enough too," said Harriet Harrison, turning up her nose already celestially inclined, "quite good enough for heretics, who ought to be *compelled* to come back to their mother-church; quite good enough for rude rustics, and gaping fishermen, and stupid Methodists, such as are edified by Mr. Bellamy's discourses, and think it folly to wear any kind of ecclesiastical vestment!"

But great was the astonishment of many others besides Harriet Harrison and her sisters when it appeared that the Dene Church, though of course not to be compared to the grand old Priory church, rich with the treasures of antiquity, and on which modern wealth had been unsparingly lavished, would yet turn out to be a very handsome, substantial building; the plans being furnished by the leading architect of Hoveness, who has since those days risen to be a man of eminence in his profession.

And then the Misses Harrison were ten times more angry than ever at the insufferable presumption of these. Dissenters, who really had the impertinence and bad taste to build a Gothic church with a spire, instead of a barn with deal pews in it; just because they had the money to pay for it! Mr. Bellamy gave the land, and gave largely besides. Roberta's £1,000 was ready when wanted; Miss Grierson contributed her "mite" over and over again, till it reached a pretty considerable sum. Ralph Mornington was among the subscribers, and Mr. and Mrs. Chennery put their names down for a cool £200, and notified their determination to attend the new church as soon as it should be opened; "unless, indeed," the squire always added, "all this mummery and Popish nonsense should be swept away from Overdale Church, and then *I* should prefer to worship after the manner of my fathers, and where my ancestors worshipped before me. And I think matters will soon come to a crisis; Mr. Aylmer must lower his tone, or just step over the low boundary wall between the rival Churches of England and Rome—a wall which he is striving to pull down with all his might; only I do not think he and such as he ever will succeed, because patient John Bull gets out of temper sometimes and makes short work of it; and the British lion is not so cowed but that it can roar loudly enough upon occasion to scare and scatter his enemies and make them fly! But the Dear Church has done good service and shown that pragmatism is not the master of England yet, and that people will think for themselves and will *not* put their necks under the yoke of the good-for-nothing old scarlet;——" and Mr. Chennery uttered a word unfit for ears polite, and he promised that in any event his aid should be forthcoming, and that he would both in word and deed befriend the infant church.

When the Misses Harrison heard this they declared the rector would only fulfil his duty if he publicly excommunicated and anathematised the recusant lord of Chennery Park. And Miss Laura thought it ought to be done in true orthodox fashion, with "bell, book, and candle," which," said the young lady, playing with her elegant coral rosary, "must be *so impressive!*" The elder sister, Dorothy, mildly suggested that however desirable such a proceeding might be, it would be inexpedient, if not impossible, in the present day; and she was chidden by the more ardent Laura and the vehement Harriet, who were wrapped in a beatific vision of the future, in which ecclesiastical power should reign supreme, and the Church triumph over the State, and reduce all men to a state of holy vassalage. Miss Laura did not even despair of people being "put to open penance." And, quoting from the Communion Service," both ladies in chorus desired "that the said discipline may be restored again."

“It never will be!” said the matter-of-fact Dorothy; “people never will submit to stand at the church-doors in a white sheet. It was all very well in old times, when the clergy had the chief power, but it would never answer now, my dears!”

“If a thing is right,” replied Laura, severely, “it is nonsense to talk about it answering or not answering. It *must* answer if the Anglican Church is true to herself.”

“I cannot quite see what you want the Anglican Church to be.”

“Just what it was before that terrible calamity which people called the *Reformation*, only not subject to the Pope of Rome—a perfect and complete Church, governed by a true and apostolic priesthood. And of course I would have all the sects put down. It should be high treason, and punishable as such, to be a heretic—that is to say, a Dissenter!”

“I am not prepared to go so far as that,” answered Dorothy, quietly. “I am a thorough Churchwoman, and I do hate the thing they call Dissent. Still, girls, it would never do to force people into any religion—it never has been done, and it never can be done, and persecution always results in the extension of heresy. Believe me, the days are past for *forcing* people to come to church; indeed, I sin not certain but what I should feel rebellious if instead of being left to my own convictions, I were threatened with civil pains and penalties if I put my foot inside any unconsecrated conventicle. Mind, I wouldn't do it now for anything; I would keep true to my Church if I were threatened with martyrdom for doing so, but I really cannot say how it might be if my Church threatened me with punishments if I dared to go out of her. Why, even children are not to be coerced as they were in my young days. They will know the reason thy, now, as well as their elders. I do not say it is a good state of things, but there it is, and you cannot alter it. It is a sign of the times, I suppose; and you may as well try to stem the current of public opinion as to turn back the tide in yonder bay with a score of sweeping brooms. Be wise, girls! I am older than you, and I have seen how rashness always comes to grief. I san as much in earnest as *you* are, perhaps a little more so; but I say, *don't go in for too much*. Look before you leap, and know all your premises before you commit yourself to either side of the argument. I am afraid Mr. Aylmer has been indiscreet, and I sincerely wish Mr. Vallance had not stayed so long. If it should turn out that he really is what people say he is—and I cannot divest any own mind of suspicion—why, then the Anglican Church in this part of the country will have sustained a blow. As to what is rumoured about the rector I do not for one moment believe it. It is a calumny invented by those wicked Dissenters—nothing more, depend upon it.”

“What have they been saying?” cried Laura, excitedly.

“Nothing new. You have heard the scandal—Mr. Aylmer and his wife are said not to be living happily. It is reported that he is unkind to her, that he neglects her, that sometimes he hardly speaks to her or looks at her for days and days.”

“Servants' gossip!” said Harriet, disdainfully.

“I wonder you repeat such things, Dorothy. It sounds as if *you* believed it all. Why, Miss Grierson declares that the rector is going to send Mrs. Aylmer away, aid that he means to live alone at the Rectory, and practise monasticism.”

“Of course it is not true,” said Dorothy; “but I must say Mrs. Aylmer does look very ill and very wretched.”

“She may well be wretched seeing what an unsound Churchwoman she is; half-and-half creeds always make people unhappy, just as half-and-half measures always result in failure and confusion. Mrs. Aylmer will never be truly happy till she yields herself up without reserve to the guidance of the Church.”

“But Mrs. Aylmer really is going abroad!”

“Is that anything so extraordinary? We went to Paris and to Brussels ourselves last summer, and were we not talking about a tour in Switzerland only yesterday? Everybody who is anybody goes abroad nowadays, and even the nobodies ape their betters, and are not content to stay at home. And the Aylmers, with their wealth and in their rank of life, why, it seems just the natural thing!”

“Natural enough, Harriet, but not quite so natural that Mr. Aylmer should stay behind and let his wife and children go without him.”

“Ah, but Mr. Claude accompanies them, and Lady Jane is going too; Mrs. Aylmer will be well taken care of. And they always do go about with such a posse of servants. Mr. Aylmer feels, of course, that he cannot leave his parish.”

“I do not know; but this I say, girls—mind, I don't believe the scandal! I think with you, it is all those horrid

Methodists, or whatever they call themselves—it doesn't much matter. They are *heretics* whether or not! It is their vulgar gossip, I doubt not; but if Mr. Aylmer *did* wrong that sweet young creature, send her away, and leave her to spend the rest of her life as neither widow nor wife, I for one would be the first to condemn him. Nothing can justify a man in being faithless to his wife.”

“Of course not!” chimed in the young ladies.

With all their High Church absurdities they had matrimonial aspirations, and why should they not have, being both under thirty, by no means unattractive in person, and having nice little fortunes of their own?

“Of course not!” they repeated; “if a man choose to marry he ought to be a good husband. Under no pretext can he desert her and be held blameless; and Mr. Aylmer is the last man to commit such a flagrant wrong. I daresay Mrs. Aylmer is only going first with the children and servants, and the rector will join them as soon as he finds he can do so without neglecting sacred duties. And they will all come home together in the autumn, and the slanderers will be silenced.”

“We will hope so,” returned Miss Harrison, demurely.

And while the sisters with light hearts speculated, and argued, and chatted, after their five-o'clock dinner, Agatha was wandering once more over some of her old haunts, tearless and sad, taking a farewell of beloved scenes—a farewell which some mournful instinct whispered would surely be her last. She passed through the cloisters where first she had known how much she cared for him who was now her husband, where first she had felt the pressure of the strong arm that she afterwards thought would be her earthly stay and support while his life and her life lasted. “Until death do us part” had rung in her ears very often of late, and she saw again the solemn chancel of the old church at Sutton Magna, and beheld the applauding Galbraiths gathered round, while that voice, which was still her sweetest music, sounded in her ears, “to love, and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.” The bare thought of that parting by death had been very bitter then; even while the merry marriage-bells were ringing those words smote upon her heart like a knell. Parting from Eustace she felt would be the very bitterness of death, for oh! how empty would be the wide, wide world without him! Poor Agatha! she had loved as few women loved, as few are capable of loving, for hers was one of those deep and quiet, yet passionately tender natures which crowd all heaven into their Elysium of love, and all Hades into their despair. And hers had been no foolish, vain romance of youth. She had loved so fondly, so truly, so entirely; not some one unworthy of her love, not some one who could have dispensed with her affection, but the man who had chosen her out from all the women of the world to be his *wife*, his own, “according to God's holy ordinance”—the man who was her lawful husband, and the father of her children; and now they were to part, and it was man's hand, not God's, so to speak, which parted them. Not death, but a strange, inexorable fate seemed standing now between them.

Out of the cloisters, where the dead and gone Aylmers mouldered wider grey stones and half-defaced brasses, Agatha wandered into the quiet churchyard. There all was peace; the birds were singing, the flowers were brightly wreathed around many a marble cross and mossed headstone, and the honey-bees were murmuring among the grass and the fragrant thyme that thickly carpeted some of the lowly hillocks. The limes, too, were in bloom, and the evening air was heavy with their sweetness, and the green leaves rustled pleasantly, while a soft breeze swept mournfully through the dark pink branches, like the long-sustained note of a solemn requiem. And in pale green and golden slants the bright sea swept away from point to point and to the farthest horizon. It was all very fair, and Agatha loved it dearly—loved it as only men and women of a certain calibre can love the natural beauty which is interwoven with their own home-life. A week ago she would have wept wildly, gazing for the last time on the well-beloved “God's acre” under the shadow of the time-honoured stately pile, rising in all its grave magnificence against the intense blue heavens, and the leafy background of dark green and emerald foliage, and sleeping as it were with its precious dust in the embrace of the everlasting hills and the eversounding sea! But now she shed no tears; she wondered whether she had ceased to feel, for no moisture came to her dark, serious eyes, and even her heart beat dully as she took that mute farewell of the silent congregation of the dead, and passed through the deep porch, out of the rich, warm, evening sunshine, into the dim and echoing nave of the great silent church.

Slowly she walked up the centre aisle, the afternoon lights falling softly on the high arches of the lofty triforium. The heavy choir-gates were closed, but one of the side-chapels was open, and Agatha entered and passed on till she came to the tomb of Lady Augusta Aylmer. There she paused, dreamily reading the inscription

she already knew so well. For one moment she envied the quiet sleeper beneath the marble, but it was only for a moment; she had been loved as the high-born, titled Augusta had never been; even Augusta's children had given to her more of their affection than to their own mother; and Agatha felt in her inmost heart that it is

Better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

Besides, all that was happening was God's will. This keen sorrow could not have come to her without His permission. In the first wild anguish of realising her fate she had been all but rebellious; now she was patient, and so quiet and calm that Eustace wondered whether she were becoming reconciled to the change. Strange to say, the idea did not please him; he did not like to think that Agatha, still *his* Agatha, was becoming passive and indifferent. He wished to save her from suffering, and yet he could not bear to think that from cool and blunted feeling she should gain immunity from pain. Singular perversity, and he hated himself for his selfishness towards her,

“No!” mused Agatha, still standing by the tomb. “No! I would not be here unless it were God's will, for while life lasts there is hope of better things. This dark cloud may disperse and all may be calm sunshine again. But perhaps the sunshine was not good for me, and I was content to walk in the pleasant light, and enjoy the warm bright beams, forgetting Him from whom the sunshine came. Yes! and He sends the darkness and the storm also. He can rule the waves of this troublous world, even as He rules the wildest billows of yonder changing sea. And He can and will bring good out of evil. All things will work together for good and to His glory in the end. I must wait; I must be patient. It is so hard to be still, nor murmur when the blow falls so heavily. Yet even for this strength is promised; and for the children's sake I must try to live on and to be as cheerful as I can. Ah! it cannot last so very long; he will never be so hard, so cruel! When he is left quite alone surely he will miss me and the children—surely he will miss their happy voices and their little pattering feet, even if he school himself to forget me, for that is what he is trying to do! Not only will he separate himself from me, but he will try to kill the love that is yet in his heart for me. Can he do it? I think not; love is not so easily crushed out of being; many waters cannot drown it. No, nor many fires consume it, for our love was blessed of God. It was no foolish caprice, no wanton, roving fancy, but the steadfast, hallowed love which God himself commands should be between those who are joined in bonds of matrimony. No; I think God will not suffer the light of that love to be totally extinguished.”

Moving a little way towards the communion rails a flood of purple and rosy light stole in through the beautiful painted window at the western end of the church; and suddenly she remembered standing there with Roberta seven years ago; and the words then spoken came back to her memory as if they had been the utterance of yesterday— “I am afraid there will be trouble here some day, the trouble that comes of forgetting the Centre of one's faith, and leaning on creeds and systems that are but fallible, however holy.”

“Ah!” thought Agatha, as she gazed at the glowing hues painted on her white dress, “I did not know then as I know now the true, the only Centre of the faith that will abide through every storm and trial. Sorrow has taught me the best of all lessons—faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, the one true Head of the Church Catholic, the true Rock on which it is built up.”

Then she knelt down on the spot where for seven years she had received from the hands of her pastor and husband the Holy Communion. Never again to drink of that cup and eat of that bread in the same hallowed place; but the Master of the Feast would go with her to distant lands, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. Kneeling there she prayed long and earnestly, wrestling, as it were, in an agony of supplication, not for herself, but for him she loved best and for that which was committed to his charge. She prayed that the Sun of Righteousness might yet arise and dispel all clouds of error from his soul and from the people whom he taught. She prayed that in that church the truth as it is in Jesus, the simple Gospel of Christ, might be preached as it had never been preached before, and that multitudes might gather round that table commemorating with joy and reverence their Saviour's dying love. Lastly, she implored, “And grant *him* in this world knowledge of Thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting.”

She looked up; the purple light was gone, the evening shadows were falling, and she rose to *go*. That was Agatha Aylmer's last prayer in the ancient church of Overdale.

Chapter 46. THE TWO SHORES

Lady Jane met Agatha as she returned through the cloisters; she had grown uneasy at her long absence; besides, Roberta was in the boudoir waiting to see her.

“Ah!” said Agatha, “I quite forgot Roberta, and I wished to see her so much.”

“My dear, I do not wonder at your forgetting anything or anybody. Oh, Agatha, that it should really come to this!”

Agatha made no reply; the “thoughts that do lie too deep for tears” are also too deep for utterance. There were some moments when Agatha felt as if she were suddenly stricken with dumbness, when words failed and speech seemed frozen on her lips. There is no sorrow like the sorrow that neither speaks nor weeps, if it last it kills almost as surely as the envenomed dart. That is light sorrow which we can talk about and exhibit to our friends.

“Thank God, bless God, all ye who suffer not more grief than ye can weep for.”

As she crossed the lawn her home lay before her in the grey twilight, looking as it had looked seven years ago, when first she had noticed its shadowy outlines resting against the trees and the quiet evening sky. She remembered how first she had connected it with Tennyson's picture—verse, how the spirit of peace had seemed brooding over pinnacle and gable; how since then it had grown so dear and so familiar that she knew every casement, and cared for every flower that gaily wreathed the well-beloved walls. One more night she would sleep under the roof which she had been taught to believe would shelter her while life lasted, and then she would pass away from it as a stranger might, to return no more; for though she might hope she never really believed that she would return to Overdale.

A few minutes afterwards she was folded in Roberta's warm embrace, and Agatha felt her friend's tears upon her cheek. And yet Roberta knew not half Agatha's grief. She, too, like everybody else in the village, had been told that this journey involved only a temporary separation. Roberta herself never dreamed but that in good time Agatha would come back again. She knew, perhaps, more of Agatha's trial than any one save Lady Jane; but Agatha was a true wife, and never yet had she spoken freely to any one of her husband's seeming unkindness, of her own anxieties, or of the apprehensions that were fast becoming agonising certainties. She was too faithful and too delicate-minded to let any one pry into the saddest recesses of her heart. She would as soon have admitted a stranger to the privacy of her own chamber as allow any friend to share in that which concerned only her husband and herself. So even Roberta had been left to conjectures and to forming her own opinions.

But though Agatha had been silent others had been less scrupulous. Claude and Gertrude, in their passionate vehemence, had been rather indiscreet, and they had said many things which of course were reported with variations, and coloured according to the sentiments of the latest speaker.

Such upheavings of social life as that which threatened Overdale can scarcely come to pass without preliminary signs. Such events “cast their shadows before.” And Roberta knew that Agatha took this dreaded journey and consented to this undefined period of absence sorely against her will.

“I am so sorry I have kept you waiting,” said Agatha, as calmly as if this were an ordinary interview. “I had no idea it was so late.”

“Never mind, you are here now. And you really go to-morrow?”

“Yes; by the 12.20 train from Blackmoor. It will not take us an hour to get to Newhaven, and the boat sails at two o'clock.”

“I hope you will have a good passage.”

“I hope so, for the children's sake, and for Jane's. I am a tolerable sailor myself. The sea has been like glass to-day.”

“Yes; but such gales spring up in the Charnel I am always suspicious of that Dieppe crossing.”

“Are you?”

And then there was silence. It was impossible to converse any longer on ordinary subject. Agatha perhaps might have sustained her part to the end, for she was strung to a pitch that would enable her to do and to say all things that seemed necessary; but Roberta was still the irrepressible Roberta of old time. She had learnt many a lesson of control and reticence of late years; but there were occasions when her feeling would have their way, and

when she would speak with very much of her girlish frankness and imprudence, and this was one or these now few and far between occasions.

“Why do you pretend to be so calm, Agatha?” she asked, suddenly, clasping her friend's passive hand. “Surely you may confide in me?”

“I am not pretending, dear Roberta, and I have nothing to tell you which you do not know.”

“Such absolute reserve is surely unnecessary. You pain me, Agatha”

“I would not willingly do that, when we are on the eve of parting.”

“That is just it. Oh, Agatha, why do you go? and when will you come back again?”

“I go because my husband wishes it; and—yes, perhaps I may say it to you,—I feel that I shall never come back to Overdale again.”

“You feel this, and you speak as calmly as if you were talking of driving to Hoveness.”

“Yes, Roberta! I suppose the passion of my grief has worn itself out, for nothing now seems to agitate me,—only day and night I have a dull pain *here!*” And she pressed her hand upon her heart. “I suppose there is no such thing as a broken heart; but I do wonder how people die of the malady, or of the misfortune rather, which is so called.”

“God grant you may never know, dearest. Agatha, when you are gone I will not speak to Mr. Aylmer; no, not if I meet him in open day, in the middle of the street. I hate him as nearly as I can hate anybody.”

“Oh, hush, Roberta! you must not speak so to me; and you know it is wicked to hate any one.”

“I know I am very wicked,” sighed Roberta, “but all that has been passing for the last eight or nine months has made me nearly frantic. If only I might have spoken plainly to you—I saw what *might* come long ago.”

“I think I saw it too, Roberta dear; do not let us spend our last hour in lamenting that which is inevitable and irretrievable.”

“And you can bear it, bear it quietly and patiently?”

“I hope so. Anything *can* be borne if only God gives strength. If it is not to be borne He will take us away to His own everlasting rest. All will be well if only we can trust Him, and wait patiently for Him.”

“And you can say this from your heart, Agatha?”

“Yes, from my very heart! I could not a little while ago. I said, like Jacob, 'All these things are against me.' I questioned God's providence. I asked *why* it came to pass that I should be so tried? And instead of showing me an angry face, such as I well deserved, He spoke peace to me, and in the light of His countenance I can bear to walk quietly through these dark and hazy tracts which are to me as the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Now talk about yourself. You will write to me?”

“Of course I will. I am not sure but that I shall come out to you presently, just for a few weeks; I want to see those Rouen churches. I have not my dear aunt now to keep me from travelling, and I have always wanted to rush across the Channel ever since that delicious little trip to Paris; only, Agatha, I must tell you something before we part, and yet it seems like obtruding my happiness on your sorrow.”

“It will soothe my pain to hear of your happiness. What is it? Surely it is not what I have been wishing these seven years past?”

“Ah, what have you been wishing?”

“That you and Mr. Bell would understand each other.”

“Then you have your wish, dear Agatha. I cannot think now why we misunderstood each other so long. Now that he has spoken, and that it is fairly over, it feels only natural that we should belong to each other. We are to be married as soon as the year of mourning is expired—she would have wished it, I know.”

“Dear, dear Roberta! I am so glad I always fancied it would be some day. He always liked you.”

“Nay, he liked you once; he has told me all about himself, we have no reserves. I know how you refused him, years ago, before you were engaged to Mr. Aylmer.”

“Yes, I refused him, I remember. I had almost forgotten it, and I thought he had.”

“Oh, no; men never forget such things. It is well for me that you said 'No' so emphatically. For your own sake, I could wish you had said 'Yes.' I know in some things John Bell is not to be compared with Mr. Aylmer, but he would never have brought this grief upon you, but would always have been a loving, faithful husband. It would have been for your own happiness if you had accepted him instead of—”

“Hush, Roberta! I never loved him in the least, therefore accepting him was out of the question. Also, I loved

Eustace, and he only of all the men in the world could have been my husband, for I loved only him. And I do not regret that I married him; however bitter all this may be, I would not for a world have missed the six years' blessed happiness and peace. From the very hour in which I promised to be his wife I took him 'for better and for worse,' and this is the worse, I suppose—only out of it all God can bring joy and gladness in His own good time; and yet I feel a little envy when I think how truly you will be united, you will be of one heart and one mind, you will walk hand in hand and soul with soul be the road smooth or rugged, up-hill or down. Oh, happy Roberta! *We* have never been quite one on the most momentous points; I never could see as my husband saw; and now—we have drifted so far apart that our paths must be diverse.”

“I used to be afraid in old time. I saw this difficulty long ago, and I almost wished something would put aside your marriage; and my dear aunt quite shared the feeling.”

“Roberta, I am so glad I saw Aunt Judith die; it gave me so much strength, and in a sense so much comfort. Once or twice, when I felt weak and wavering, her parting words came back to me—'The Lord give you strength and keep you faithful. Keep close to Christ, child—do not let Him go; let all the rest go if it must be, but never quit your hold on Him.' I clung too closely to earthly supports; I had so much of the tendril nature in me; and now God is gently untwining my childish hands, and teaching me that nothing is assured, nothing safe and firm, but His love and His promises. You will be very happy Jam sure, Roberta, but do not hold too fast to any earthly joy.”

“I will try not. We are neither of us very young, you know, and we both feel how unsecure is all that is not founded on the Rock. But on that I trust our happiness is and will be founded, so I hope it will all be well. Have you seen Miss Grierson lately?”

“I saw her several days since, but I did not take a formal farewell. She was talking a great deal about her favourite, Helen Bellamy, and about the Misses Harrison, who are not at all her favourites.”

“No, indeed; how should they be? Such foolish girls, or rather women, as they are! But they are staunch Anglicans, Agatha; they will never go over to Rome, although their spiritual guides may lead the way.”

“Roberta, I want to ask you—you hear, of course, a great deal which would never reach my ears—do people say that Mr. Aylmer is likely to quit the communion of the Church of England?”

“They say so most emphatically; they believe, many of them, that he has virtually left it, that he only awaits your departure to make an open profession of Romanism. But I would advise Mr. Vallance to leave Overdale before that happens, or I will not answer for the consequences. There are those in this neighbourhood who are infuriated with him—and have you heard? Mr. Oakley has as good as turned him out of doors.”

“I did hear something about it, but I did not pay much attention. Eustace said something about his being with Mr. La Motte, at Hoveness.”

“No one knows the rights of it; but Mr. Oakley gave him scarcely a day's notice, he returned him a week's rent for the lodgings and bade him remove himself from his house as speedily as possible.”

“He has not been tampering with the girls, I hope—and yet I have my fears. Hetty has never been the same since he went to live there. Poor, pretty little thing! the last time I saw her I thought she looked like a flower withering up in an east wind.”

“Something is wrong, but I do not know what; old Oakley is very particular and very close about his daughters. No; Hetty has not been herself for some time, and she confessed to Miss Grierson that she was very unhappy. Laura and Harriet Harrison have been much with her, but lately she has avoided all society. There is quite a scared look in her face if you come upon her suddenly. And now, Agatha, dear, dear Agatha, I must go; but it is not quite good-bye, you know, because I shall come to Rouen, and perhaps we may go to Caen together; that would be too delightful! You would rather I did not see you off to-morrow? I had some notion of driving to Blackmoor myself.”

“No, please do not. I shall want all my strength tomorrow, and many farewells would unnerve me. Though when I have said the one good-bye, all the rest—”

And Agatha broke down; she did not cry, but a choking sensation stifled her voice. She had had a strange feeling as of a lump in her throat lately, and Mr. Barton said it was nervousness, and of frequent occurrence in the case of people who were out of health, without having any decided malady.

Roberta's tears fell fast again. Agatha was quiet and calm, but very cold, and not a word could she utter. The interview was trying her sorely, and wearily she wished it were over. Every now and then came upon her a strong yearning desire for perfect rest; the longing to lie down in stillness and utter darkness, to see no face and to hear

no voice, rose up again and again in spite of all her efforts to bear herself bravely and cheerily. She did not know, no one knew, how fast her physical strength was failing her.

"How cold you are this hot night," were Roberta's last words; and Agatha said, "Yes, I am always shivering now. I feel ashamed of myself, but I cannot do without a fire, except in the very middle of the day. Mr. Barton says I shall be better in Normandy."

Meanwhile Claude was in his father's study; he had gone for final instructions and to say for himself a few final words, which he was resolved to speak before his departure.

Mr. Aylmer gave him an ample supply of cash, saying, as he put the well-filled pocket-book into his son's hand—"Spare nothing, Claude. Be sure that Agatha and the children are comfortable; and remember, I look to you to watch over Agatha's health. Let her have plenty of change and every facility for enjoying herself. I trust her comfort and her happiness to you."

But Claude looked gravely, nay sternly, in his father's face, and he replied—"No, sir; I will not so accept your trust. I will do all for Agatha that a son should do for his own mother. I need no charges to that effect. She is very dear to me, and your conduct towards her cuts me to the heart. But I will accept no trust from you. *I* answerable for her comfort! *I* make her happiness! You know very well, sir, that to yourself belong all the tasks you would devolve on me. Agatha is your wife, and say what you will, and lay what flattering unction to your soul you may please, HER CLAIMS ARE SACRED! Though not what the world would regard as a faithless husband, in God's sight you are such. You have deserted her whom you swore in His presence to cherish and protect. She has been to you a true and loving wife; she has made you very happy, and now you turn her over to me; you expect her calmly and quietly to exchange conjugal affection for filial devotion."

"Claude," returned Mr. Aylmer, "you have no right to speak to me thus. I am your father; my own son is not to question my actions or call me to account for what I know to be duty; yes, my positive duty. But it is useless to go into it again."

"Quite useless, sir. If you talked for a year I should still be unconvinced. But without any disrespect I have a few more words to say. Though I refuse to take my stepmother as a charge committed to me by you, her husband—though I would do it willingly if you were lying on your death-bed—yet I mean to devote myself to her and to the little ones, and Gertie will be also a loving, tender daughter and a good sister. But till Agatha Aylmer comes back to this house, its honoured and lawful mistress, I shall return to it no more. I have cast in my lot with her, and I find that my duty to her *and* to you are incompatible."

"We need not argue that question; I am more than willing that you should give *all* your filial love and duty to her and let me go."

"Also I have to say that I have done with the Church of England, and that I abominate the Church of Rome. It is your own fault, sir. If the Church of England is what you represent her to be the sooner all sensible, rational men desert her the better. Roberta says that yours is no true Church, only a system of priestcraft; that the grand old Church of England is just what she ever was, a bulwark of strength built in the land. It may be so or it may not, you know; but I will not hold myself any longer a member of a Church in which all sorts of extremes meet. You tell me of traditions, and councils, and canons. I say they are so much rubbish, though there may be precious things in them, perhaps, just as there are hidden treasures in dust-heaps. Roberta and Jane, aye, and Agatha, tell me that the Word of God is the sole standard on which we may rely. *And I cannot rely upon it!*—don't look horror-stricken, sir, it is your own doing; I strove to disentangle myself from obvious superstition and I find myself landed in what is commonly called *Rationalism*. Yes, I am a Dissenter inasmuch as I repudiate the Established Church with all her claims and all her teaching, but I do not hold the creed of any Dissenter that I know of. In fact I have no creed; I believe some things that are in the Bible—not all; no sensible man can believe all the Bible, you know—I really fancy no one does in these days. I am sorry if my confession has pained you, father, but I thought it best to make it before we parted for an indefinite period; I am ready to take all the consequences. You *must* see, sir, that this Ritualistic movement, which is just now convulsing our country, lands you on one of two shores—the shore of superstition and infatuated delusions, or the shore of scepticism! Leaving the old truths, which I always thought the Church of England taught, and which the Evangelical Dissenters, as they are called, teach also, you must drift one way or the other. There is not so much difference in one way; regarding the Bible as a starting point you find it *insufficient*, and you add to it the teaching of the 'fathers'—traditions and all sorts of lumber. I also find it a very faulty and imperfect book, but instead of

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bolstering it up with a lot of medieval nonsense, I bring the learning of the present age and my own sound sense to bear upon it.”

Next day came the parting. Agatha had begged her husband not to accompany her to Blackmoor; at least no eyes but his and her own should witness their farewell. When all was ready she sent word to Mr. Aylmer that she was in the morning-room. The children were in the carriage, waiting only till she came.

No one ever knew what passed in that quarter of an hour, during which the husband and wife were alone, but when Claude came and took her in his arms she felt that the bitterness of death was past. She could scarcely stand, but no tears dimmed her sweet dark eyes, and there was scarce a trace of emotion on the beautiful marble-like features as she looked her last on Overdale.

Mr. Aylmer went into his study, and no one saw him again that day. But when Mr. Vallance met him on the morrow he was fairly startled—long years, with all their weight and burden of heavy cares and bitter griefs, might have passed over that once stately head since last they parted, and for one moment, perhaps, Herbert Vallance's heart felt some compunction.

A week afterwards the Honourable and Rev. Eustace Aylmer was received into the communion of the Church of Rome.

Chapter 47. CROSSING TO DIEPPE

Over the dancing waters of the British Channel went the fast little steamer between Newhaven and Dieppe. It was a lovely summer day, and the beautiful southern cliffs lay like lines of frosted silver between the azure sky and the pale sea—green waves. The boat was pretty full, and nearly all the passengers were on deck—a motley group, such as one generally sees in such a situation—some young and some old, some gaily dressed and some very soberly clad, some with bright laughing faces and merry ringing voices, and some from whose grave, sad countenances all smiles disappeared, and who watched in silence the gradual fading out in the far distance of the long white English coast—line.

There is something pathetically strange in the mingling for a certain number of days or hours with a set of people who will never certainly meet all together again in this world. The faces that you never saw before soon become familiar; you begin to wonder who that man is who has such serious dark eyes, and so thoughtful a brow, and a mouth so firmly set; and what is the history of that pale, quiet woman, who, with her waterproof cloak and her blue veil wrapped closely round her, sits in the stern, looking mournfully towards the land which she is leaving. You consider various groups and wonder what are their mutual relations, and you decide that some are sisters and brothers, and some are married couples, and some are friends and neighbours, travelling together for pleasure or convenience.

It was just such a company that were clustered together at the best end of the boat on that fair Midsummer day; only there was less sickness than usual, the Channel, though not quite amiable, being on the whole rather in a gracious humour. The Aylmer party fared better than the majority of their companions; Lady Jane and Sprawson were the only people who had to retire to the Tartarian privacy of the ladies' cabin; all the rest, babies included, except for a few qualms, just as Dieppe harbour came in sight, crossed without any material inconvenience.

When the last silvery headland had, as it were, sunk beneath the waves, Agatha turned to Claude, who sat by her on his camp—stool, and said—“There! it is gone, Claude! I shall never see it again! I did not think I could say, 'Farewell, my country,' so calmly and so contentedly! How God softens to us those calamities which we anticipate so fearfully. The blow comes, but it does not hurt as we thought it would; the rod falls, but the stroke we apprehend does not smite; it only makes us say thankfully, 'This is not our rest!'”

“Little mater, you bear it very bravely. Well, brighter days are in store for us, I daresay. 'Hope on, hope ever,' is my favourite motto.”

“And a very good one, Claude; only one must have some ground for one's hope—hoping without any foundation is sure almost to lead to disappointment.”

“Oh, one generally believes in one's heart that one will get sooner or later what one hopes for; we may wish for the impossible, but I should say we never really hope for it—hope is, after all, a sort of idealised anticipation.”

“But, Claude, I do not hope to go back again to Overdale.”

“You do not? But you would wish it?”

“Ah, yes, that is another thing; but as you were saying wishing and hoping are too often widely apart. I see no prospect of return, and, therefore, I cannot be said to hope for it.”

“I cannot think why you ever consented to come away. You were in your rightful place at Overdale, and I cannot think but you made a sad mistake in yielding.”

“Claude, my dear, I think I was right. If I had not left year father he would have left me, and the scandal would have been greater. I felt it to be my duty to obey him, painful as was the alternative. I tried to do that which seemed right, and now I must leave it—the consequences are in other hands than mine.”

“In my father's you mean? Say rather in that arch—demon's—Vallance!”

“No! neither your dear father nor Mr. Vallance has the ordering of events and issues. One greater than they will so rule all things as to turn them to good.”

“I cannot see how all this stupidity and wretchedness can ever turn to good. It cannot be good that you should be made miserable, that you should be exiled with your children, that my father should make himself supremely ridiculous, giving himself over, bound hand and foot, into the power of those who will never yield one inch of their prerogative. How *can* such mischievous blunders turn to good?”

"I do not know; I do not seek to know. Only I am sure that some day out of all this darkness and confusion God will bring light and order. I must have patience, we must all have patience, Claude; nothing helps one like faith and patience; indeed it seems to me that the two are inseparable. I do not think an impatient person can ever have much faith!"

"No; a true faith brings patience with it; it is surely the possession of faith that makes one patient."

It was Rosamund who spoke; she had been sitting apart ever since the boat left the Newhaven river. She had been, even for her, singularly silent for the last few days; most of her packing she had accomplished herself, refusing all assistance; and Claude had exclaimed when he saw the few packages she laid claim to, while Gertrude had encumbered herself with so many trunks and bonnet-boxes that she was laughed at and threatened with frightful inquisitions and confiscation from the Custom House authorities.

The sisters presented in appearance as wide a contrast as is possible to imagine. Rosamund wore the half-conventual robe which she had adopted for some months past—a plain dark serge dress, a long cloak with a serviceable hood, a bonnet that seemed immense even in those days, when people were content to cover the back of the head, even if they dispensed with much shadow for the face. Rosamund's bonnet was the genuine article, with a real crown, a real poke, and a *bona-fide* curtain; it was of brown straw, trimmed with ribbon of the same hue; but the long, thick black veil was the same which she had worn all the winter.

And Gertie was looking charming, in a pretty blue and white cambric dress, and a large flapping Leghorn hat, from which streamed a snowy ostrich plume; and beneath the hat the bright curls were clustering round the sweet young face, and the deep blue eyes were dewy with emotion; for though Gertrude rejoiced to find herself *en route* for Normandy, she would rather have remained at home till the end of her natural life than have gone abroad under circumstances so painful. She had been chattering with her little sisters, trying to divert their attention, as she saw their mother could hardly bear the appeals they made to her from time to time: "Mamma, why doesn't papa come?" "Who will live in the house with papa now we have all gone away?" "What makes you look so white, mamma? don't you like going to *Ruin*?"—"Miss Maude's pronunciation of Rouen! But they were satisfied now to remain quietly with their nurses, and Gertrude, seeing that Rosamund had joined her step-mother and Claude, left the juvenile party in order to mingle with the conversation of her elders.

Agatha was just replying to Rosamund's observation—

"Yes, dear, one can scarcely be patient if one has not something to rely upon; and a faithless person does not rely upon man's goodness, nor upon God's promises."

"*Waiting* seems to be the watchword of some people's lives," said Rosamund; "we read and hear of some who seem to have waited a whole life long, even till death came and ended the protracted struggle."

"Struggle for what?" said Claude, rousing himself from the melancholy that was stealing over him.

"Waiting for what?" asked Gertie, impetuously; "what were they waiting for, these people of whom you speak? Was it for wealth, or success, or for love? There might be something in waiting for that, if one had the right so to wait."

"Waiting for peace, for certainty, for that calm repose which they only know who are willing to practise the virtue of self-surrender."

"Waiting for peace!" said Claude, rather contemptuously; "you talk like a Methodist. I heard old Moss at the Chine telling another old fisherman that he had found peace, the Lord be praised for it. I wonder how he found it, and whether he will be able to keep it now he has found it! I would not give much for a Methodist's peace, ay, Rosamund?"

"It could not be very secure, because it is based on an erring belief," replied Rosamund. "I have no doubt these Methodist men mean well, but they assume a fearful responsibility in arrogating to themselves a mission and an authority to which they have no pretensions. They are self-constituted messengers, unauthorised teachers, and it is fearful to contemplate the depths of error into which they may lead too credulous souls."

"Ah!" said Claude, "I don't think they will mind the responsibility—not, at least, in the way you mean it. What were those lines I heard you quoting to Mr. Bellamy the other day, when you stumbled over him in the alms-houses?"

Rosamund hesitated; but Gertie interposed—

"Oh, I know, Claude! I have heard them times enough; I will repeat them—

Who then, uncalled by Thee,

Dare touch Thy spouse, Thy very self below?
Or who dare count him summon'd worthily
Except Thine hand and seal he show?

Where can Thy seed be found
But on Thy chosen seed from age to age,
By Thine anointed heralds duly crowned
As kings and priests Thy war to wage?"

"Hush, Claude!" said Agatha, seeing the expression of the young man's face; "I will not have you annoy Rosamund. And the verses are true enough, only we interpret them diversely. You, Rosamund, hold that only those are 'authorised' who receive their commission directly from those whom you believe to be the successors of the Apostles themselves. I believe that they whom Christ calls to preach His Gospel, they whom He teaches and gifts with His Holy Spirit, are as worthily the ambassadors of God as any who can show the credentials on which so much stress is laid."

"Mamma!" said Rosamund, gravely, "if you cannot believe in the one true Church, you surely hold that some kind of consecration is required before a person should pretend to take upon himself the office of the ministry?"

"I hold in the setting apart of certain persons for the work of the ministry, and all such persons should be duly examined by those whose age and experience give them weight in the churches; but the true call—the only call that should be obeyed and recognised—must be from God Himself. Unless He send them forth as heralds and ambassadors, they are certainly 'unauthorised,' and they may well tremble at the responsibilities they have dared to assume. But, Rosamund, a clergyman—a priest as you call him—may show the seal of the visible Church and yet be uncalled of God! The laying-on of hands, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, are not necessarily inseparable; nay, if the heart of the man be not consecrated to God, the mockery of ordination can only provoke the Almighty's just wrath and the hiding of His face. Yes, it is indeed a fearful thing to touch Christ's spouse, the Church, with unhallowed hands; but all they who love the Master, and are willing to devote themselves to His work, need not fear. He will own and bless their work, under whatever name they enrol themselves as His true captains."

"But," said Gertrude, "the verse says, 'Thy very self below.' What does that mean? The Church is not Christ, though it may be His spouse."

"Christ is one with His Church, you know," said Agatha, "even as the husband is one with the wife. He has permitted us to use the emblem."

"I think, nay, I am sure, it means much more than that," said Rosamund, slowly. "It refers to the body and blood of our blessed Lord, which are indeed present after consecration in the Holy Sacrament. I often wonder how unauthorised ministers *dare* to administer what they call the Sacrament! I can fancy a mistaken zeal leading men into rash preaching and praying and expounding, but I cannot fancy the presumption of him who says—"Take, eat; this is My body," and then handles the bread as bread, pronouncing, too, what is only a vain jargon of guilty words from lips unauthorised. But such a sacrament is no sacrament at all. Only those holding the Divine and apostolic mission have the power of celebrating the ordinances of the Church,—the one Catholic and Apostolic Church!"

"And what is that Church?" asked Claude.

"That Church which holds its authority by direct commission from our Lord," was the reply.

"A most Jesuitical answer," said Claude, gravely. "Rosamund, if I knew, or thought I knew of any one true Church, I would not hesitate to proclaim it to every creature with whom I conversed. What do you mean by the 'one Catholic and Apostolic Church'? Cannot Mr. Vallance's pupil be candid?"

Rosamund coloured, and for a moment her face was crimsoned, as if with some inward struggle; then, by an obvious effort, she spoke—"Yes, I will be candid; the time is come when I may say all that is in my heart. I have the sanction of my spiritual guides, and I need bear the pain of self-repression no longer. Indeed, the concealment of my true sentiments has been very, very painful to me; but it was needful discipline. Even to myself I seemed disingenuous, insincere, almost untruthful; but I knew that I had but to obey, it was not for me to choose my own way, to select my own times. I *waited*, and now I may speak. I am what you would call a *Roman Catholic*. I acknowledge the claims of the parent Church, and for long my heart has only yearned to fly to the shelter of her holy bosom. For long I was weary, restless, dissatisfied. Now I am at rest; the insatiable thirst of my soul is filled;

the doubts of years are dispelled, and I have passed the sacred portals, and entered into the Ark, which shall bear me safely above the billows of this world's treacherous sea to the haven of eternal rest. May God bring you all to the same blessed home of eternal peace.”

And with streaming eyes and clasped hands she turned away, and stood looking out towards the French coast, which was now visible. Agatha was paler than before, Gertie's blue eyes were swimming with tears, and Claude's face was sadder and graver than it had been a little while before. “It is no more than we guessed,” he said, at length; “and it is better to carry one's own colours. I can respect her now more than when I felt she was marching under Anglican banners with her face Romewards.”

“My poor, poor Rosamund!” said Agatha at length, with a deep sigh. “God keep my little ones in His own Truth!—yes, I can leave them to Him.”

“I will do my best, mother, to keep them from turning Romanists.”

“My dear Claude, your best will be of no avail. You cannot destroy error by simply combating it; argument and ridicule are alike ineffectual; you must present something in the place of that which you would cast down or destroy. If, when I am gone, *you* would teach my little girls the simple truths of Christ's Gospel—if you would speak to them of *Him*—if you would show them His love, and invite them to His arms, I should feel that their brother would be indeed their best earthly friend; but—”

“But I cannot. I begin to doubt all religion except yours and Aunt Jane's. Don't look so distressed, dear little mater, perhaps you will convert me yet before you die—and that will not be yet, you know; you are not to think of such a thing! You will get well again before the winter, and the governor *must* come to his senses presently; and if Rosamund will be a nun—well, we must let her be happy in her own way, and we will be happy in ours! And perhaps she will get tired when she tries it in good earnest; she only knows the romance of the thing at present, It will all come right in time, dear little mater! Now I must go and send Foster to look after the luggage.”

A few minutes afterwards they were entering the harbour of Dieppe, the two great crucifixes on either side looking down upon them as they glided gently into port.

Chapter 48. GONE INTO “RETREAT”

An ancient, black-timbered mansion, half castle and half convent in appearance, a little way withdrawn from the grove-like *Boulevard Beauvoisine*, had been secured for the residence of the Honourable Mrs. Aylmer and her family during their sojourn in Rouen. It was a dark-looking house, standing in a wide court, round which were ranged many orange-trees in large green tubs, and in the centre of which a half-ruined fountain played fitfully; and all around was a garden, beautiful but neglected, where all sorts of flowers and shrubs and weeds grew in unchecked luxuriance. The little ones danced with happiness; any change is pleasant to childhood, and the grassy alleys, and spreading thickets, and shady banks without, and the long, echoing corridors and many deserted rooms within the chateau, were altogether delightful in their eyes. Maude and Eustacia, at least, were quite able to appreciate the charms of their new home; and they thought it, of course, a great deal more enjoyable than Overdale. Gertrude, too, delighted in it; and wondered what its history might be, and who had lived, and loved, and suffered within those sombre walls, and under the shadow of those tall, leafy limes, and stately cedars, and wide-spreading chestnuts. That wild, tangled garden, with its wealth of flowers, its screened alleys, and its broken-down, moss-grown statuary, seemed to her a very paradise of old romance. Claude voted it “awfully jolly, but rather slow”; Rosamund reserved her opinion; while Lady Jane joined with nurse arid Sprawson in deploring the dismal and half-ruinous state of the picturesque but inconvenient chateau. As for Agatha, she said little about it, and thought less; all places on earth were now alike to her; and banished from her own beloved home, it mattered not where her lot was cast so that her children could be cared for; and such satisfaction as she could still feel rose up within her weary heart, when she heard her little ones' merry laughter ringing through the shrubberies and across the wide lawns of that neglected garden.

Nurse grumbled, of course, at the French domestics, at the French loaves, at the French confectioners, where nothing wholesome or substantial was to be obtained; at the French money, and the *litres* and the *grammes* which had superseded the honest pounds and ounces she had left behind her; at the French language, which she did not believe the jabbering creatures understood themselves; at French everything, as became an elderly respectable British matron of limited experiences and unlimited prejudices.

For the first few days after their arrival Agatha felt stronger and altogether better. Indeed, her only ailment seemed to be excessive weakness,—fits of nervousness, terminating in hysteria or faintness,—and a depression of spirits, at which, alas! no one knowing her present circumstances could be astonished. But the change and the warm, bright air of Normandy certainly revived her. She began to talk again with the little girls, and she liked to have her baby in her arms, though nurse protested against it; she would smile sometimes, though languidly, when Claude and Gertie were exchanging witticisms, and roused even Rosamund to interest with their clever banter and brilliant repartee. She said, too, that she enjoyed sitting on her camp-stool under the acacia trees in the garden, and she took the drives that her step-son and daughter planned; she even visited the cathedral, and went with Gertie to buy *papeterie* and photographic views in the *Rue de l'Imperatrice*; and accompanied the excited children when they went to purchase bon-bons, of all imaginable shapes and flavours and colours, in the *Rue Beauvoisine*, where bon-bons most do congregate.

Rosamund came primed with letters of introduction to the Lady Superior of a certain neighbouring convent, which we will call the Convent of St. Therèse, and she soon became friendly with the nuns, and spent much of her time with these new acquaintances. In spite of all the self-repression of a life-time, Rosamund Aylmer had a genius for friendships, we may say for devoted attachments; and for many years Ada Chennery had been her dearest and most confidential companion, till at length Rosamund going the whole way, and Ada persisting in hating at the half-way house of Ritualism—I beg its pardon, it is far beyond half-way, it is more than three-quarters of the way on the high road to Rome!—Ada, I say, not choosing to advance any further, the intimacy languished they met less and less frequently, and when they did med conversed with visible constraint on both sides. But all and more than she had lost in Ada she found in the devoted sisters of St. Therèse, who welcomed her with rapture, and made much of her, and initiated her into all the charms and heavenly blisses of convent life. She soon began to consider why she should not profess herself at St. Therese, with its medieval towers and time-hallowed memories, instead of at St. Catherine's, that ugly brick, smoke-begrimed,

nineteenth-century edifice, in the unromantic town of Hoveness. At St. Therèse the nuns were for the most part well-born, and they were graceful and *spirituelle*, and several of them were really beautiful; while at St. Catherine's the type seemed to be of the dimpling-faced, middle-class, unintellectual order—young women who might be very devoted and even saint-like, but sadly uninteresting to one bred as Rosamund Aylmer had been. To one likewise whose nature was deep and passionate, though singularly self-controlled, conventual life in that fair, rich valley of the Seine, under the grand old towers of Rouen, presented almost irresistible attractions, and Rosamund knew that neither Mr. Vallance nor her father would object to such a change of plan; and Claude had said that perpetual imprisonment and the grave were alike everywhere, when once she had ventured to approach the subject with him.

So the days passed on, and it was a fortnight since they left British shores. Nurse had ceased to grumble and protest; Lady Jane began to feel herself at home in her low-ceiled, wainscoted bedroom, with its red-tiled floor and its small bed in a recess, and its queer little doors opening anywhere and everywhere. Claude and Gertie knew the cathedral and St. Ouen by heart. Gertie had sketched *La Calende*, as the exquisite southern portal of the cathedral is called; and now she was busy on the great porch of St. Maclou, with its tracery, like finest point lace, or delicate frost work, and its wonderful bas-reliefs. And Claude was on gossiping terms with the dames in the Place aux Cannes, where he went every morning to purchase the finest flowers for Agatha. The children, too, were well and happy; and the baby, the smallest and the most weakly child Agatha had had, began to thrive, and to look, as nurse said, a little more like the others had done at the same age.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and Agatha and Lady Jane were seated in their favourite haunt under the acacia trees, and the children were playing with their nurses in a distant part of the garden. Now and then the ringing sound of childish mirth came borne upon the fragrant breeze, and brought the flush to Agatha's pale cheek, and caused their aunt to say, "Bless the darlings! how merry they are, and how well this air does suit them!" Rosamund was spending the day with her cloistered friends, and Claude and Gertie were away on one of their usual expeditions. This brother and sister invariably hunted in pairs, and whether the object of their researches was archeological, scientific, artistic, or simply rural, it was undertaken together. It was a very sunny afternoon; but the acacias afforded a pleasant shade, and from the hills came a soft breeze, playing with Agatha's long dark curls, and wafting to her feet the faded, sweet-scented acacia blossoms. It was very quiet, so quiet that Lady Jane in her garden chair became drowsy, and continually dropped her knitting, and indulged in a little nap. The faint rustling of the leaves, the coo of ring-doves, and the low hum of bees still clustering about the lime-trees were the gentle lady's lullaby; and presently she sank into so profound a slumber that the shouts of the children, which had ceased awhile, coming nearer failed to rouse her. The little ones, however, did not approach them, and presently their shrill merry voices died away again in the distance; and Agatha heard only the striking of the church clocks, and the chiming of the quarters, which is quite an institution in Rouen, where there are thirty-seven parish churches, and nearly as many clocks, most of them striking or chiming the quarters, and scarcely any two of them speaking exactly in concert. Now it was the boom of the great Cathedral bell; now the softer notes of St. Ouen; now the reverberating tones of the legendary *Grosse-Horloge*; now the unmusical clang of St. Romaine, and now little tinkles from all quarters, dying away in the far distance, as the light breeze wafted the sound along the busy, smiling, sparkling Seine valley. Agatha was comfortably settled in a cushioned bee-hive chair; little Maude, before she went to her play, had brought her a footstool, and tired as she felt, she too might have slumbered had not her sorrowful thoughts kept her waking.

Since her departure from England Mr. Aylmer had not written, and Agatha was beginning to suppose that the separation to which she had been compelled involved also an absolute silence. That seemed too cruel. At least she had expected to hear from him and to write to him in return, for he was her husband, her very own, by all the laws of God and of man; and surely no stern creed, no arrogating Church, could completely interpose itself between them! She had not anticipated so utter a blank, and morning by morning she grew feverishly anxious when the English post came in. Would he never write again? she asked herself, oh! so sadly; while the rose leaves and the faded blossoms fluttered down, and the acacia leaves thrilled in the soft wind above her. "Has he quite given me up? Did he ever love me? Ah, yes, he loved me; he loves me still in spite of himself; to the last I will believe that. To think that he should be so blinded, so deluded, so ready—to believe that which the Word of God disallows! And so noble a mind, So high an intellect, to bow to this abject, debasing Superstition. This is indeed the loftiness of man brought down. Oh, my love, what has infatuated you that you should fling away the pure faith of the

Gospel for this miserable refuge of lies?"

Agatha unconsciously spoke aloud; and Lady Jane suddenly awaking, asked what she was saying to her.

"I was talking to myself, I believe," said Agatha; "I did not know I spoke aloud. I was wondering when I shall hear of if not from Eustace; it seems a weary while since we quitted Overdale."

"My dear, I should like to hear from him, both for his sake and for your own; but I am really losing patience with him myself. His conduct seems to me something little short of Insanity. I could almost wish he were insane, it would excuse so much that is really inexcusable."

"Do not be angry with him, Jane. As wise men as he have gone over to the Church of Rome. However we may wonder and deplore, we can scarcely blame his conscientiousness. Think how much he is sacrificing; friends, position, preferment, to some extent character, and the domestic peace and happiness which no one knows better how to appreciate. He would not do all this save at the sternest dictates of conscience."

"He would not, I am persuaded; but alas! he has mistaken the deceitful impulses of his own heart for the voice of conscience. Oh, Agatha, I deeply regret now that long ago I did not speak more plainly, more faithfully. I did not know, I cannot suppose that my weak words would influence him; and yet, spoken in the might of One with whom is all truth and all wisdom, they *might* have sunk deep into his heart. A mere child's utterance has been blessed before now. 'Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts.'"

"Do you remember when you first perceived the change?" asked Agatha.

"I can hardly say; even as a boy Eustace held doctrines of what was then called the High Church party. He gave to the Church, that is to the clergy and to the canons and rubrics, an authority which is God's only. Very early he learnt to multiply forms and ceremonies, and even during Augusta's lifetime he sometimes startled me by saying things which showed he was not resting on the one sure foundation of faith—on our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Eustace's religion seemed to me to exalt man and man's decrees to the place which is the Lord's; it gave to ordinances a power which belongs only to God's Holy Spirit. Indeed I cannot but think that the constant recurrence to external rule and aid, instead of to a living, internal principle, is little less than blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. Also it seemed to me that Eustace and those who thought with him made essential as matters of faith many things which are not expressly contained in God's Word. That was long ago, and I feared that he had erred from the simplicity of the Gospel, and lent an ear to cunningly devised fables. Then you came among us, the morbid spell was broken, a healthy human interest was awakened; there was a struggle, as you know, and a pure, hallowed affection conquered. Then I hoped for better days. I thought the tide of error had turned, and that the light of truth would shine brighter and brighter every year. I left you with so much hope, Agatha; I knew that you held the truth in all its simplicity, the very truth itself, salvation through Jesus Christ alone, the only Mediator, the sole propitiation for the sins of the world; an! I did not think that even Eustace could lead you very far astray."

"No, thank God! the light of His truth was never extinguished in my soul; but I sinned greater, Jane; I *seemingly* countenanced that which I knew to be most dangerous error. I even tried to think it was really the truth, only the truth wrapped up in a shape to which I was unaccustomed. I allowed myself to be apparently convinced; I loved my husband so much that I could not bear to stand in opposition to him. Out of my very idolatry for him I tried to force myself into his creed, and when God's blessed Spirit would not let me bind on the fetters I was clasping, I only strove still more determinately to content myself with what I inwardly knew was not food but poison. I was not quite happy, for all the while I felt that the danger was increasing, the darkness deepening. Still I lived in such a dream of happiness. I had my husband, who was all the world to me; I had my little darlings, as one after another they came to crown my joy of happy wifehood. I had the affections and the respect of the elder children. Even Rosamund gave me not only the honour due to her father's wife, but the kindly feeling and loving thought of a younger sister. Ah! I was happy indeed in my sweet, pleasant home; and yet I longed for the one communion which was denied me, for whenever Eustace and I began to converse on religious subjects,—when even our discourse led that way, as it continually did, of course, I was either constrained to silence or to protest; and, Jane, I *kept silence!* I was unfaithful to my God who had enabled me to see clearly His own simple and eternal truth. I held my peace because I would not grieve my husband, because I could not bear to differ from him. Yes, I placed him *first*. I see it now. He should have been next to God, and he came before Him. And now—now—I was going to say I am punished, but I will not look upon my Heavenly Father's interference as mere punishment—it is His kindly chastening, His own loving correction, His voice saying to me, 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols.' It is rather more than a year ago since I became cognisant of a change in

Overdale

Eustace;—he was kind and tender as ever, but so reserved, and he returned to his old habit of shutting himself up in his study or in the church. Then began those observances which, ever developing and amplifying, have brought the services in Overdale Church to the verge of Romanism; then sprang up that strong spirit of Ritualism which is growing and spreading everywhere. Alas, alas, for Protestant England! I spoke then, but all in vain; it was too late. I might as well have entreated the waves at half-tide not to come to flood. My husband was very gentle but very firm. I saw that I could no more move him than I could move one of our own proud cliffs. He strove to convince me; he argued, but I could not—oh, I am so thankful I could not!—be led by the man I loved into fatal error. Oh, I could give up everything but my simple faith in Christ! I must go straight to Him, rely solely upon Him. The ordinances of the Church are channels of grace, but no more the grace itself than are the pipes through which the water flows, the veritable fluid without which we could not live. And oh, Jane, that horrible doctrine of Transubstantiation! When first I heard my husband, standing up in his pulpit, pointing to the altar, say boldly that after the words of consecration that bread, which came out of our own kitchen, would be Christ's *very flesh*, and that wine, which I had given out myself the day before, would be our Lord's own precious *blood*, my heart sank within me, and I could have cried out with horror. I did not go up to the communion rails that day. People thought I was ill, for it was only a few weeks before my baby was born; but *I could not go*, Jane. I could no longer *seem* to be an idolater! And when I saw my husband and his curates bowing down to the mere creatures of bread and wine,—the rest of the loaf had doubtless been finished in the kitchen, and the rest of the wine was in our own cellar,—when I saw them kneel, almost prostrate themselves, before the senseless elements, I could bear it no longer, and I wept as I have not wept since my childish days. Eustace was grieved and even angry, but I could not help it. I do not wish now that I had helped it. I could not but think of the 44th of Isaiah, of the man who made the graven image and worshipped it, while with the residue of the wood he warmed himself and roasted roast. I suppose the heathen have their view of transubstantiation also; it is not the mere wood they adore, else why not adore the chips? It is the thing which, being fashioned and graven, they believe to become instinct with the spirit of their god, their very god himself.”

Just then they saw Claude coming from the house, and with him Ralph Mornington.

“Here is an unexpected visitor for you, mater,” cried Claude, trying to speak freely, but looking very pale and stern.

“Is anything the matter?” asked Agatha, her poor heart sinking as she spoke. “Tell me, Claude, if anything has happened to your father. I can bear it—bear anything but suspense.”

“Mr. Aylmer is quite well, dear Mrs. Aylmer,” said Ralph, kindly, “but he wished me to bring news of him.”

And then Ralph told his story. Mr. Aylmer had openly joined the Church of Rome. He had been publicly received into communion at Hoveness on the Feast of the Translation of St. Martin. Of course he was no longer rector of Overdale. Also, he had pledged himself to some monkish fellowship or community; Ralph thought the Oratorians of St. Philip Neri, but he was not sure. And, finally, the ex-rector of Overdale was now “*in retreat*” at the celebrated college of Upcott, which everybody knows is five miles or more from the great manufacturing town of Blackingharn, in Midlandshire, and little more than two miles from the small, ancient town of Sutton Magna, where the Galbraiths lived.

Chapter 49. HETTY'S CONFIDENCE.

Yes! everybody knew it now, and Overdale was naturally in commotion; Mr. Aylmer had resigned the living, he had left the Rectory, and he was “gone into retreat!”—“whatever that might mean,” as Miss Grierson said when she communicated the tidings to Helen Bellamy and the governess, when she met them going to the post-office.

Helen and Miss Binder perfectly understood the term, and they did their best to explain it to Miss Grierson, who remarked, “Well, if it could be done properly, it would not be such a bad thing after all. Such as I do not want it—I am not so poor as to have to work for my living in any way, and I am rich enough to keep as many thorough servants as suffice for the appointments of a house like mine—I am free from all kinds of ties, therefore I can meditate as much and as often as I choose, and I can deny myself to my friends whenever I like; but really I should not wonder if it were not a comfort to poor married women, sometimes, to get away from an exacting husband, and nine or ten troublesome children, and all the harassing cares of a large household.”

“Mamma would not think it a comfort to go away from us all,” said Helen; “she takes her sewing up into her own room sometimes, and tells us she does not wish to be disturbed, and she thinks and meditates there, I fancy, for she always comes down gentler and sweeter and kinder than ever; that is her retreat, and I am sure she wants no other. I have an aunt who makes a ‘retreat,’ though she does not call it that, every evening; but if she goes upstairs in a bad temper she generally comes down in a worse, and if she leaves the drawing-room in a pretty amiable mood, she not unfrequently returns with what my cousin Harry calls ‘her cloudy face.’”

“I wonder,” said Miss Binder, “whether it is really good to have set times for meditation and devotional reading, over and above the regular morning and evening exercises.”

“I think, my dear,” replied Miss Grierson, “that every person must judge for himself in such cases. You know the old proverb, ‘What is one man’s meat is another’s poison,’ and what is wholesome and beneficial to you may have just the contrary effect on me. It may do one person the greatest good to have a regular quiet hour for religious duties—such as you say your aunt has, Helen; and it may do another person the greatest harm, by engendering spiritual pride and undue self-complacency—a sort of disguised Phariseeism, in fact.”

“In short,” said Miss Binder, “I suppose it all depends upon the effect it has upon our frames of mind?”

“No, my dear, that is a grand mistake; do not set out with an idea that ‘frames of mind’ are of much value. It is this retirement or retreat, as we may call it, calms the mind, and elevates the feelings so as to influence the life, all well and good; but everything must be judged, I think, by the effect it has upon one’s outer life. If the temper is more subdued, if there is more kindness, and unselfishness, and patience, cheerfulness in our intercourse with others, then the ‘retreat’ is doing us good, and, through us, working for the good of others. But if it does not so result, if rather we feel more touchy and uncharitable, and less forbearing and considerate, then I should say it does us harm. My dear girls, it seems to me that in these things we must judge each one for ourselves, asking God to *show us ourselves*, that we may know our true motives and not impute to ourselves virtues which we really do not possess. The great mischief is, that we are all so fond of judging for one another, prescribing for our friends rather than seeking to cure our own maladies. We like people to believe as ‘we believe; not only do we insist upon their holding the same truths, as we esteem them, but we require them to receive our interpretation of the same; if we could all leave off being intolerant how good it would be! I have heard it said, ‘Never preach to people unless you love them;’ and I think it would be as well to add, ‘Never pray for people, and then go and exhibit before them your own moral ugliness in the way of temper, gloom, or irritability.’ But all this has nothing to do with Mr. Aylmer, poor man; into ‘retreat’ he has gone, true enough, and let us hope it may be good for him, showing him the error of his ways. Are you going into the post-office?”

“Yes; mamma wants some mending cotton, and we want wools. Ah! here are Miss Roberts and the three Misses Harrison; are you coming in, Miss Grierson?”

Miss Grierson was; so Hetty’s shop was pretty full, as it very often was on a fine morning, when all the Overdale ladies turned out together; and Hetty and her sister found more than enough to do in serving their numerous customers.

“Well, young ladies, I hope you are pleased with your pastor,” said Miss Grierson, grimly accosting the three

Misses Harrison all at once.

"I suppose it is quite true?" said Miss Laura, doubtfully.

"Harriet will have it that it is an invention of the Dissenters," remarked Miss Harrison; she was going to say of the Bellamyites, only that she caught sight of Helen's curls just in time to save herself from such a breach of politeness. "But Miss Roberts says it is a fact that Mr. Aylmer is at Upcott."

"A very sad fact," said Roberta; "the papers are full of it this morning. There is a paragraph in one of the London papers entitled 'Another Romish Pervert,' and the *Times* has a leader on the subject of Romanising influences, and Mr. Aylmer's name is freely mentioned."

"And he has really deserted his poor wife?" asked Dorothy Harrison. "But he cannot *divorce* her; the law would not allow that?"

"Certainly not; neither do I suppose Mr. Aylmer would wish it. She is still Mrs. Aylmer, and will live in all honour and comfort—only he is at Upcott, intending, I believe, to remain there, and she is at Rouen."

"A very nice sort of life for married people!" said Miss Grierson. "Young ladies, take warning—have nothing to do with these fickle, unreliable, heartless creatures of the male sex; don't indulge in the doubtful luxury of a husband. I am afraid, Roberta, my advice comes too late for you. Suppose after six years' happy marriage Mr. Bell should take it into his head that the celibacy of the clergy was desirable, and send you off to some continental town, to be as happy as you could under the circumstances!"

"I am not afraid," replied Roberta, smiling. "Mr. Bell does not hold Mr. Aylmer's views; if he did he would not, of course, wish for my society. They parted, you know, because they differed so essentially."

"I never thought Mr. Aylmer would go so far," was Miss Laura's comment.

"It is impossible to say how far any one will go when once he has deliberately crushed out the light of truth in his soul," said Roberta. "There is light for all, but if we reject it, if we wilfully blind ourselves, then indeed may we expect to be given over to strong delusion, so that we believe a lie."

"I never could hold your creed, Roberta," replied Harriet.

"I do not ask you to hold it, I only ask you to seek the truth for yourself; seek it in God's holy Word, by the help of His blessed Spirit. There is no infallible Church, no perfect Church on earth; what we call churches are only parts of one great whole—the Holy Catholic Church."

"And to that Church I claim to belong, not only by baptism, but by participation in all its rites," returned Harriet, earnestly, for she was very much in earnest, more so than either of her sisters; "it is my joy and my glory that I am a true Catholic, or at least striving hard so to be."

"There, then, we quite agree; and I know Miss Grierson and Miss Bellamy, and I believe Miss Binder, are of the same mind."

"They are Dissenters; they are enemies of the one true Church; and you, Miss Roberts, though nominally within her pale, are sadly half-hearted in her interests. Nay, in worshipping with schismatics, have you not virtually separated yourself from your mother Church?"

"No, I have not. By schismatics you mean, of course, our friends at the Dene. Well, they are not schismatics. It is a common but very stupid mistake to suppose that all Dissenters are schismatics. It is they who, by promulgating error within the ancient fold, drive the sheep to seek other and more satisfying pastures, who actually commit the sin of schism. I believe there are certain canons which declare Dissenters to be schismatics, and by which they are excommunicated."

"What does schism mean?"

"In the New Testament, on which we all profess to found our doctrine, it means dissension among Christians who ought to be united as brethren. This is the view taken of it by St. Paul in the first epistle to the Corinthians. It is not schismatical to refuse to unite with fellow-Christians in those things which our hearts and judgments tell us are contrary to the law of Christ. When Mr. Aylmer openly avowed his belief in what we call *Transubstantiation*—when he bowed down before the table of the Lord, adoring as God mere bread and wine, I could join with him no longer; he became an idolator, and I could not, as one of Christ's disciples, any longer worship with him. And, therefore, he was the schismatic. I do not wish to call hard names, but you used the term yourself, Harriet. He, not I, separated from the true doctrine; he upheld a false doctrine and a corrupt practice, and so committed schism. I could not, as I said, any longer join in the services of the dear old church, where I had bent my knee from child-hold. There were other Christians, holding services in which I could conscientiously and

profitably take part, and with them I felt myself constrained to worship, since I could not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. But I am no Nonconformist. I hold to the so-called Church of England. I cannot quite see with my friends at the Dene, whose new church is to be on Congregational principles. But that does not prevent us from being happy together; we all hold the same essentials. On some things we are agreed to differ. I hope we are too wise to be scared by the demon Uniformity. When once you begin to force all minds into the same mould you graft human inventions on a Divine institution. Do you not remember how a schism arose in the church of Antioch? Paul openly resisted Peter and Barnabas, because of their Judaizing doctrine and practice. Was he, then, a schismatic, or were they not rather the offenders? So now, those who see and feel that there is in the Anglican Church a disregard of Christ's authority, feel compelled to abandon it; their duty is imperative; therefore their Non-conformity cannot be schism, though arrogance and narrow-mindedness may term it such. Let it be called what it will, such separation is honourable, and to the glory of God."

"But such people set at naught all authorities, all proper discipline."

"Their discipline is a little more stringent than you are aware; as for authority, they acknowledge only that of Christ. And, Harriet, if you really go back to the primitive times you are so fond of quoting, you will find that all the apostolic churches were independent; and in those early ages there were no associations of churches under one human headship, such as the Church of England, or the Church of Scotland, as we have it in this day. Oh, if Christians would only strive for unity instead of uniformity, which is a mere *ignis fatuus*, what might they not do against the world and Satan? Then, indeed, would the kingdoms of this world speedily become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He should at once reign for ever and ever."

"It strikes me," said Miss Grierson—"and Mr. Ralph Mornington sees it in the same light—that while any part of the Established Church persists in attributing any sanctity to the mere elements administered in Holy Communion, there will always be a direct tendency to the Romish heresy of *transubstantiation*."

"But," said Laura, looking quite horrified, "you would not regard the bread and wine on the altar as the same after it was consecrated as before?"

"Precisely the same! I deny that it can be consecrated! Certain words said over it do not really alter its constitution. And I think the mere pretence of consecration is mischievous, for it leads on to more; it encourages a superstitious mysticism, which ends too frequently, as in the case of Mr. Aylmer and many others, in downright idolatry. And where are we to draw the line? Once admit that the bread and wine used in the Sacrament are different after the '*Prayer of Consecration*,' as the Rubric styles it, from what they were prior to the utterance of that prayer, and you at once open the door to the supernatural, and to a monstrous error."

"But the Evangelical Church does not hold that the bread and wine are other than what they seem to be," said Roberta.

"It professes, certainly, that the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine; but, then, why does it consent to humour the delusion by not permitting the residue to be carried out of the church? Why, if any of the bread and wine which was '*consecrated*' remain, should it be immediately after the blessing '*reverently*' consumed by such of the communicants as the '*priest*' shall call to him? Some years ago I received the Communion privately with an aunt of mine who was in dying circumstances, and I was struck with the solemnity with which the minister drained the last drop from the small cup, and scrupulously gathered up every crumb from the three or four pieces of bread which had been required. All this, whatever may be said to the contrary, tends to an unworthy superstition, which ends in a sensuous miracle.

'Oh! presumptuous undertaker,
Never bread could bake its baker,
Yet a man can make his Maker!'"

"I cannot say you are wrong," replied Roberta, "but I am thankful some words of protest still remain; there is a note to the Order of Holy Communion, which says plainly, 'it is hereby declared'—relating to the posture of kneeling to receive the Sacrament—that thereby no adoration is intended, or ought to be done, either unto the Sacramental bread and wine there bodily received, or unto any corporal presence of Christ's natural flesh and blood. For the Sacramental bread and wine *remain still in their very natural substances, and, therefore, may not be adored*, for that were idolatry, to be abhorred of all faithful Christians; and the natural body and blood of our Saviour Christ are in heaven and not here, it being against the truth of Christ's natural body to be at one time in

more places than one.' And that that is the outspoken doctrine of the Church of England no one may dare to gainsay, for all that Ritualists may assert to the contrary."

"You do not mean to say that that is the teaching of the Church of England?" asked Harriet Harrison, very earnestly.

"It is in the Prayer-book, however. You will find it, as I said, at the very end of the Communion Service."

"Oh! it was that so-called—that terribly mis-called— Reformation that did the mischief," remarked Laura, shaking her head.

"Then," said Roberta, a little out of patience, "why not go back to the Church that disowns the Reformation? Why row down the stream when you are looking up? Why wear the colours and speak the watchwords of one army while you are really with the opposing forces?"

"And yet you blame Mr. Aylmer?"

"Not for going over to Rome. If he felt that he must go he was right to go; his lingering in the ranks of the Establishment was a living lie. He had as much right to become a Romanist on his own convictions as Mr. Bellamy had to turn Dissenter; but he had no right to leave his wife. Matrimony was prior to ecclesiastical institutions of any kind, and it is God's ordinance, not man's. In becoming an outward Romanist Mr. Aylmer only took the most honourable and the only honest course. God forbid that I should judge him."

"He is a saint compared with that Mr. Vallance—that imposter, that arch-deceiver!" hotly exclaimed Miss Grierson. "Hetty, child, what has become of him?"

But pretty Hetty's colour came and went, and her pale lips quivered, and at last she burst into an agony of weeping. Roberta took her quietly away, and went with her upstairs, and stayed with the poor excited child till she grew calm again. "I wish they would never mention his name again to me," said Hetty at last, just as Roberta was thinking she might leave her. "Oh! I wish I could be stronger; how foolish you must think me, Miss Roberts! Nay, I am afraid to fancy what you think!

"I really do not know what to think, Hetty; that Mr. Vallance has established some sort of influence over you I observed long ago, but what are your relations with him at present I cannot make out. Does he regard you as a penitent?"

"No!—that is, I do not know how he regards me; but he talked to me many times, and gave me some beautiful books which he wished me to read in private. I was to consult him if I did not quite understand them."

"And did you understand them?"

"No; but they were very beautiful. Some of them were allegories, about children being led blindfold over mountains, and some were the lives of saints, and one was a book of poetry—the sweetest poetry I ever read. Oh! I cannot tell you, Miss Roberts, how kindly Mr. Vallance talked to me,—not always about religion, you know, but about all kinds of things; he seemed to understand whatever you spoke about, and to know everything. He would tell me all about flowers, and plants, and stones, and music, and people who lived long ago and did great deeds, or made themselves famous. I liked to talk to him better than anything else in the world, and the little time I spent with him each day I looked forward to all the rest of the four-and-twenty hours. He seemed to like to talk to me, too, for he made many opportunities for conversation; and he was more kind and gentle than any one had ever been to me before. I was so foolish,—after awhile I came to care for him more than for all the world beside; I could not help it; and, Miss Roberts, though he never said anything right out, as others have said to me, he said things that made me think he cared for me, and very soon he found out that I cared for him. He seemed pleased: one evening he said to me, 'I believe little Hetty loves me better than any, one else in the world;' and I flushed up hot and red, I could not say it was not so. Well, presently his conversation changed, and it was all on religious subjects, and I was quite willing to go where he led, though my father got angry and said he would have no Papists in his house. He taught me to go to confession, and oh, then, Miss Roberts, he knew ail,—all that I thought and felt and hoped about him; he knew my very soul. And then his tone suddenly changed, and he told me that he loved my soul only, and that I must not love him save as my pastor and spiritual friend; and he confided to me that he was under vows never to allow his heart to be entangled by an earthly affection. All ties, he said, he had given up for Christ's sake, and I must do the same; and the very pain of unanswered affection, he assured me, was sent by God to draw my soul to Him, that I might renounce all human loves and fix my heart only on Him. Somehow I understood that he was a priest of Rome, and I felt at first as if the shock would take away my reason. He wished me to determine upon steps which he knew my father would disapprove; he tried to convince me that I

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ought not to allow parental authority, or, as he said, prejudice, to keep me back from so blessed a career. I hesitated, for I loved my father, and I trusted him, and—and—it seemed to me that Mr. Vallance counselled crooked ways. But while I miserably hesitated, half–convinced, and half–terrified, my father overheard our conversation, and that was what made him send Mr. Valiance away. I felt thankful that I was not left entirely to my own responsibility, and though my father was angry, he was very kind and tender with me, and by degrees I told him all. He was terribly shocked, and he warned Mr. Valiance to keep away from Overdale. But my life has seemed very dreary since he went away.”

“Never mind, Hetty; this has only been a bad dream; you will be happy again bye–and–bye. Have you heard of Mr. Vallance since?”

“Yes; a letter came to me this morning requiring me to meet him, unknown to my friends, at St. Catherine's, Hoveness; he is going to leave England for ever, he says.”

“But you do not think of going?”

“I do not know. I should like to see him once more. He did make me care for him so much. Oh, you do not know how gentle he can be!”

Chapter 50. "SO HE GIVETH HIS BELOVED SLEEP"

But none of the rumours respecting himself reached Mr. Aylmer in his quiet cell at Upcott. The long struggle was over now, and the lingering purpose had turned at last into action; the Rubicon was passed, the irrevocable vows were spoken, and now surely the long-hoped-for repose was attained, now every doubt would melt away and die, and he would go on to his life's end, fighting the good fight, as a sworn soldier of the Church.

Letters came from Normandy, but he did not receive them; he was told that his family were well, but his superiors deemed it "inexpedient" at this juncture to intrude upon him anything relating to the outer world; especially would it be injurious to have his mind recalled to circumstances from which he was for ever severed. Till time and use should have strengthened the new bond it would be wiser not to revert to those mere human ties which he had solemnly renounced. He was no longer a husband and a father, he was reminded—he was a priest of the Holy Catholic Church, and to her were due all devotion, all allegiance, and, above everything, all submission! And the once haughty rector of Overdale did submit, and bowed his proud head to the yoke he had voluntarily assumed. He meekly acquiesced in the decision of his spiritual guides, he made no remonstrance, he even strove to check the longings that would arise when images of Agatha and her little ones rose unbidden from the recesses of a too-faithful memory. He endeavoured, and not unsuccessfully, to absorb every thought and feeling in the services of the Church, in her interests, which, in due time, he was so largely to serve, and in the private devotions which were prescribed for him by his confessor. For a long time it seemed as if he were performing spiritual quarantine, lest the taint of Anglicanism should in any way be carried into the strongholds of Rome.

And so the silent summer flowed away. When Mr. Aylmer came to Upcott the woods were still in all their beauty of rich foliage; now they were fairer still, but it was the fairness of decay stealing over lawn and grove, and tinging with bright, hectic hues every branch and spray that would fade ere long in the wild, keen autumnal breezes that, sweeping down from the grand old chase of Sutton Magna, spread, a little before its time, the desolation of winter over that high table-land. The winds sighed drearily through the thick shrubberies around the college, and roared at night through the tall pine-trees, many of which grow in the neighbourhood of Upcott, and nothing would break the silence save the ringing of the chapel bell at certain intervals. Then, sometimes, in spite of every effort, the past came back again like an avenging spectre, and the solitary room where the unhappy man knelt before a crucifix was haunted with memories as vivid as they were irrepressible.

One night Eustace Aylmer strove in vain to fix his mind on the subject chosen for his meditations. An intense feeling of loneliness stole over him, a sense of utter desolation such as he had never before experienced oppressed him. The future stretched before him, a dreary path, on which no warm, sunny ray might fall; along which the music of no loving voice might breathe, and which must be trodden in stern self-repression and bitter self-abnegation to the end. The strong impulses that had led him to the goal he had reached, the fixed opinions that had borne him thither, seemed now dull and indistinct. The sentiments that had so far animated him, the hopes that had sustained him, were no longer of any avail; the joy of self-sacrifice was gone, the vaunted peace of the cloister had fled; nothing remained but the consciousness that he was for ever parted from all he loved on earth.

He did not doubt the infallibility of his Church, he only doubted himself, or, rather, he believed that he had sadly mistaken his vocation, and over-rated his own spirituality and powers of endurance. Not for him was the high and lofty calling he had assumed; his heart was too earthy, his aspirations too human; he would never, never be able to tear away from his weak heart the recollection of his sweet young wife, and of the children who called him father. Then came the agonising thought, had he really been called to this immolation of the most sacred affections? Did God really demand of him the offering not only of his own crushed joys, but of others' innocent happiness?

Long and earnestly he gazed upon the image of the Man of Sorrows; but the sculptured figure seemed only what it was, a mere "graven image," nothing more. He closed his eyes, and then the pure, benignant gaze of the ascended Saviour seemed to penetrate to the depths of his miserable heart, and a voice seemed gently to speak to his wounded spirit, saying, "My child! My son! give Me thy heart." He looked no more to the image, but, covering his eyes, he strove to realise the presence of Him, the once crucified and now exalted Jesus, and to listen

to His words of consolation—"Come unto Me, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Oh! well would it have been for Eustace Aylmer if he had obeyed that loving invitation; but not yet was he to escape from the net that had been prepared for him. The fetters that he had himself forged were too firmly riveted; peace might have come to him in that very hour, but with something like terror he put from him the hope that was beginning to breathe sweetest balms over his soul. He had surrendered the right of private judgment; he was obedient to the voice of *his Church*, and with a gush of penitence he commenced to repeat a long string of Latin prayers which had been imposed upon him as a penance, whenever he should yield to the temptation of worldly regrets and wandering thoughts.

But the prayers finished, he was yet more wretched than before, and in a very stupor of misery he knelt, still mechanically repeating prayers at intervals, but scarcely conscious what he said or even what he thought. He was roused by the bell which called him to the midnight service. It was a relief to leave that lonely room and see the forms and hear the voices of his brethren in the chapel; and he felt soothed as he joined in the low, sweet chant, and listened to the deep swelling music of the organ. But the service was soon over; it seemed impossible for him to go back to his cell, and, approaching his superior, he requested permission to spend the night watching in the chapel.

The petition was graciously accorded, and when the last strains of the Benediction had died away, and the last dark form had passed along the shadowy aisle, Eustace Aylmer was alone once more, and the silence and solitude of the chapel were even more oppressive than they had been in his own room. And again he lost self-control, and murmured to himself, "Alone! alone! oh, my God, how can I bear this anguish to my life's end? Have pity on me! give me strength!" And yet this man had wealth and friends, a loving wife, fair children, and all that is regarded as most precious by the sons of men. He had put from him the choicest of God's gifts, he had despised blessings such as fall not to the lot of all. Yet now he complained, and called upon God to help him. And would God hear him? Yes; God hears all, even the erring and foolish children are listened to by the kind Father of all good; and help is given, but not precisely the help they expect and look for. They who reject the one source of all truth and light, they who voluntarily wander away into paths of delusion and falsehood must come back painfully and humbly, as did the prodigal of old to his father's house. Not only may goods of this life be wasted in, riotous living, but the treasures of faith and hope may be squandered, and Christ's love may be virtually rejected by those who seek to find in ordinances, and in vain ceremonies, a more excellent way.

Eustace Aylmer was still strong in his own infatuation; he was suffering the consequences of his sin; but, of his sin apart from that which it entailed, he did not repent. He was still content to wander in the *mazy* labyrinths of Romanism; he would still refuse to tread the plain high road to heaven and God—the way, thank God, which none need miss, especially in favoured England, where there is an open Bible and a free Gospel everywhere proclaimed. But he would have liked to hold still the false creed, and the man-exalting system of Popery which he had embraced so heartily, and at the same time to resume those blessed social and domestic joys which he had in his madness cast away. But now it was too late. Vows, solemn and binding, were upon him; he had renounced home, wife, children, kindred ties, position, and much of the wealth which Providence had entrusted to him. And he must abide by the rash and unnatural covenant to which he had pledged himself,

For a long time Aylmer paced the lonely chapel aisles, lighted now by the clear beams of a waning October moon; he walked on and on till weariness bade him rest a little, and then he seated himself in the choir, and the exhausted form, and the worn, tempest-tossed mind sank for a little while into the sweet unconsciousness of slumber. How long he had slept he could not tell; it seemed a long time, yet the moonbeams had only travelled a short space since he had watched them palely colouring with the tints of an upper window the beautiful cluster pillar exactly opposite the spot on which he rested. He awoke with a start! Was it a dream? Or did Agatha really stand by him, laying her gentle hand on his, and saying—oh! with such a smile, a smile that seemed to have caught the radiance of heaven's own effulgent brightness—"My own beloved husband, God will comfort you in His own good time. You will come to me one day. God's truth will yet shine upon your soul, and all will be well!" Then she bent to kiss him, and he stretched out his longing arms to fold her to his heart; but he did not feel the kiss, though something seemed to tell him that it fell upon his lips, and he only clasped thin air; only the moonlight beams fell across the arch, and the night wind moaned without; he was alone in the solitary, shadowy, college chapel.

But not with the dream—if dream it were—passed away the strong impression of Agatha's presence. He

roused himself and began again to pace the aisles, but quickly he returned to the seat in the choir where he had slumbered. Should he ever forget that bright, lovely face—not sad, and pale, and subdued as he had seen it last, as it had been for many a day before that parting at Midsummer, but lit up as with a glory! Oh, the calm of that white brow! Oh, the solemn joy in those dark, earnest eyes! Oh, the pathos in that low, sweet voice, and the inexpressible pity and tenderness in the whole face and mein as the parted ruby lips came near his own. Was it a dream, or a vision? Was Agatha on earth, or numbered with the saints in heaven?

On that same wild October evening which saw Eustace watching in his lonely cell, a sorrowful group was gathered in one of the dim wide chambers of the chateau in the Boulevard Beauvoisine, at Rouen. Rosamund was not there—she had professed at the convent of St. Therèse nearly six weeks before—but Gertrude, Claude, Ralph Mornington, Jane, and others were present. Ernest, as you know, did not accompany the family to Normandy, and early in August he became a pupil in the seminary connected with Upcott College, where he occasionally saw his father. An elderly man, strongly resembling Eustace Aylmer, sat by the bedside of one whose sands of life were sinking rapidly. It was the Earl of Ashdown, and he had come, in answer to Gertie's appeal, to take his last farewell of his gentle sister-in-law—for Agatha was dying.

Slowly she had faded, so slowly that almost to the last they had hoped. She had suffered little pain; weakness and languor were all that she complained of, except, indeed, that dull, fixed pain at the heart, which she told the doctor was a real physical sensation. He only shook his head, and said that madame must be very careful,—it was *serious*. She need not be afraid, oh, no; only she must obey directions, and take great care. But privately he told Mr. Mornington that he could do nothing; the lady was slowly dying, and her malady was beyond the reach of all the medical skill in the universe.

As the summer waned, the little strength she had waned too. Very soon she had to be wheeled or carried into the garden; then she could not leave the house; then she was confined to her own chamber.

At last there came a day when they could not even lay her on the sofa at the foot of the bed.

“Yes, my dear,” said Lord Ashdown, striving to be calm, “I will do all you wish; your dear children shall be cared for. Also, if the time ever come when Eustace can be befriended, he shall find me a brother in deed as well as in name.”

“He will need your kindness some day,” she said, feebly. “Oh, Ashdown, I never thought I could leave all and die so happily. I am so tired—so tired.”

“Yours has been a hard lot, my poor Agatha!”

“Has it? Well, it is all over now. I should have liked to see Eustace once again; but God's will be done. I shall see him before long. Time must go very quickly in heaven. Yes, I know he will be there; he will come home at last, my poor Eustace. Oh, how good God is! I have not a care, not a doubt, not a misgiving. This is indeed 'light at evening time.' And it was so kind of *you* to come!”

“Not at all! I wish I had come sooner. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Nothing, thank you. You will watch over the children? You and Jane will take them to Ashdown?”

“They shall be as my own, and Jane will be their mother.”

“And always tell them about me; and I should like them to love their own papa. Tell them how I could leave them to go to my Saviour, how *He* comforted and sustained me when all earthly comfort failed.”

Later in the evening she asked for Claude, and once snore she thanked him for all the love and duty he had so willingly rendered her. “And,” she said, in conclusion, “You see now, Claude, that there *is* a faith which is stronger than death. The hour is come, and I am not afraid to die. Should *you* fear death?”

“Not so much death as the darkness and void beyond.”

“Ah! beyond it is all sunshine! Bright, eternal noon!”

“But you have been so good, Agatha—mother.”

“No, no, my boy. It is Christ who has been so good, not I. I should never have loved Him so much if it had not been for my great trouble; all my hope, all my trust is in *Him!* Remember that, Claude; in Him is our salvation. He has promised, and He is faithful. But I do not trouble about you any more than about your dear father. I have told my Master about you both. I have committed you both, even as I have committed my own little darlings, into His hands, and I *know* He will bring you all safe to His eternal joy.”

And the evening faded into black night, and midnight came, and the many chimes rang out from Rouen's ancient towers, and Agatha still lay, just breathing, and now and then opening her heavy eyes and looking round

for the faces she loved so well. It would soon be over; the chill dews of death were on the white forehead, the long black ringlets were damp and uncurled, there was no perceptible pulse, and the faint breath grew fainter still. First one and then another sat by her, holding the listless fingers in their own warm clasp, and feeling the little hands grow colder and colder in spite of all.

“She will never speak again,” said nurse, after she had tried in vain to administer a spoonful of wine and water. “Poor dear lamb; how quiet she lies! If this is death I am sure one need not be so afraid of it. Don't it look like falling asleep, my lady? Don't it, Miss Gertrude?”

“It is falling asleep,” replied Lady Jane; “she will sleep in Jesus. No! Death is not terrible to the true Christian—to her who is *in Christ*, and stayed on Him. It is only a sleep; one gets so tired, and rest is sweet, 'so He giveth His beloved sleep.’”

Ralph had been away, and now he returned.

She is still here?” he whispered to Gertie.

“Yes, but I think she is unconscious; she will pass away so, nurse believes. I wish she would speak to me once more.”

“Do not disturb her. Oh, Gertie, how little seem all strifes and troubles of this life in the presence of the last enemy. But surely he never came in softer, gentler guise. Does she not look like a happy child who has been lulled to sleep on its mother's bosom? I cannot gaze upon that serene, dying face without recalling our blessed Saviour's own words—almost His parting words before He delivered Himself up to that last mortal agony—'Peace I leave with you; My peace I give unto you. Not as the world giveth give I unto you.' No, the world can neither give nor take away the peace which Christ Himself imparts; it is indeed the peace of God which passeth all understanding.”

The dark eyes opened once more, and the pale lips shaped themselves to speak, but no words were uttered—none, at least, that mortal ears might hear. But over the Dying face shone a radiance, a glory, that fairly took the breath of those who were standing by. A great awe fell upon their hearts, for they knew that she upon whom they looked with their poor, dim, human eyes, saw “the great vision of the face of Christ.” It was more than peace, it was joy and wonder unspeakable that lighted up the wasted features; the weak hands tried to join themselves as if in praise and thanksgiving; it was very rapture that spread itself over lip and cheek and brow. And then slowly, slowly the eyelids closed, the fingers relaxed again, a slight tremor ran through the frame, and all was hushed for ever; only the beautiful smile, the strange, radiant expression of mingled love, and bliss, and wonder still lingered.

“She is at rest,” said Claude, rising from his knees.

“She sees 'face to face'——” was all that Lady Jane could say.

While Lord Ashdown solemnly enunciated, “The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law; but thanks be to God *who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

And the last words Ralph echoed, “Even so!—through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Chapter 51. SEVEN YEARS AFTERWARDS

Seven years had elapsed since they laid Agatha to rest under the chestnut shade in the peaceful cemetery among the Normandy hills—seven years, in which many changes had come to pass; in which Mr. Bell had become rector of Overdale; in which the new Congregational church had prospered exceedingly; and in which the Methodists at the Chine had built a modest little conventicle of their own.

Changes, too, had overswept the land; great questions, ecclesiastical as well as political, were being debated in the senate, in the club-houses, at public meetings, and at private re-unions—everywhere, indeed, where men met together and freely expounded their convictions and expressed their previsions. All men—that is, all thoughtful and earnest men, and many thoughtful women also—were beginning to talk anxiously, yet hopefully, about “the Church of the future.” All felt that a change was impending, that a great crisis was gradually approaching, that Nemesis was slowly but surely making her way to the high places, where wrong had been suffered and injustice had been ignored so long. But through all Ritualism had steadily advanced; it had received much opposition and many checks; but it had thriven and spread, and exalted itself in spite of every hindrance; and now indeed not only Nonconformists, who might be supposed to be disaffected where an Establishment was concerned, but sturdy Episcopalians began to ask, “Where and what is the Church of England? When we call ourselves Churchmen are we Protestants or semi-Romanists? Do we believe the Word of God, or do we hold no creed at all? Have we any faith, and is there such a thing as ‘the life of the world to come’?”

It was the year of the last Paris Exhibition, which was just closed, after having run its most successful and brilliant career, and people were still talking over its marvels and exchanging their experiences during their sojourn in the gay capital. Gertrude had spent several months in France; part of the time she had been staying in Paris, but some weeks had been devoted to Normandy, and to visiting scenes now most hallowed to memory. But she was no longer Gertrude Aylmer; she was Ralph Mornington's wife, and a wife of four years' standing, and a fine healthy boy, and a lovely little girl bearing the beloved name of Agatha, called her mother. Claude had travelled with the Morningtons; he was still unmarried; and now they were all at Ralph's town house in Hyde Park Gardens.

The “all” included Lord Ashdown and Lady Jane, who came up from the country to greet their relations, and to hear the accounts of the wonders they had not seen, and of festivities in which they had not shared; for the Earl and Lady Jane chose now to consider themselves quite elderly people, who were best at home whenever there was any chance of bustle and confusion. Roberta, too, was Gertie's visitor, as well as Helen Galbraith, whom Mrs. Mornington had invited up to town, because she had good reason to believe that Claude particularly enjoyed her company; so that most of the people who had borne their part in the mournful drama of 1860 were met again to revert to it in 1867.

“Where is Maude?” asked Lord Ashdown, when he had looked once or twice towards the door in vain; “the naughty child said she was coming down to luncheon.”

“She is still taking her music-lesson,” replied Lady Jane; “she will, be here directly. How wonderfully like her poor mother she grows!”

“Wonderfully!” responded Gertie. “I can fancy Agatha was just like her at her age. Child as she still is,—just thirteen, you know,—she is constantly reminding me both by look and gesture of the lovely Agatha Bevan who came to Overdale fourteen years ago. I wonder what papa would say to her? Will she ever see him again, I wonder! It is of little use writing to him. I know our letters are withheld if they touch upon anything beyond the merest common-places. Think of never getting a letter of your own with seals unbroken! Ralph went to see him in the spring, before we left Mornington; but he did not have a private interview. Brother Somebody sat reading in the room the whole of the time.”

“But he did have the dear little mater's letter,” said Claude, “for I gave it into his own hands five years ago. By the way, I had a note from Ernest the other day. He was obliged to write about that business of Gregson's. Being of age, his signature was required. He does not seem to have an idea beyond the narrow bounds of his monkery. He absolutely hugs his chains. I have sometimes a suspicion that my poor father finds his galling enough.

“Does anybody know where Mr. Vallance is?” asked Lord Ashdown.

“My husband heard that he was at Rome,” replied Roberta, “very intimate with a noble English family, who were passing the winter there. Miss Grierson had tidings, too, from an artist cousin of hers who is working away in the Via Margutti. He met the whole party frequently in the different galleries, and once he came upon them at a picnic at Tivoli. Mr. Vallance was telling the young ladies all about Hadrian's Villa.”

“And little Hetty did not quite break her heart?” inquired Gertie.

“Happily not. She managed to endure the discipline he ordained for her till it became discipline so longer. It was only the child's fancy that was touched. She was an excitable, romantic little creature in those days, and she read more novels and poetry than were good for her, and she fell readily enough into the snare laid for her unwary feet. I remember Mr. Vallance telling me once that a great sorrow, such as involved crushed affections and withered hopes, would soften the heart that had refused to receive any spiritual impressions. I suppose he thought by instructing her in High-Churchism, and winning her love at the same time, he was making sure of her.”

“Ah, I know how he would manage that little affair. He would be so interested in Hetty, give her such excellent advice, lend her books, pay her delicate attentions, which no gentleman had ever paid her before, all the while abstaining scrupulously from one single word which would at all commit himself—never in the least compromising himself by uttering aught that might be construed into a declaration of attachment. Poor, silly Hetty! but I cannot blame her. Did she take long to get over it?”

“Not so long as I feared she would. Mr. Vallance's real character being ascertained, she felt that she had been not only deceived, but in some measure insulted; for, though she affirmed he had never said in so many words, 'Hetty, I love you' he had frequently given her to understand that he deeply valued her affection. She went away for a while to an aunt in Oxfordshire, and Annie managed the shop; and while she was on this visit, a worthy young farmer in the neighbourhood fell in love with her and proposed. She refused him then—she had not quite got over the shock, poor thing; but he followed her to Overdale a few months afterwards, and pleaded his cause so successfully that he went away Hetty's betrothed husband. A year afterwards they were married; and Hetty, I believe, is a very happy wife. She came to see me about two years ago, and to show me her baby—a fat, round-faced, round-eyed, pug-nosed little fellow,—not a bit like his lovely young mother, but, as she proudly assured me, 'the very image of his father!' and, seeing that the father was tolerably ugly, I quite believed it. Hetty, however, seemed perfectly satisfied both with husband and child, and so glad that Annie was going to marry into the same family; for she said, in conclusion, when we had quieted the noisy baby with stuffing cake into his mouth, 'There is nothing like being happily married, is there, Mrs. Bell? What a foolish girl I was, to be sure, in that old time; and how good God was to me!'”

“Do you ever see Ada Chennery now?”

“No; she has quite left our neighbourhood. The squire is so angry with her he will not have her at home. He says her example is so bad for her sisters, as indeed it is! I hoped once that Ada would be saved. The disclosure of Mr. Vallance's treachery startled her very greatly.”

“Did she really give away all her fine fortune?”

“She endowed the sisterhood very largely, that is all I know about it. The last time I saw her—several years ago—she looked sadly out of health and most unhappy. I think she will remain faithful to the Anglican Church. I do not think she will ever follow Rosamund's example.”

“Poor Rosamund! How little we thought what it would all come to! Of course we went to St. Therèse as we passed through Rouen.”

“And you saw her?”

“Yes; but we were not alone except for about two minutes, and then the grate was between us. I could only touch the tips of her fingers. To think that sisters should meet so!”

“And was she in tolerable spirits?”

“She was quite composed, but very grave, and of course that horrible old nun counting her beads in the background prevented anything like confidence. Just two or three minutes we had, the old lady being suddenly called off guard, and then I put out my hand as far as it would go, and tried to grasp Rosamund's hand, and I said, 'Are you happy? Speak quickly,—if you wish to return to us, say so, and Claude and Ralph will manage it.' I could see something like a spasm pass over her thin, wasted features. Then she answered, 'I am content. There can be no change now; it is too late.' 'Only say you repent,' I urged, 'and you shall be free. You are a British subject; they cannot, dare not detain you against your will.' She only shook her head hopelessly, and said, sadly, 'Ah, you

do not know!' And then Sister Brigida came back, and we could say no more: she evidently understood English. As we parted, Rosamund whispered, 'Oh, Gertrude, pray for me! pray for me!' To think of her asking *me*, a heretic, to pray for *her*!"

While the ladies were talking, Ralph had been called out of the room, and five minutes afterwards he had sent, for Claude.

"Some business, I suppose," said Gertie, carelessly; "Ralph thinks so much of Claude's opinion."

And then she went on telling their continental adventures, and was still describing the Emperor's *fete*, when Ralph returned, looking, as Gertie afterwards said, as if he had seen a ghost.

"Oh, Ralph, what is it?—where is baby?" cried Gertie, rushing across the room to her husband.

"Hush, dear! baby is quite well—the children are both safe in the nursery—but some one has arrived from—"

"From Upcott? Speak quickly, Ralph—my father is dead?"

"No, no, my dear, be calm; he is not dead—not even really ill—though seriously out of health, I should say. A little of your nursing will soon set him up again, Gertie."

"Oh, Ralph, you do not mean it?—he is here,, then?"

"Yes, he is here; and Gertie—Aunt Jane—Lord Ashdown—he has—left Upcott for ever."

It was true. Mr. Aylmer had indeed left Upcott—he had come back again to his children; at last he had cast away the fetters that enslaved him, and returned to the simpler, purer faith of his earlier years. Rather had he found for the first time the sure and certain hope revealed in Christ's Gospel; at length he knew the love, the power, and the fulness of Him in whom alone there is peace and remission of sins.

Strangely altered was the once proud and handsome Eustace Aylmer. His form was bent and wasted to emaciation, his face was haggard, and his hair whitened as if the snows of fourscore winters had passed over it. But through all the sadness, through all the tokens of illness and premature decay, gleamed a sweetness and a calmness such as had never illuminated the haughty features of the rector of Overdale, or the stern countenance of the ascetic priest of Upcott. His children made much of him, for it seemed to them as if their father had been dead and was alive again, had been lost and was found.

"Oh, if only *she* could have lived to see this day!" said Gertrude, passionately.

And Ralph made answer:—"Dear, she is far happier as it is; her prayers are answered, and who shall say' that, in her own bright, blessed home, she knows it not? I think they will not be long parted."

But a very tempest of anguish shook Mr. Aylmer's enfeebled frame when he saw his daughter Maude. She was tall and womanly of her age, the very transcript of her lovely mother; and when first she stood before him, he could have fancied that he saw again the blooming Agatha of that sweet May-time, fourteen years before. She looked at him with Agatha's deep, tender eyes; she spoke to him in Agatha's sweet clear young voice; even the clasp of her slender fingers reminded him of that hand that could be clasped nevermore, till they should meet in the world beyond the grave!

Late that evening, when, they were gathered round the hearth, Claude said, "Father, will you forgive me for the hard, cruel words I said to you when last we met?"

"I thank you for them, for they made me feel how far I had missed the mark at which I aimed. And I had forfeited the love and respect of my children; it was ever a consolation to me that you were faithful to her when I had forsaken her, and that you thought harshly of me for my desertion of those whom I was bound by the most solemn vows to love and cherish while life lasted."

"And when did you begin to change, papa?" said Gertie, gently. "Do you mind telling us all about it?"

"There is little to tell, my dear. Shall I confess that through it all I had intervals of terrible misgiving? Even when I was surrendering my mind and judgment to be hoodwinked by those who knew full well how to take advantage of my fatal weakness, I used to feel sometimes that I was following a flickering meteor, rather than the glorious lamp of God's own eternal truth. But the infatuation was strong upon me; and I had courted error from my boyhood. Very early in my life I was enamoured of the forms and ceremonies of that terrible heresy which sprang up in the Church of England some five—and—thirty years ago; *there lay all the mischief*—those childish tendencies were at the very root of all the wrongs and sufferings of later years. I thought when once the irrevocable step was taken, when the costly sacrifice was complete, I should doubt no more, I should be at rest; and though the happiness of earth could never be mine, I was content to give it up, if only in its stead I might know that Divine joy, that rapt ecstatic bliss, which, I had been told, was the reward of those who yielded all they

held dearest in the world, in order to consecrate themselves to a life of so-called *religion*. Too late I found that I had sacrificed my treasures, and gained nothing in their place. There was no rest, no peace. If, sometimes, I succeeded in working myself into a state of beatific contemplation, the reaction speedily set in, and I lay crushed under my weight of helpless misery and sin. Sometimes came whispers of peace to my weary soul, pleadings of the Blessed Spirit, and I would fain have listened, but *dared not*. Such were not the breathings of my Church. Time passed on; I was obedient even to slavishness in outward seeming; I multiplied prayers and penances, and my brethren deemed me a saint. But within all was darkness and coldness, the void of an empty heart—a heart from whence earthly love had been chased, and whence heavenly love had fled. After I knew of Agatha's death I fell into a sort of stupor; I lived in a kind of trance, with all my sensations benumbed. I knew that the blow had fallen, but it had stunned me, and the dreary weeks and months passed away till they amounted to years, and still I was as one cut off from life. I was locked up in the horrible charnel-house of despair—sullen, heavy, frozen despair, from which I had no hope, from which I scarcely wished to escape. I had wilfully rejected God's grace, I had extinguished the proffered Light, I had turned from the truth, and now I was suffered to fall into strong delusion, to *believe a lie!* Great was my guilt, and bitter' was my punishment.

"I do not know how long this dull misery lasted; but a few months ago I opened Agatha's last letter—the one which you brought me, Claude; it would never have reached me through the post. Once more I read her words of love. She never reproached me; she only strove to comfort me, and she called me her darling, her precious husband, just as if I had not broken her heart. The end of the letter ran thus:—'I know the day *will* come, my dearly loved Eustace, when all the delusions that have' surrounded you will melt away. Some day your heart will fail you, and you will feel that your feet are not upon the Rock, but upon the shifting sands of human pride and human weakness; then do not hesitate! *come straight to Jesus!* Commit all to Him—lay hold of Him, and all will, be well! Put away all your fancied merits; forget your prayers, your self-denial, your many sacrifices; just give yourself into His hands, and once more you shall rejoice and be at peace. "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved.*" Farewell, my own love, farewell for a little while. I am quite at rest concerning you; the light will soon dawn upon your soul, the Day-star will rise and shine and guide your feet into the way of perfect peace, and bring you to the happy home where I shall be waiting and watching for you.'

"And the light did dawn! As I read the darkness receded: fear, doubt, and anguish took their flight. I looked to Christ and *I believed*. I saw Him whom my sins had nailed to the tree; I had a vision of His loveliness and glory, and my soul sank in praise and adoration before Him. And now, though I must go softly all my days, though earthly joy can never dwell in my heart again, I am happier than I have ever been! If it is God's will, I would like to live a few years, that I might *really* preach His Gospel and proclaim His love; that I might rescue others who are dazzled and misled—deceived, as I once was; that I might protest with every breath I have against that false system, which begins in exalting human observances, and multiplying forms and ceremonies, and ends in destroying the vital powers which God has created—destroying them under the name of devoting them to Himself alone."

My tale is ended now. I might have made it "conclude more happily," people tell me; but I had no such alternative. *I have not been writing fiction*. I have merely narrated facts which actually occurred; and I have altered circumstances, and, as it were, reset the picture, only so far as it was necessary in order not to violate confidence, and not to give pain to those still living, who were once actors in the scenes I have described—who are still mourners for sister and brother, immured within convent walls, and for her whose fair young life was blighted by workings of a system which is sapping the very foundations not only of the Anglican Church, but of our national glory, and of our social and domestic joys and respectability. For, alas! the story I have told you as faithfully as I could is no rare and terrible exception to the rule, no unfortunate combination of incidents such as will hardly ever recur again. The same story is being told daily in every county of England. Facts similar to those I have narrated have recurred—are still recurring; and examples will multiply so long as the errors of Ritualism, the great heresy and schism of the nineteenth century, prevail among us.

Mr. Aylmer still lives, a sorrowful, penitent man, humbly and earnestly working for his Master; anxious that his days may be prolonged, that his voice may still be uplifted in the proclamation of Christ's blessed Gospel, yet yearning for rest!—very weary and very sad, thinking of wasted opportunities; of a long life spent in following' vain shadow's and delusive myths; of children led astray by paternal influence; of a gentle wife deserted and most deeply wronged, sleeping in her quiet grave, under alien skies, and with no kindred dust around. But the end is not

Overdale

far off; very soon the husband and wife, parted by a false and cruel creed, will be re-united. The hand of death is oftentimes very merciful. Even as the curse of labour, by God's grace, turns to blessing, so the doom of death becomes the writ of manumission to those who live for Christ, and dying, have found Him.

Lady Jane once more lives with her brother Eustace, but not at Overdale. *He* could not bear that now; besides, the living has passed out of the Aylmer family, and Eustace prefers to hold no fixed charge, but to preach as an evangelist wherever the Lord's work may call him. Rosamund is still at St. Therèse, no one knows much about her; but her brother Claude, now on the eve of marriage with Helen Galbraith, resolves to pay her an annual visit, and claim her freedom, should she desire it, by an appeal to the British Government. Ernest remains a monk, and is noted for his bigotry and his bitter hatred of Protestantism! Claude is a true believer now; Agatha's dying words were blessed to him, and he has mercifully escaped the dismal gulf of infidelity towards which his course was tending. Ada Chennery is as much cut off from her family as if she shared Rosamund's cloister; she appears to be a very unhappy woman, and in the bloom of life she is growing wizened, wan, and shrewish.

And Roberta and her husband are working happily together; the parish church is crowded once more, and many of the old congregation have returned to worship God after the manner of their fathers; but the Dene church is full also, and the Methodists are doing a great work at the Chine, and all along the coast as far as Hoveness. In all three churches the Word of truth is preached in simplicity and power; all unite as brethren and Christians, and great is the blessedness and peace of Overdale, now that the dark tempestuous clouds of error have rolled away, and the Sun of righteousness shines upon its people, even as the earthly sun shines upon its woods, and its breezy downs, and upon its glittering sea!

May God grant us all "the knowledge of *His Truth*, and in the world to come the life everlasting. Amen!"