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Volume 3 (of 3), by Robert Williams Buchanan**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FOXGLOVE MANOR: A NOVEL, VOLUME 3 (OF 3) ***

FOXGLOVE MANOR

A Novel

By Robert W. Buchanan

In Three Volumes, Vol. III.

**London
Chatto And Windos, Piccadilly
1884**

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FOXGLOVE MANOR.

CHAPTER XXVIII. A MONKISH TALE (FROM THE NOTE-BOOK).

Sunday, Sept. 19. My wife has gone to church.

I can hear the bells ringing in the distance as I write... Now they cease, and at this very moment the clergyman, "snowy-banded, delicate-handed," is ascending the pulpit stairs, amid the reverent hush of his congregation.

Though several times of late she has suggested that a little church-going would do me good, Ellen did not ask me to accompany her on this occasion; indeed, I thought at first that she was going to stay at home herself. At breakfast she was irritable and absent-minded, and she did not dress or order the carriage until the last moment. There was evidently a hard struggle in her mind whether she should go to church or not. Ultimately, she decided to go.

Out of this and other unpleasant indications, I have made a discovery. My wife, despite her purity, despite her lofty sense of honour, is *jealous* of the clergyman.

The day after my fishing expedition, I quietly told her what I had seen in the woodland. It was not without due deliberation that I determined to do so. One portion of the truth, however, I carefully concealed: namely, the references made by the lovers to herself. For the same reason, I showed no sign of personal suspicion, but treated the affair lightly, as a thing of indifference.

I began the conversation in this way, while beating the shell of my second egg at breakfast—

"By the way, my dear Nell, I have made a discovery."

She looked up and smiled unsuspectingly. "Something terrible, I suppose; like Dr. Dupré's elixir?"

"Oh dear no, nothing nearly so scientific; a mere social discovery, my dear. I have found out that I was right; that if your pet parson is not married, he ought to be."

I saw her change colour; but, bending her head over her teacup, she forced a laugh.

"What nonsense you're talking!"

"Don't call it nonsense till you hear my story. It will interest you, being quite piscatorial and idyllic. Conceive to yourself, first, the primaeval woodland; then two figures, a nymph in a frock and a satyr in a clerical coat. The nymph, your friend Miss Dove; the satyr, your other friend, Mr. Santley. She was crying; he consoling. I heard their conversation; I saw them quarrel, make it up, embrace, kiss, and disappear. I think you will agree with me that so pretty a pastoral should have, in a moral country, but one sequel—marriage."

How white and strange she seemed! How nervously she fought with her agitation!

"I don't believe a word of what you say!" she cried. "You saw all this, but how?"

I told her how, and she uttered a cry of virtuous indignation.

"It is shameful!" she exclaimed. "I will never speak to him again—never!"

"On the contrary, I think you *should* speak to him, and, like a true matchmaker, produce the *dénouement*. You need not tell him that I played Peeping Tom; but, without doing so, you can act on the information I have given you. After all, if he really loves the girl—"

"But he does *not* love her!"

She paused, trembling and flushing, conscious of her blunder.

"Then is he a greater scoundrel than even I suspected!"

"There must be some mistake. I am sure Mr. Santley would do nothing dishonourable. As to marrying, his ideas are those of the High Church. He does not think that a priest has any right to marry."

I looked at her in amazement. After what I had told her, could she possibly be attempting to justify him? If so, the case was worse than I had foreseen, and her moral sense had already been effectually poisoned. She continued rapidly and eagerly, as if contending in argument with her own thoughts.

"A clergyman's position is very difficult. If he is unmarried, as a true priest should be, he is persecuted by all the marriageable girls of his parish. His slightest attentions are misconstrued, his most innocent acts exaggerated; and if he shows a friendly interest in any young person, he is sure to be misunderstood. I have no doubt, after all, that what you saw could be easily explained; and that, in any case, Miss Dove is the person really to blame."

I was right, then: justification, and '—jealousy.

"You forget," I answered quickly, "that I heard the whole conversation. Besides, though the language of words may be distorted, that of kisses and embraces is unmistakable."

"He did not kiss her; he did not embrace her! I will never believe it."

"Then, you simply assume that I am stating an untruth?"

"I know how glad you are," she cried passionately, "to put this slur upon him."

With some difficulty I mastered my indignation. Sick of the discussion, I rose and prepared to leave the room; but before leaving I spoke, with cold decision, to the following effect:—

"I have told you precisely what I saw; it is for you to impeach my motives, if you please, and to think, in your infatuation, that I dislike Mr. Santley because of the cloth he wears. If you doubt me, question the girl; you can possibly get the truth from her. In any case, remember that, from this moment, I forbid you to entertain that man in my house."

So I left her, leaving my words to work.

The next day, i.e. yesterday, Santley called. She did not see him, but sent out a message that she was engaged. I saw him creeping, pale and crestfallen, past my laboratory door.

Since the conversation recorded above, Ellen and I have not alluded to the subject; indeed, we have seen little of each other, and spoken still less. Possibly our temporary estrangement might account for the fixed pallor, the cold look of sorrow and reproach, on my wife's face; but I am inclined to fear otherwise. At all events, the thing had gone so far, and I knew so much, that the overtures to reconciliation could not come from me. I had to conquer my struggling tenderness, and watch.

The great struggle came this morning. I observed it with sickening suspense. Had honest indignation conquered, had Ellen held to her first decision of not returning into that man's church, I think I should have taken her into my arms and begged her pardon for suspecting her. But no! she has gone; not, I am sure, to pray. Surely I am a model husband, to sit so tamely here!

Sunday Evening.—She drove home immediately after morning service, and

I saw by the expression of her face that she was greatly agitated. We lunched in silence, and afterwards she took a volume of sermons and sat reading on the terrace. Later on in the afternoon, while I sat writing alone, she came in behind me, and before I could speak, put her arms around my neck and kissed me.

"Forgive me," she cried, with her beautiful eyes full of tears. "Oh, George, I am so unhappy! I cannot bear to quarrel."

And she knelt by my side, looking pitifully up into my face.

I returned her kiss, and for the time being, in her soft embrace, forgot my suspicions. It was a happy hour! Neither of us spoke of the subject of our disagreement.

Tuesday.—After a temporary calm, the storm has again broken, and the weather is still charged with thunder. Let me try to record calmly what has taken place.

This afternoon, as I sat at work, Baptisto entered quietly.

"I think you are wanted, senor; there is some one here."

"What do you mean? Who is it?"

"The clergyman, senor. He is with my lady."

I started angrily; then, conquering myself, I demanded—

"Did they send you for me?"

"No, senor," replied Baptisto, with his mysterious look; "but I thought you would like to know."

I could have struck the fellow, for I saw that he had been playing the spy. Nevertheless, I remembered that I had forbidden Ellen to entertain Santley again at the Manor, and I felt my indignation rapidly rising at the thought of her disobedience. Angry and humiliated, I rose to my feet.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"In the drawing-room, senor."

I at once went thither, uncertain what to say or do; for I was determined, if possible, not to make a scene. Now, the great drawing-rooms of the Manor house consist of two old-fashioned apartments, communicating with a curtained archway, where there was once a folding-door. The inner room opens on a lobby communicating with the house; the outer opens on the terrace. I approached from within, and finding the door open, entered softly. No one was visible; but I heard voices whispering in the outer room.

After a moment's hesitation, I sat down in an armchair, and took up a book from the table. My back was to the curtained archway, and facing me was a large mirror, in which the archway and the dimly lighted, rose-coloured chamber beyond were clearly reflected.

The whispering continued.

I could bear the suspense no longer, and was about to rise and make my presence known, when the voices were raised, and I heard the clergyman exclaim—

"Ellen, for God's sake! I can explain everything!"

Ellen! My satyr was familiar. I crouched in my armchair, listening, as my wife replied—

"Why should you explain to me? I have no wish to listen, Mr. Santley. Only I am shocked and indignant at what I have heard."

"But there is not one word of truth in it. Who is your informant? I demand to know his name."

I strained my ears in suspense, wondering how she would reply, for I already guessed the bearings of the conversation. To my surprise, she replied parabolically—

"It is the common talk of the place."

"Then it is a simple scandal!"

"You are not engaged to Miss Dove?"

"Certainly not. She herself can tell you that there is nothing of the kind between us. I will admit freely that she has a great esteem for me—that, in short, she is attached to me; and that possibly, if I desired it, she would marry me."

There was a silence. Then I heard Ellen say, quietly and firmly—

"Will you answer me a question?"

"Certainly."

"Did you meet Miss Dove alone, last Thursday?"

I felt that her eyes were fixed upon his face as she put the question, and I guessed how it startled and amazed him; but he was unabashed, and replied instantly—

"Where?"

She waited a moment, like one pausing to give the *coup de grâce*, before she said—"Close to the river-side, among Lord ——s plantations."

Greatly to my astonishment, for I naturally expected a denial, the answer came at once, in a clear, decided voice. "Yes, I did meet her."

I could imagine, though I could not see, my wife's start of virtuous indignation. Almost instantly, I saw her image in the mirror before me, as she rapidly crossed the room beyond; then he followed, black-suited, like the devil. In the dim distance of the mirror, I now saw their two figures reflected, floating faintly in the rose-coloured light beyond the curtains. Their backs were turned to me, their faces were looking out upon the terrace.

"I have nothing to conceal," he continued passionately. "Some enemy has been spying upon me; but I repeat, I have nothing to conceal. Only, I wished to spare Miss Dove. Now that you have made reserve impossible, I will admit, frankly, that she has misconstrued certain harmless attentions, and that, on the day you mention, she came upon me by accident, and reproached me for my coldness, my want of sympathy. She even went further, and asked me to marry her. I tell you this in sacred confidence, for I have no right to inform others of the young lady's indiscretion."

"Was that all that passed?"

"All, I assure you."

Ellen gave a peculiar laugh, the sound of which I did not like at all. There is nothing more significant than a woman's light laugh—nothing, sometimes, more horrible.

"She was reproachful, and you—consoled her?"

"Consoled her?"

"As a true lover should,—with kisses and embraces? You see, I know everything!"

"It is a calumny," cried the clergyman, with seeming indignation. "True, I was gentle with her, for I felt very sorry. I reasoned and remonstrated with the foolish child: after all, she is a child only. Oh, Ellen, how could you listen to such an accusation? You who know that there is but one woman in the world who has my love, my life's devotion, and that *you* are that woman."

Did my eyes deceive me, or had he stretched out an arm to embrace her? No, I was right!

"Take away your arm!" she cried. "I will not suffer it!"

She did suffer it, notwithstanding.

"Ellen! dearest Ellen!"

He drew her towards him, and I thought she was going to yield to his embrace; but she shook herself free, and in a moment, before he knew her purpose, had opened the window and glided out upon the terrace. He followed her with a cry, and so—my mirror was empty. I rose to my feet, sick and dazed with what I had seen, and prepared to follow.

What should I do? Should I at once avow my knowledge of what had taken place, and seize my satyr by the throat; or, smiting him in the face, fling him from my door? Should I stand by tamely, and see my hearth violated, my wife tempted, by a common snake of the parish? If I had been less angry with my wife herself, I am sure I should have taken the violent course. But I saw now, to my horror, that she was neither adamant nor marble. She had allowed him to know his evil power upon her, and to see that the knowledge of his power over another woman, so far from shocking and repulsing her, had increased the fascination. If I denounced him openly, it would be to admit his rivalry, and, by inference, to complete her degradation.

Fortunately, I have been accustomed, from youth upward, to control my strongest feelings, whether of tenderness or anger; and though I am capable enough of strong passion, I have generally the power to disguise it. In the present emergency, I found my habit of self-restraint stand me in good stead. I advanced into the outer room. By the time I had reached it, I was calm and cool to all outward appearances.

Quite quietly, I approached the window, and gazed out upon the terrace. There they stood, he talking eagerly, she with face averted from him, and looking my way. She saw me in a moment, and started in agitation. I nodded grimly, and opening the folding windows, looked out. Then, all at once, I drew back apologetically.

"Ah, there you are!" I said to my wife. "I was looking for you."

She stepped over to the window, looking strangely pale and scared. I had not even looked at, much less addressed, her companion; but he approached, with a ghastly smile.

"I'm afraid I interrupt you," I continued. "Some religious business, I suppose? Shall I retire till it is settled?" He looked at me doubtfully; but Ellen immediately replied—

"Do not go away. Mr. Santley is just leaving."

Still preserving my *sang froid*, I sat down in one of the garden seats on the terrace, and opened the book which I had lifted at random from the drawing-room table. Curiously enough, it was a work which is rather a favourite of mine, one of Sebastiano's "Tales in Verse." I knew the thing, particularly the passage on which the page had opened, and which, strange to say, had a certain reference to the present situation.

"Pray proceed with your talk," I said. "I have something here to amuse me, till you have done."

So I sat reading, or pretending to read. I did not even glance up, but I felt that they were looking uneasily at one another. There was a long pause. At last I lifted my eyes.

"I'm sure I'm in the way," I said; and rose as if to go.

"No, no!" cried Ellen, more and more uneasy at my manner, which I'm afraid was ominous. "We were only discussing some foolish village matters, on which Mr. Santley wished to have my advice."

"Very well," I replied. Then, turning to Santley, I inquired quietly, "Do you read Spanish?"

He shook his head.

"That's a pity," I continued. "Otherwise, you might have been much amused by this little work, written by a priest like yourself, though not quite of your persuasion."

"Is it a tale?" asked Ellen, bending over me.

"Yes; one of old Sebastiano's 'Tales in Verse.' Its author, I may tell you, was a Castilian monk, who abandoned the Church for the heretical pursuit of story-writing, and took 'Sebastiano' as a pseudonym. The story I am reading here is considered, by many, his masterpiece. The verse is assonantic throughout, the subject—"

Here my satyr could not forbear a gesture of impatience and irritation.

"I'm afraid I bore you, sir," I said, smiling. "Your tastes are not literary, I fear?"

"I seldom read fiction," he answered. "I consider it too trivial, and a waste of time."

"Do you really think so? I grant you, if the work is not of a truly moral nature, like the present. As I was going to tell you, the subject of this story, or tragedy in narrative, is edifying in the extreme. There was once in Castile a parish priest, an exceedingly handsome fellow, who, in a moment of impulse, fell deeply in love with a Spanish lady."

There was no need to look up now. I felt that they were both fascinated, not knowing what was to come. Ellen's hand was on my chair, which vibrated with the violent beating of her heart.

"Very prettily does Sebastiano describe the course of this amour. The priest's first struggles to resist temptation, his frequent fastings and spiritual purgings, his growing desperation, his final yielding to the spell. To be brief, he at last spoke to her, avowed his passion, and flung himself, despairing and imploring, at her feet."

"And she?" asked Ellen, in a voice so low that I scarcely heard her.

"Oh, the story says but little of her answer, though doubtless it was to the purpose, as the sequel proves. They understood one another, and might doubtless have been happy, but for one unfortunate impediment, which both had forgotten. The lady had—a *husband!*"

Ah, that frightened, beating heart! how it leapt and struggled, as the little hand still clutched my chair! I just glanced up, and meeting my gaze, she made an appealing gesture; for she began to understand. As for him, he stood pale and sullen, scowling at me with his seraphic face, and as yet imperfectly comprehending.

"A husband!" I repeated, turning over a leaf. "He, poor devil, was an alchemist, a dreary, doting seeker for the elixir of immortal life, and they thought him—blind. In this they were mistaken. As the poor flat flounder on the bottom of the sea, lying half buried and invisible in the sand and mud, still with its watery jelly of an eye surveys the liquid welkin overhead, so he, our alchemist, was marking much in silence. Well, sir, the thing grew, till at last, out of that obscure laboratory where the dreamer toiled there came a thunderbolt. One fine morning the lady was found—dead!"

"Dead!"

They both echoed the word involuntarily.

"Yes; but the curious part of the affair has yet to be told. They found her lying, as if sleeping, in her bed; so sweet, so quiet, so peaceful, no one in the world would have dreamed that she had been destroyed by a malignant poison. Such, however, was the case."

Santley buttoned his coat, and moved nervously towards the door.

"A horrible story!" he said. "I detest these tales of violence and murder. Besides, though I am not a Roman Catholic, I look upon such rubbish as a calumny upon the Christian Church."

I smiled.

"The Church's history, I am afraid, offers endless corroborations."

"I do not believe it; and I hold that the Church should be saved from such attacks."

"Pardon me," I persisted; while Ellen's hand was softly laid upon my shoulder, as if beseeching me to cease, "the Church may be sacred, but so, you will admit, is the marriage tie. For myself, I am old-fashioned enough to sympathize with that poor alchemist, and applaud his rough-and-ready mode of vengeance."

"Then you justify a cowardly murder?" he returned, trembling violently. "But, there, I must really go."

"Pardon me, I don't call it murder at all."

"Not murder?" he ejaculated.

"No, sir; righteous vengeance. Were such a state of things possible *now*—though, of course, wives are now all pure, and priests all immaculate—I should recommend the same remedy. What, *must* you go? Well, good

day; and pray excuse a scholar's warmth. Actually, as I discussed that old monkish nonsense, I almost thought it *real*."

He forced a feeble laugh, and then, with one long look at my wife, and a murmured "Good afternoon" to us both, retreated through the drawing-room doors. I sat still, as if intent on my book.

The moment he had gone, Ellen caught me wildly by the arm.

"George! look at me—speak to me!"

"Well?" I said, looking up quietly.

"What does it mean? Why did you tell that wild tale? You did not do it without a purpose."

"Certainly not."

She stood pale as death, clasping her hands together.

"You did not think—you could not, dare not—that——"

"That what, pray?" I demanded coldly, seeing that she paused.

"That you suspect—that you can believe—that——"

She paused again; then she added pleadingly—

"Oh, George, you would never do me such a wrong!"

"I have done you no wrong," I replied. "You, on the other hand, have disobeyed me?"

"How?"

"I forbade you to entertain that man in my house."

"He came unexpectedly. Indeed, indeed, I wish he had not come."

She looked so pretty and so despairing, that I should have straightway forgiven her, had I not suddenly called to mind the conversation in the drawingroom. Women are strange creatures.

At that moment, I am certain she fervently believed that she was innocent, and I cruel. And yet.... I knew, by her humility and by her sorrow, that she partially reproached herself for having awakened my anger.

"Let there be an end to this," I said. "You must never speak to that man again."

"Never speak to him!" she repeated imploringly. "But he is our clergyman, and if I break with him there will be a scandal. Indeed, George, he is not as bad as you think him. He is very earnest and impetuous, but he is good and noble."

"What! do you defend him?"

She did not reply.

"You must choose between him and me; between the man whom you know to be a hypocrite, and the man who is your husband. If he comes here again, I shall deal with him in my own fashion; remember that! I spared him to-day, because I thought him too contemptible for any kind of violence. But I know his character, and you know it; that is enough. I shall not warn you again."

With these words, I walked to my den. There, once alone, I gave way to my overmastering agitation. I found myself trembling like a leaf; looking in a mirror, I saw that I was pale as a ghost.

An hour passed thus. Then I heard a knock at the door.

Enter Baptisto.

"Well, what do you want?" I cried, angrily enough.

Before I knew it he was on his knees, seizing and kissing my hand.

"Senor, I know everything!" he cried. "I have known it all along. That was why I remained at home when you were away—to watch, to play the spy. Senor, give me leave! Let me avenge you!"

I shook him off with an oath, for I hated the fellow's sympathy.

"You fool," I said, "I want no one to play the spy for me. Stop, though! What do you mean? What would you like to do?"

In a moment he had sprung to his feet, and flashed before my eyes one of those long knives that Spaniards carry. His eyes flashed with homicidal fire.

"I would plunge this into his heart!"

I could not help laughing,—a little furiously.

"Put up that knife, you idiot! Put it up, I say! This is England, not Spain, and here we manage matters very differently. And now, let me have no more of this nonsense. Be good enough to go about your business."

He yielded almost instantly to my old mastery over him, and, with a respectful bow, withdrew. So ended the curious events of the day. I have set them down in their order as they occurred. I wonder if this is the last act of my little domestic drama? If not, what is to happen next? Well, we shall soon see.

CHAPTER XXIX. HUSH-MONEY.

Mrs. Haldane had not exaggerated when, in her cross-examination of the vicar, she had described his intimate friendship to Miss Dove as the common talk of the parish. There beats about the life of an English clergyman a light as fierce, in its small way, as that other light which, according to the poet, =

“... beats about the throne,
And blackens every blot!”=

Charles Santley was very much mistaken if he imagined that his doings altogether escaped scandal. As usual, however, the darkest suspicions and ugliest innuendoes were reserved for the lady; and before very long Edith Dove was the subject of as pretty a piece of scandal as ever exercised the gossips of even an English village.

Now, the thing was a long time in the air before it reached the ears of the person most concerned. Tongues wagged, fingers pointed, all the machinery of gossip was set in motion for months before poor Edith had any suspicion whatever. Gradually, however, there came upon her the consciousness of a certain social change. Several families with which she had been on intimate terms showed, by signs unmistakable, their desire to avoid her visits, and their determination not to return them. One virtuous spinster, on whom she had expended a large amount of sympathy, not to speak of tea and sugar, openly cut her one morning at the post-office; and even the paupers of the village showed in their bearing a certain lessening of that servility which, in the mind of a properly constituted British pauper, indicates respect. Things were becoming ominous, when, late one evening, her aunt boldly broached the subject.

Edith had taken her hat and cloak, and was going out, when the old lady spoke.

“Where are you going so late? I hope—not down to the Vicarage?” Edith turned in astonishment.

“Yes, I am going there,” she replied.

“Then listen to my advice: take off your things and stay at home.”

The tone was so decided, the manner so peculiar, that Edith was startled in spite of herself. Before she could make any remark, her aunt continued—

“Sit down and listen to me. I mean to talk to you, for no one has a better right; and if I can put a stop to your folly, I will. Do you know the whole place is talking of you—that it has been talking of you for months? Yes, Edith, it is the truth; and I am bound to say you yourself are the very person to blame.”

Almost mechanically, Edith took off her hat and threw it on the table. Then she looked eagerly at her aunt.

“What do they say about me?” she cried.

“They say you are making a fool of yourself; but that is not all. They say worse—horrible things. Of course I know they are untrue, for you were always a good girl; but you are sometimes so indiscreet. When a young girl is always in the company of a young man, even a clergyman, and nothing comes of it, people will talk. Take my advice, dear, and put an end to it at once!”

Edith smiled—a curious, far-off, bitter smile. She was not surprised at her aunts warning; for she had expected it a long time, and had been rather surprised that it had not come before.

“Put an end to what?” she said quietly. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know well enough, Edith.”

“Indeed I do not. If people talk, that is their affair; but I shall do as I please.”

And she took up her hat again, as if to go.

“Edith, I insist! You shall *not* go out to-night. It is shameful for Mr. Santley to encourage you! If you only knew how people talk! You are not engaged to Mr. Santley, and I tell you it is a scandal!”

Edith flushed nervously, as she replied:—

“There is no scandal, aunt! Mr. Santley—”

“I have no patience with him. In a minister of the gospel, it is disgraceful.”

“What is disgraceful?”

“The encouragement he gives you, when he knows he has no intention of marrying you.”

“How do you know that?” said Edith again, with that far-off curious smile.

“He has not even proposed; you are not engaged? If you were, it would be different.”

With a quiet impulse of tenderness, Edith bent over her aunt and kissed her. The old lady looked up in surprise, and saw that her niece’s eyes were full of tears.

“Edith, what is it? What do you mean?”

“That we have been engaged a long time.”

“And you did not tell me?”

“He did not want it known, and even now it is a secret. You must promise to tell no one.”

“But why? There is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“It is his wish,” said the girl, gently.

Then kissing her aunt again, and leaving her much relieved in mind, she went away, strolling quietly in the direction of the Vicarage. As she walked, her tears continued to fall, and her face was very sorrowful; for there lay upon her spirit a heavy shadow of terror and distrust. With how different an emotion had she, only a year before, flown to meet the man she loved! How eagerly and gladly, *then*, he had awaited her coming! And now? Alas, she did not even know if she would find him at all. Sometimes he seemed to avoid her, to be weary of her company. All was so changed, she reflected, since the Haldanes came-home to the Manor. He was no longer the same, and she herself was different. Would it ever end? Would she ever be happy again?

The shadows of night were falling as she walked through the lanes, with her eyes sadly fixed on the dim spire of the village church. Close to a plantation on the roadside, she encountered a woman and a man in conversation. She recognized the woman at a glance, as Sal Bexley, the black sheep of the parish, who got her living by singing-from one public-house to another; and she had passed by without a word, when a voice called her.

“Here, mistress!”

She turned, and encountered a pair of bold black eyes. Sal, the pariah, stood facing her, swinging her old

guitar and grinning mischievously.

"I'm afraid you're growing proud, mistress. You didn't seem to know me."

There was something sinister in the girl's manner. Edith drew aside, and would have passed on without any reply, but the other ran before her and blocked the way.

"No, you don't go like that. I want a word with thee, my fine lady. Ah, you may toss your bead, but you'd best bide a bit, and listen."

"What do you want? I cannot stay."

"No call to hurry," cried Sal, with a coarse laugh. "Thy man's out, and don't expect thee. Belike he's gone courting some one else. Ah, he's a rum chap, the minister, though he do set up for a saint."

Edith shuddered and shrank back.

"Go away," she said. "How dare you speak to me like that?"

"Dare? That's a good one! No, you shan't pass till I've done wi' thee." Edith was getting positively frightened, for the girl's manner was so rude and threatening, when she saw a tall figure approaching, and in a moment recognized the clergyman. He was close to them, and paused in astonishment at seeing the two together.

"Miss Dove! Is anything the matter? Why are you here, so late, and in such company?"

He paused, looking suspiciously at Sal, who laughed impudently.

"I was passing by, and she stopped me. Do send her away!"

"Send me away?" cried the pariah. "I'll come when I please, and I'll go when I please. I'm as good as she." Mr. Santley stepped forward, and placed his hand on her arm.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were far away."

"So I were; but I've come back. Well?"

"Remember what I told you. I will not have my parish disgraced any longer by your conduct. I have warned you repeatedly before. Where are you staying?"

"Down by the river-side, master. I've joined the gipsies, d'ye see."

"Always an outcast," said Santley, with, a certain gloomy pity. "Will nothing reform you?"

"No, master," answered the girl, grinning. "I'm a bad lot."

"I'm afraid you are."

"But mind this," she continued, with some vehemence, "there's others, fine ladies too, as bad as me. Though I like a chap, and ain't afraid to own it, and though I gets my living anyhow, I'm no worse than my betters, master. You've no cause to bully *me*, so don't try it on, master. I can speak when I like, and I can hold my tongue when I like. Gi' me a guinea, and I'll hold my tongue."

She held out her brown hand, leering up into his face.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed. "I shall give you no money."

She looked round at Edith, who stood by trembling.

"Tell him he'd best, mistress—for *thy* sake! Come, it's worth a guinea! There's many a folk hereabouts would gi' five, to see what I saw t'other day, down to Omberley wood."

Edith started in a new terror, while her face flushed scarlet and her head swam round. Santley winced, but preserving his composure, looked fixedly and sternly at the outcast.

"You're a bold hussy," he said, between his set teeth, "as bold as bad. But take care! Do you know that if I only say one word, I can have you up before the magistrates and sent back to prison?"

"What for?" snarled the girl.

"For vagrancy, begging, and threatening a lady on the roadside!"

"A pretty lady. And I bean't begging, neither. Well, send me to prison, and when I'm up before the magistrates, I'll tell'em why you were down upon me. Come!"

Santley was about to reply angrily, when Edith interposed. Trembling and almost fainting, she had taken out her purse.

"Here is some money," she cried; "give it to her and let her go!"

"She does not deserve a farthing," exclaimed Santley. "Still, if you wish it——"

"Yes, yes! I—I am sorry for her."

Santley opened the purse, and took out a sovereign.

"If I give you this, will you promise to go out of the parish?"

"Maybe."

"And to conduct yourself properly—to turn over a new leaf?"

Sal grinned viciously from ear to ear.

"I take example by you, master, and your young lady there! Leastways, if I *do* go a-larking I'll be like you gentry, and say naught about it. There, gi' me the guinea! Stop, though, make it two, and I'll go away out o' Omberley this very night."

Santley and Edith rapidly exchanged a look, and a second piece of gold was at once added to the first. Then, after giving Sal a few words of solemn warning, in his priestly character, Santley walked away with Edith. The pariah girl watched them until they disappeared; then, with a low laugh, she rejoined her companion, a one-eyed and middle-aged gipsy, who, during the preceding scene, had phlegmatically stretched himself on his back, along the roadside.

CHAPTER XXX. "AND LO! WITHIN HER, SOMETHING LEAPT!"

Santley and Edith walked along for some time without a word. At last, after looking round nervously to see that they were not observed or followed, the clergyman broke the silence.—:

"It is horrible! It is insufferable!" he cried. "I shall be ruined by your indiscretion."

She looked at him in amazement. It was too dark to see his face, but his whole frame, as well as his voice, trembled with anger.

"My indiscretion!" she echoed.

"Yes."

"But I have done nothing."

"I found you talking to that creature, and it is evident that she knows our secret. I shall be ruined through you. What have you told her?"

"Nothing. I met her by accident, and she spoke to me; that is all."

There was a pause. Then Santley stopped short, saying in a whisper—

"Go home now. After to-day we must not be seen together."

But she clung to his arm, weeping.

"Charles, for Gods sake, do not be so unkind!"

"I am not unkind," he said; "but I am thinking of your good name, as well as of my own reputation. What that woman knows others must know. It will be the talk of the place. Edith, think of it. We shall both be lost. Go home, I entreat you."

"Charles, listen to me!" exclaimed the weeping girl. "If there is any scandal it will kill me. But there need to be none. You have only to keep your word, as you have promised, and then——"

"What? and marry you?"

"Yes."

"I cannot—at least, not yet."

"Why not? Oh, Charles, have I not been patient? There is nothing but your own will to come between us. Make me your wife, as you have promised, before it is too late. Even my aunt begins to suspect something. My life is miserable—a daily falsehood. I have loved you next to God. For your sake I have even forgotten Him. I thought there was no sin; you yourself told me there was no sin—that we were man and wife in God's sight.. But now I am terrified. I cannot sleep, I cannot pray. Sometimes I feel as if God had cast me out. And you——"

She ceased, choked with tears, and, placing her head upon his shoulder, sobbed wildly. He shrank from her touch, and sought to disengage himself, gazing round on every side and searching the darkness; in dread of being watched.

"Control yourself. If we should be seen!"

But she did not seem to hear, and his anger increased in proportion to her terror.

"Do you want to compromise me?" he cried. "I begin to think you have no discretion, no respect for yourself—I hate these scenes. They make me wish that we had never met."

"If I thought you wished that from your heart," she sobbed, "I would not live another day."

"There, again. You are so unreasonable, so violent. When I attempt to reason, you talk of suicide or some such mad thing. If you really loved me, as you say, you would be willing to make some sacrifice for my sake. But no; you have only one cry—marriage, marriage!—till I am sick of the very word. Cease crying. Dry your eyes, and listen to me. Go home tonight, and I will think it over. Yes, I will do what I can—anything, rather than be so tormented."

She obeyed him passively, and tried to stifle her deep sorrow. Child as she was, and loving him as she did, she could not bear his words of blame; and her soul shuddered at the strange tones of the voice that had once been so kind. For it was as she had said. She had made an idol of this man, next to God. She had offered up to him, at his passionate request, her young life, her purity of heart, her very soul. He had been God's voice and very presence to her; ah! so beautiful! She had been content to lie at his feet, to obey him like a slave, to accept his will as law, even when the law seemed evil. And now he was so changed. Not base—ah! no, she could not bear to think him base; not base—still good, but cruel. Was she losing him? Was she destined to lose him for ever, and, with him, surely her immortal soul?

"Good night," she moaned. "I will go home."

And she held up her face for his kiss; then, as he kissed her, she yielded again to her emotion, and clung, wildly crying, about his neck.

"Oh, Charles, be true to me! I have no one in the world but you."

With that fond appeal she left him, turning her tearful face homeward. On reaching the cottage she found the door ajar, stole quietly up to her room, and locked herself in. A few minutes afterwards her aunt knocked.

"Are you there, Edith? Supper is ready."

"I have a headache, and am going to bed," she replied, stifling her sobs.

"May I not come in?" said the old lady. "I want to speak to you."

"Not to-night. I am so tired."

She heard the feeble feet descending the stairs, and again resigned herself to sorrow. Presently, when she had grown a little calmer, she arose, lit a candle, and proceeded to undress. The moon, which had newly risen, shone through the cottage window, with its white blinds, and the faint rays, creeping in, mingled with the yellow candle-light. The room was like a white rose, all pale and pure; and the girl herself, when she was undressed and clad in her night-dress, seemed the purest thing there. But the night-dress felt like a shroud, and she felt ready for the grave.

She knelt by the bed to say her prayers.

How long she remained on her knees she knew not. While her lips repeated, half aloud, the prayers she had learned as a child, and those which, in later years, she had framed to include the name of the man she loved, her tears still fell, and with her long hair streaming over her shoulders, and her little hands clasped together, she sobbed and sobbed. The moonlight crept further into the room, and touched her like a silver hand—not tenderly, not pityingly; 'nay, it might have been the very hand of the Madonna herself, bidding her arise to face her fate.

She arose shivering; and at that very instant there came to her a warning, an omen, full of nameless terror. It seemed to her as if faces were flashing before her eyes, voices shrieking in her ears; her heart leapt, her head went round, and at the same moment she felt her whole being miraculously thrilled by the quickening of a new life within her own.

With a loud moan, she fainted away upon the floor.

When she returned to consciousness, she was lying, nearly naked, by the bedside, and the moonlight was flooding the little room. She arose, dazed, stupefied, and appalled. Her limbs shook beneath her, and she had to clutch the bedstead for support. Then she tottered to the dressing-table, and holding the candle, looked into the mirror.

Reflected there was a face of ghastly whiteness, with two great despairing eyes, wildly gazing into her own.

CHAPTER XXXI. A LAST APPEAL.

The night had passed away, and the chilly light of dawn creeping into Edith's room, found her quietly sleeping. During that night, when the full horror of her situation had flashed for the first time upon her, she had passed through hours of agony similar to those which have turned pretty brown hair grey; then, overcome by a sense of thorough mental exhaustion, she had laid her head upon the pillow and slept.

She slept long and soundly.

When she opened her eyes she saw that it was broad daylight; indeed, the day was well spent, for her aunt, after tapping gently at her door and receiving no reply, had determined not to disturb her rest.

Her first feeling on opening her eyes was one of pleasure, such pleasure as is felt by a young matron, when the knowledge of approaching maternity first dawns upon her; but this feeling was only momentary, and was succeeded in this case by one of intense mental pain.

She lay for a time, thinking of the past, and trying to penetrate the future. She recalled her interviews with Santley; the last interview which had taken place only the night before. She remembered with pleasure the promise he had made, and she tried to think that all would yet be well. Yes, even when he knew nothing, he had yielded to her solicitations; and as soon as he *knew*—for of course at their next meeting she must tell him—he would not hesitate for a single day. He had a double duty now: not only had he to save her reputation, he had to think of the future of his child. He had said that he would think it over; that the next day, this very day, she should hear from him. He would appoint a meeting, then when she saw him, if he still hesitated, she would tell him, and he would hesitate no longer.

All that day Edith remained in the house, pale, silent, but expectant. At every sound she started and looked anxiously towards the door; but Mr. Santley made no sign. At last, disappointed and heart-broken, she went up to bed.

Several days passed thus. Edith fearing to cross the threshold, shrinking in horror at the thought of meeting any of her fellow-creatures, moved about the house in pale, sad silence; expectant sometimes, at others crying her heart out in sickening despair. The suspense was terrible; and terrible too was the thought of having to bear her secret sorrow entirely alone. If she could only see him, tell him, feel his passionate kiss, and hear his whispered words of comfort, her trouble, she thought, would be lightened by one half. Never had she needed him so much; yet never, she thought, had she seemed so utterly alone.

And with this hopeless dread upon her, this sense of mental agony which seemed to be wearing her very life away, she waited and waited for the words which never came.

At last she felt she could wait no longer. Since it was evident he did not intend to send to her, she determined to send to him. So she wrote—

"For Heaven's sake come to me. I must see you at once. Charles, for both! our sakes, do not neglect my request:—

"Edith."

It was a mad letter to write, and at another time Edith would not have written it; but now her trouble seemed to be turning her brain. She determined to trust it to no hands but her own; so, having written and sealed it, she put on her hat and cloak to take it to the post.

It was the first time she had been out! since that night when she had fainted: upon her bedroom floor, and nothing but a sense of utter desperation would have forced her from the house even now. For she felt as if her secret was known to all the world; that curious eyes looked questioningly into hers, and honest faces turned from her; and that by one and all she was left to walk along her troubled path alone.

It was not late in the afternoon, but the time for long bright evenings had long since passed away. Though the church clock had not long struck five, darkness was coming on, and a keen north wind was blowing. Edith, who was thickly veiled and well wrapped up in a large fur cloak, walked quickly as if to keep herself warm. She reached the village, slipped her letter into the post, then hurriedly turned to retrace her steps homewards. She had accomplished about half the distance, and was walking very hurriedly, when suddenly she stopped, and her heart gave a great bound. There in the road, quietly walking towards her, was Mr. Santley.

Edith stood for a moment, feeling almost suffocated through the quick beating of her heart; then, with the wild impetuosity of a child, she ran forward and, seizing his hand, exclaimed—

“Oh, I am glad, so very, very glad that I have met you! Oh, Charles! Charles! how could you leave me so long alone?”

Santley, utterly taken aback by this wild exhibition of feeling, stared at the girl in calm amazement; then he said impatiently, shaking her hands away—

“Edith, how many more times am I to tell you that these violent scenes of yours will be my ruin!”

But this time Edith was not to be cowed. She said—

“I cannot help it, Charles. You bring it on yourself by breaking every promise that you make to me.”

“Every promise? What promise? What have I done now?”

Edith looked up at him, her tearful eyes full of amazement as she said—

“Do you not remember? Have you really forgotten, dear, the last time we were together I asked you to do me justice—to reward my long patience by making me your wife? You said, ‘I will think of it. Yes, I think I will do as you wish, and I will let you know tomorrow.’ Well, Charles, to-morrow never came. I waited and waited, and you never sent a word. At last I could wait no longer. I have just been down to the village to post a letter, asking you to come to me.”

The clergyman’s brow darkened ominously, and a very angry light shone in his handsome eyes.

“It is ridiculous!” he exclaimed.

“Edith, you have no more reasoning power than a child. Why could you not have waited? A matter like that required serious deliberation; it could, not be decided in a day.”

In point of fact, he had never once deliberated over the matter at all. Having comfortably got rid of Edith that night, he had dismissed both the girl and the subject of their conversation entirely from his mind. It was not necessary to tell her this, however. So when, after waiting to hear more from him, she asked quietly, “Have you considered, Charles? Have you decided?” he answered—

“Yes. After thinking of it very deeply, and after having considered it from every point of view, I have decided it would be much better for us-both—to wait!”

She started, and the hand which lay on his arm trembled violently.

“No; you have not decided—that!” she exclaimed in a sort of gasp.

“I am not in the habit of lying to you, Edith.”

The girl clung piteously to his arm.

“No, no; I did not mean that,” she exclaimed. “But if you have decided so, you will change your mind, dear, will you not? I have been very patient. I have waited and waited, because you wished it, dear; but now it is different. I can wait no longer!”

“I tell you, Edith, it will be better—for us both!”

“Charles, Charles!” exclaimed the girl piteously, trembling more and more, “we have others besides ourselves to think of. We must not, dare not, injure an innocent life which never injured us. If you will not repair the wrong which you have done to me, you must think of—of—the child!”

She lowered her head as she spoke, and hid her face on his bosom.

There was silence. Then Santley spoke.

“Is this so, Edith?”

“Yes, dear; it is so!”

Again there was silence. Edith, trembling and almost happy, with her blushing face still hidden on his bosom, was waiting for him to bring her comfort, by gathering her fondly to his heart. But she waited in vain. The cold hands scarcely touched her shoulder; and the lovely eyes, gazing over her head, were fixed on vacancy. He was not thinking of her. Indeed, for the moment, he seemed scarcely conscious of her presence. As usual, he was thinking of himself, wondering what, in this extremely unpleasant emergency, it would be better for him to do. The news was not altogether startling to him. It was an event which, under existing circumstances, might reasonably have been expected; but hitherto it had not been of sufficient importance to trouble the clergyman’s thoughts. “Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof,” had hitherto been his motto; consequently, for the moment he felt as if a mine had suddenly sprung beneath his feet. So when Edith raised her head, and asked tearfully, “Are you very angry, Charles?” he answered coldly, almost irritably—

“You cannot expect me to be pleased, Edith. But there is no use in talking about that. What we must discuss is, what is the next thing to be done?”

What was best to be done? It seemed to Edith there was only one thing that could be done, and she said so, quietly and firmly. But Santley, frowning ominously, positively shook her in his irritable impatience.

“Always harping on the one string!” he exclaimed angrily; “and yet I tell you it is impossible.”

“But why is it impossible?”

"There are a dozen reasons why I cannot marry you just now."

"Then what am I to do? Am I to be publicly disgraced and brought to shame? Is my whole life to be ruined because of my love for you? Oh, it is cruel, and piteously unjust!"

"Edith, will you listen to reason? Will you have patience?"

"Will I have patience?" repeated the poor girl. "Have I not had patience? And my forbearance is well-nigh gone; I cannot bear it. Charles, think for a moment of what all this means to me, and have some pity."

"Edith, will you listen to me?"

"Yes. Speak; I will listen," she returned wearily, trying to stifle the sobs which almost choked her.

"If you will only control your violence and be guided by me, there need be no disgrace in the matter—either to you or to me. No one knows of this; no one need know. All you have to do is to remain quietly at home until a further concealment of the truth would be impossible; then you will leave home, as you have done before, to visit your friends. Once free of the village, you will go to a place which I shall have found for you; and, afterwards, return home."

She listened quietly while he spoke. When he ceased, she said nothing. Presently he said—

"Edith, have you been listening?"

"Yes; I have heard."

"And what do you think?"

"I think," returned the girl, in a voice of utter and hopeless despair—a voice which would have rent the heart of any man but this one, "I think, Charles, that your love for me, if it ever existed, is dead and buried. I think, nay, I am quite sure, that you have decided never to make me your wife."

"This is folly."

"Charles, it is the truth. If you had any love, any feeling for me, you would not, could not, speak as you have done to-night. If you meant to make me your wife, you would not subject me to such utter shame."

The clergyman entirely lost his self-command. He uttered an exclamation, and impatiently freed himself from her touch.

"Your shame," he said; "your disgrace—it is always that. But what of me? Have I no caste to lose? You talk of my love, but what of yours? If it exists, does it fill you with the least consideration for me? If you talk like this, you will make me wish that we had never met."

"How much better it would have been for me!"

"You think so? Thank God, it is not too late to part."

"But it is too late!" cried the girl, wildly. "I tell you, it is too late for me!"

"But it is not too late for me," said. Santley, between his set teeth.

"Charles, what do you mean? Answer me, for God's sake. Will you not make me your wife?"

"No."

Without a moment's hesitation, without a tremor of the voice, the pitiless-word was spoken. The girl staggered back, and clasped her hands to her head. It was as if a bullet had entered her brain. With a wild cry, she stretched forth her hands towards him, but he pushed her roughly away.

"You heard what I said. I mean it. You yourself have opened my eyes, and I see. If I can help you as—as your pastor, I will do so; but I cannot, I will not, make a sacrifice of my whole life. You always know where to find me. I repeat, I shall always be glad to give you such assistance as a clergyman can give."

CHAPTER XXXII. "FLIEH'! AUF'! HINAUS! IN'S WEITE LAND!"

For several days after that meeting, it seemed to Mrs. Russell that Edith was sickening for a fever. Edith herself was afraid that the terrible trial through which she had passed, was likely to have serious results. In her agony, the girl prayed to die; but for her there was no such mercy. At the end of a few days the ominous symptoms had passed away, and Edith was almost herself again. No doctor had been sent for. Mrs. Russell in her anxiety, was eager for him to see her niece; but Edith, driven almost distracted at the thought, had refused so-decidedly to see him that her Aunt had yielded, and had promised to put off sending to him for a few days. At the end of a few days Edith was better, so no message was sent, and the doctor never came.

So the time wore on. Winter had fairly set in, and everybody in the village was making preparations for Christmas, Mrs. Russell following the fashion of all the rest. From morning till night she was herself employed with the maid in the kitchen, chopping up mincemeat, and preparing various other dainties for Christmas fare. But her kindly face was troubled; she was always thinking of Edith, who was so sadly changed. The illness which had been so much dreaded, had passed away, it is true, but something almost as pitiable had been left in its place. The girl looked pale and worn, and old before her time. She never crossed the threshold, but sat at-home day after day, shivering over the fire, and when questioned by her aunt, she merely said—

"I don't feel very well. But don't notice me, aunt dear; go on with your preparations for Christmas. I like to think that you will make the house bright, for I am sure I shall be better, so much better, when Christmas

comes.”

Mrs. Russell, according to her usual custom, wanted to have company, since it was dull, she said, for two lonely: women to spend their Christmas together. So she proposed to her niece that she should write to Mrs. Hetherington, asking her to come, with her son, and eat her Christmas dinner at the cottage. But this idea was opposed by Edith as vehemently as the doctor’s visit had been; and in this case, as in the other, the aunt had yielded.

“Well, Edith, shall I ask them for the New Year?” she asked; and the girl, eagerly seizing the respite, had answered—

“Yes, aunt; for the New Year. For this once, you and I will spend our Christmas alone.”

So the time passed on, until one morning Edith opened her eyes, and lay listening to the Christmas bells.

“Peace on earth, good will towards men!”

That was the message they were chiming forth; that was the doctrine *he* must preach to-day. *He*, through whose cruelty she, who only last Christmas had been a happy, contented girl, now lay there a very sorrowful, weary woman.

Would he think of her when he stood in his pulpit, gazing into the enraptured faces of his flock, and preaching to them the gospel of faith and love? Would he think for one moment of this poor girl, whom he had made an outcast?

When mother and daughter sat at breakfast, Edith announced her determination to stay at home as usual; so Mrs. Russell went alone through the snow to hear the vicar’s sermon. She was sorry Edith was not with her, she said to herself again and again, as she sat in the church, listening in rapt attention to the benevolent gospel which Mr. Santley preached. He had never been known to have spoken so well before, and when he had finished, one half of the congregation had been reduced to tears.

Mrs. Russell told Edith all about it at dinner, and again expressed her sorrow that Edith had not been there to hear. To this the girl said nothing, but there passed over her face a look it was well the aunt did not see.

Thus the day passed—a day so full of joy to some, so full of sadness to others. Well, joy and sadness were ended. Mrs. Russell, following her usual custom, reached down the old family Bible, and read from it; then, taking her niece’s hand in hers, she knelt down to say a prayer. When they rose from their knees, Edith put her arms round her aunt’s neck, and kissed her fondly.

“Aunt dear,” she said, “I have often been a great trouble to you—I have often caused you disappointment and a deal of unnecessary pain; but tonight, on Christmas night, when we should all forgive and love one another, you will tell me, will you not, that you forgive me?”

With strange, wondering eyes, the old lady looked at her niece, so pale and sadly changed; then she kissed her, as she said—

“My darling, what there is to forgive I forgive. We cannot all do as we ought, Edith—we are poor creatures at the best of times—but you are a good girl, Edith; and perhaps, after all, things have shaped themselves for the best.”

The old lady, all unconscious of the real state of things, was thinking of the collapse of the pet scheme she had had of making Walter Hetherington her son.

“Dear aunt,” said Edith, fondly, “it was impossible.”

“Yes, yes; I know that now, my dear: and perhaps, after all, as I said before, it is for the best. There, don’t think of it again to-night, dear, but go to bed and rest!”

So Edith went to her room; and while the rest of the household were falling into blessed, tranquil slumber, she sat, dressed as she was, upon the bed and stared vacantly before her. She did not weep; her time for that, had passed away, even as the greatness of her sorrow grew. Her face was fixed and determined; her heart seemed to-have hardened to stone. For days and days she had waited for she knew not what; but a vague kind of hopefulness, had taken possession of her heart, and she had allowed it to remain. Perhaps, during those terrible days of agonizing suspense, she had thought that she might have received some word or sign from him. It had been a vague, almost a hopeless, hope; nevertheless, it had been that one spark which had kept life within her. But now that hope was gone: he had made no sign. And with the knowledge that she could no longer conceal her shame, came also the assurance that the man for whose sake she had sinned, had pitilessly abandoned her.

Edith, sitting at home by the fire that day, had thought over all this, while her aunt had been at church listening to the vicar’s touching sermon; and, after having forced herself to accept and acknowledge the truth, she had finally decided what she must do. She had decided; it but remained for her to act. She had determined to leave her home that night; to walk whither her wandering footsteps might lead her, and leave no trace behind.

So, having reached her room, she sat until the house was quiet; then she rose, and began to make her preparations for departure. She went to a drawer, and took from it what money still remained there—some bank-notes and gold—and stitched it firmly in a fold of her dress; then she put on her hat and warm winter cloak, and stood ready.

The village clocks were striking twelve.

She opened her door and listened. All was still; so she passed quietly onwards, after securely locking her bedroom door—passed noiselessly down the stairs, out of the house, and stood in, the darkness alone.

It was a bitter night. The snow lay thick all round her, and the cruel wind which blew seemed to turn the life-blood in her veins to ice.

Edith stood for a moment, chilled to the heart. She gave one look at the home she was leaving; then, as if fearing the strength of her own resolution, she turned and quickly pursued her way.

Whither she went she knew not, nor did she care to know; she only knew that every step was taking her further and further from her home, and from the man who had broken her heart. So she walked on quickly, with her cloak wrapped well about her, and bending her head to shelter her face from the bitter breath of the

wind.

She walked on and on, while the darkness gathered above her and the snow lay thick all around. Sometimes she sat down to rest, and then the thought came to her, that perhaps it would be better if she could end it all; if she could but lie down on the frozen earth, with the snow wrapped like a mantle around her, and sink to her eternal sleep. Henceforth there would be no more sorrow and no more pain—The idea having occurred to her, took possession of her mind, and held to it tenaciously. “Oh, if she could only die!”—close her eyes in the darkness, and feel for a moment that blessed peace which had passed from her for ever! Yes, Edith knew it would be better; though, with the instinct implanted in all human things, she shrank from death, she knew that his presence would be merciful. Henceforth, what would life be to her—an outcast, a thing to be spoken of with pitiless contempt, to be hidden for ever from the sight of all her fellow-men? Then she asked herself, “Would it be a sin to take the life which God had given her, and yield it up to Him?” No; she believed it would be no sin.

She walked on and on. Then once more, in the bitter anguish of her heart, she cried on God to be merciful to her. For, weary with travelling, cold and sick at heart, she cast herself down upon the snow, and sobbed—

“Oh, if I could only die!”

But death did not come. The snow closed all round her as she lay fainting and cold; but she did not die. Its icy touch, lying on her parched lips and brow, revived her. With wild, wandering eyes, she looked around.

The night was well-nigh spent, and the sky gave tokens of quickly approaching dawn. As every hour passed on the air grew colder, and now its touch chilled her to the very bone; she shivered, yet her brow, her lips, and hands were burning. She tried to think, but could not; even the events of the past were becoming strangely blurred and dim.

Where was she? She hardly knew; yet she must have wandered many, many miles from home, since she was footsore, and growing very faint for lack of food. She listened feverishly, and her ear caught the murmuring of a running stream.

She rose; but her limbs were feeble, for she staggered and fell again upon the ground. Then she cried from very weakness, and a sense of utter helplessness and loneliness.

After a while she rose again. How her hands and lips burned! Her brain was in wild confusion, and everything about her seemed fading into the mystery of a dream. Was it coming, that death for which she had prayed?

Suddenly a wild fear seized her. If she fell and lay here on the snow, she might be recognized by some passing traveller and taken home! That must not be. She must never be found, and then no one would ever know.

As this new terror seized her, she heard again the rippling of the stream. It seemed to lure her on. She thrust a handful of snow into her mouth, and staggered forward. The sweet sound of the running water came nearer and nearer. She stood now on the banks of the stream—a stream deep and rapid, flowing between banks now laden with snow. Edith looked down into the dark, cold water, and thought, “If I lay there, quiet and cold, no one would ever find me and no one would ever know.”

“Yes, yes; it would be better,” she cried. “The water called me, and I have come!” And, with a wild sob, she sprang forward, and sank beneath the swiftly flowing waters of the stream.

When Edith opened her eyes, she found herself lying upon a bed of straw. She was dressed in dry clothes, sheltered by a canvas roof, warmed by a fire, and watched by a woman. Her eyes, after having carelessly noted these things, remained fixed on the face of the woman, for she had recognized the bold black eyes of Sal Blexley.

Edith remained dumb, but Sal broke the silence with a loud laugh.

“Yes, it’s me, my lady,” she said.

“I said we should meet again, and so we have, you see. I thought it would come to this.”

“Where am I?” asked Edith, faintly.

“Where are ye? Why, in a gipsy tent, with me and my pals. I was out on the rampage with my chap, when we saw ye throw yourself in the river. I got him to fish you out—more dead than alive, I bet—and between us we brought ye here. There, don’t shrink away, and don’t look afeard. I ain’t agoin’ to harm ye. Your man’s deserted ye, I reckon. Well, ye despised me once, ye know, and so did he; but I mean to let ye see that ‘tain’t only gentlefolks and clergy that can do a good turn to them as wants it.”

CHAPTER XXXIII. THE NOTE-BOOK AGAIN.

December 15.—The first snow fell yesterday. As I write, the air is still darkened with the falling flakes. From here to the village is spread a soft white carpet, ankle-deep. I am more than usually interested in this common phenomenon, as I can tell, by the deep footprints, exactly who is coming and going. One track interests me especially—that of a shapely foot, clad in an elegant, tightly fitting boot. Its holy owner came as far as the lodge gate, no further. To make certain that I was not mistaken, I inquired of the lodge-keeper, and found that the clergyman *had* passed this morning.

As matters stand now, I can arrange everything with coolness and *sang froid*, for I am really the master of the situation. I hold this man, as it were, in the hollow of my hand. I know his life, his comings and goings, his offences against social propriety, against his own conscience; there is not a step of that poor instrument, his

soul, of which I am not master. Despite all this, he is still absolutely blind to his danger. He thinks me sleeping sound, when I am wide awake. Imbecile!

Well, I mean to have my revenge, somehow or other; how and when, I have not exactly determined. I should like to read my satyr such a lesson as would last him for a lifetime; and of course, without any kind of *public* scandal. I have thought once or twice of a way, but it would, perhaps, be playing with fire to attempt it; nor is it easy to carry out without my wife's co-operation.

As for Ellen, she remains restless and bewildered; certain of the man's unworthiness, yet fascinated by his pertinacity. She goes to church, as usual; otherwise, she avoids Santley as much as possible. What would she say, if I were to tell her all I know? I am afraid, after all, it would not facilitate her cure; for, strange to say, women love a scoundrel of the amorous kind.=

````That we should call these delicate creatures ours,

````And not their —— sentiments!"

Yes, it is nothing but sentiment, I know. She is as pure as crystal, but she cannot quite forget that she was once a foolish maid, and this man an impassioned boy; and he comes to her, moreover, in the shining vestments of a beautiful, though lying, creed. I shall have to be cruel, I am afraid, very cruel, before I can quite cure her... Pshaw! what am I thinking, writing? Folly, folly! I am trying to survey Ellen Haldane philosophically, to assume a calmness, though I have it not—though all the time my spirit is in arms against her. I am jealous, damnably jealous, that is all.

To talk about the crystal purity of a woman who has a moral *cancer*, which must kill her if it is not killed! To describe her folly as mere sentiment, when I know, more than most men, that such sentiment as that is simple conscience-poisoning! If I did not save her, if I were not by with my protecting hand, she would assuredly be lost. Well, I shall cure her, as I said, or kill her in the attempt. Once, when a boy, in a Parisian hospital, I saw an *ouvreuse* operated upon, for a tumorous deposit, which necessitated the excision of the whole of the right breast. It was before the days of chloroform, and the patient's agony was terrible to witness. But she was saved. For the moral cancer also, the knife may be the only remedy; and it will be, as in the other case, kill or cure.

Meantime, our domestic life goes on with characteristic monotony. We have no quarrels, and no confidences. We eat, drink, and sleep like comfortable wedded people. The greater part of my day is spent among my books; the greater part of hers in simple domestic duties, in music, in wanderings about the gardens. She seldom visits in the parish now; but the poor come to her on stated days, and she is, as ever, charitable. At least once every Sunday she goes to church.

A sombre, sultry state of the atmosphere, with gathering thunder!

December 20.—I have been reading, to-day, Naquet's curious pamphlet on "Divorce," a subject which is just now greatly exercising our neighbours across the Channel. This study, combined with that of two new attempts in Zolaesque (which a French friend has been good enough to send me), has left me with a certain sense of nausea. Gradually, but surely, I am afraid, I am losing that fine British faith in the feminine ideal, which was among the legacies left me by a perfect mother. It is dawning upon me, at middle age, as it dawns upon a Parisian at twenty-one, that women are, at best, only the highest, or among the highest, of *animals*, and that sanitary precautions of the State must be taken—to keep them cleanly. It is this discovery which, perpetuated in Art, makes the whole literature of the Second Empire so repulsive to an English Philistine. "And smell so—faugh!" Are the days of chivalry, then, over? Is the ideal of pure maidenhood, of perfect womanhood, utterly overthrown? Is the modern woman—not Imogen, not Portia, not the lily maid of Ascolat, not Romola, not even Helen Pendennis?—but Messalina, Lucretia—nay, even Berthe Rougon, or the shamble-haunting wife of Claude, or the utterable Madame Bovary? Surely, surely, there cannot be all this literary smoke without some little social fire. Thank God, therefore, that the wise Republic has taken to the drastic remedy of crushing those vipers, the Christian priests, and of abolishing the solemn farce of the marriage ceremony. Marriage is a simple contract, not an arrangement made in heaven; it is social and sanitary, not religious and ideal;—and when any of the conditions are broken by either of the contracting parties, the contract is at an end.

Yes, I suppose it is so; I suppose that women are not angels, and that married life is an arrangement. And yet how much sweeter was that old-fashioned belief which pictured the wedded life as a divine communion of souls, a golden ladder beginning at the altar, and reaching—through many dark shadows, perhaps, but surely reaching—up to heaven! Ah, my hymeneal Jacob's Ladder, with angels for ever descending and ascending, you have vanished from the world, with Noah's Dove of Peace, and Christ's Rainbow of Promise! All faiths have gone, and the faith in Love is the last to go.

I find that I am philosophizing—prosing, in other words—instead of setting down events as they occur. But indeed, there are no events to set down. I am in the position of the needy knife-grinder of the Anti-Jacobin:

"Story? God bless you, I have none to tell, sir!"

So, to ease my mind, I pour out my bile on paper.

December 21.—I have made a discovery. During the last few days my wife and Santley have been in correspondence. At any rate, he has written to her; and I suspect she has replied.

Baptisto has been my informant. Despite my command that he should cease to play the spy, he has persisted in keeping his eyes and ears open, and has managed to convey to me, in one way or another, exactly what he has seen or heard. This morning, when hanging about the lodge (still fascinated, I suspect, by the little widow), he discovered that there was a letter there addressed to his mistress, and he asked me, quite innocently, if he should fetch and take it to her. I showed no sign of anger or surprise, but bade him mind his own business. In the forenoon, I saw Ellen emerge from the house, and stroll carelessly in the direction of the lodge gates. I followed her at a distance, and saw, her enter the lodge, and emerge directly afterwards with a letter, which she read hastily and thrust into her bosom.

When she returned up the avenue, I was standing outside my den, waiting for her.

She came up smiling, with her air of perfect innocence. Wrapped from head to foot in furs, and wearing the

prettiest of fur caps à la Russe, she looked her very best and brightest. The sun was shining clearly on the snow, and, as she came, she left soft footprints behind her.

"What is my Bear doing," she cried, "out in the cold, and without his great coat, too?"

"The day looked so bright that I was tempted out. Where have you been?"

"Only for a little stroll," she replied; "it is so pleasant out of doors. By-the-bye, dear, they are skating down on Omberley Pond. I think I shall drive over. Will you come?"

"Not to-day, Nell."

She did not look sorry, I thought, at my refusal.

"Is there a party?" I asked carelessly.

"I don't know; but I heard the Armstrongs were going, and some of the people from the Abbey."

"And Mr. Santley, I suppose?"

She flushed slightly, but answered without hesitation—

"Perhaps he will be there; but I need not speak to him, if you forbid it. I will stay at home if you wish it, dear."

"I don't wish it," I said. "Go and amuse yourself."

"Won't you come?" she murmured, hesitating.

I shook my head, and turned back to my den. She looked after me, and sighed; then walked slowly towards the house. What a sullen beast she must have thought me! But I was irritated beyond measure by what I had seen at the lodge. Not a word of the letter!

Half an hour afterwards I saw the pony-carriage waiting for her, and presently she drove off, looking (as I thought) bright and happy enough. No sooner had she gone than I was mad with myself for not having accompanied her. Was it a *rendezvous*? Had she gone, of set purpose, to meet *him*? I cursed my stupidity, my sullenness. At a word from me she would have remained. I had almost made up my mind to walk over, when in came Baptisto. He was wrapped up to the chin in an old travelling cloak, and his nose was blue with cold.

"Have you any message in the village, senor?" he asked. "I am going there."

I could not resist the temptation, though I hated myself for setting a spy upon her.

"No, I have no message. Stay, though! While you are there, pass by the skating-pond, and see if any of our friends are there."

He understood me perfectly, and went away, well satisfied at the commission. More and more, as the days go on, the rascal intrudes himself into my confidence, with silent looks of sympathy, dumb signs of devotion. He says nothing, but his looks are ever significant. Sometimes I long, in my irritation, to get rid of him for ever; but no, I may find him useful. I know he would go through fire and water for my sake.

In about two hours he returned with his report.

"Well?" I said, scowling at him.

"The pond is covered, senor, with gentlemen and ladies. His lordship is there, and they are very gay. It is pretty to see them gliding about the ice, the ladies and the gentlemen hand in hand. Sometimes the ladies slip, and the gentlemen catch them in their arms, and then all laugh! It is a pity that you are not there; you would be amused."

"Is this all you have to tell me?"

"Yes, senor, except that my mistress is among them. She bade me tell you——"

"Yes! yes!"

"That she was enjoying herself so much, and would not be home for lunch." He stood with head bent gently, respectful and submissive, but his face wore the expression which had often irritated me before—an expression which said, as plainly as words, "How far will you let them go? Cannot you perceive what is going on? It is no affair of mine, but is it possible that you will endure so much and so long?" I read all this, I say, in the fellow's face.

"Very well," I said sternly, dismissing him with a wave of the hand.

He went lingeringly, knowing I would be certain to call him back. As I did.

"Was Mr. Santley there?"

Baptisto smiled—darkly, malignantly.

"Oh yes, senor, *of course!*"

I could have struck him.

Damn him! does he think I am already ornamented, like Falstaff, with an ugly pair of horns? I shall have to get rid of him, after all. He saw the expression on my face, and was gone in a moment; but he had left his poison to work.

All the devil was awake within me. I could not work, I could not read, I could not rest in any place. When the lunch-bell sounded, I went in, and drank a couple of glasses of wine, but ate nothing. Then for some hours I flitted about like a ghost, from room to room, from the house to the laboratory, upstairs and down. I went into her boudoir. The rosy curtains were drawn, and the air was still sweet with perfumes, with the very breath of her body. I am afraid I was mean enough to play the spy—to open drawers, to look into her work-basket; nay, I even went so far as to inspect her wardrobe, and examine the pocket of the dress she had worn that morning.

I wanted that letter.

If I could have found it, and read in it any confirmation of my suspicions, I would have taken instant action. But I could not find it.

In the drawer of the work-table, however, I found something.

A sheet of paper, carefully folded up. I opened it, and found it covered with writing in a man's hand. At the

top was written—“*I think these are the verses you wanted? I have transcribed them for you.—C. S.*” The verses followed—some twaddle about the meeting in heaven of those who have lived on earth; with incredible images of cherubs sitting on clouds (blowing their own trumpets, I suppose, with angelic self-satisfaction); descriptions of impossible habitations, with roofs of gold and silver, and inspired rhymes of “love” and “dove,” “eyes” and “paradise.” The paper was the pinkest of pinks, and delicately perfumed; the writing beautiful, with ethereal curves and upsweeps, exquisite punctuation, and a liberal supply of points of exclamation. I put the rubbish back in its place. It had obviously been lying there for some time, and was not at all the sort of document of which I was in search. So I quitted the boudoir, not much wiser than when I entered it, and resumed my uneasy ramblings about the house.

About four in the afternoon, I heard wheels coming up the avenue. I looked out, and was just in time to see the pony-carriage pass. What was my amazement, however, when I beheld, calmly driving the carriage, with my wife seated at his side, the clergyman himself.

My head went round, and I felt positively bloodthirsty. Seizing my hat, I hastened round, and arrived just as Santley was carrying Ellen up the steps into the house. Yes, actually carrying her in his arms! I could scarcely believe my eyes; but, coming up close, I saw that she was ghastly pale, and that something unusual must have occurred.

He had placed her on a chair in the lobby, and was bending over her just as I followed. I am afraid that the expression of my face was sinister and agitated enough; I stood glaring at the two, like one gasping for breath.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said, meeting my eyes. “There has been a slight accident, that is all. Mrs. Haldane slipped on the ice, and, falling, sprained her ankle.”

Ellen, who seemed in great pain, looked up at me with a beseeching expression; for she at least read my suspicion in my face.

“It was so stupid of me!” she murmured, forcing a faint smile, and reaching out her hand. “I could not come home alone—I was in such pain—and Mr. Santley kindly volunteered to bring me.”

What could I do? I could not knock a man down for having performed what appeared a simple act of courtesy. I could not exhibit any anger, without looking like an idiot or a boor. Santley had merely done what any other gentleman would have done under the circumstances. For all that, I had an uneasy sense of being humbugged.

“Let me look at your foot,” I said gruffly.

She pushed, it from underneath her dress. The boot had been taken off, and a white silk handkerchief tightly wrapped about the ankle.

“Mr. Santley bound it up,” she explained.

I took the foot in my hand, and in my secret fury, I think I was a little rough, for she uttered a cry.

“Take care!” cried the clergyman. “It is very tender.”

I looked up at him with a scowl, but said nothing.

“Shall I carry you into the drawingroom?” he said, with tender solicitude.

“No; I am better now, and George will give me his arm. Pray do not stay.”

She rose with difficulty, and, resting all her weight upon her left foot, leant upon me. In this manner she managed to limp into the drawing-room, and to place herself upon a couch. Her pallor still continued, and I felt sorry, for I hate to see a woman suffer. Santley, who had followed us, and was watching her with extraordinary sympathy, now bent softly over her.

“Are you still in pain?” he murmured.

“A little; but—”

“Shall I send Doctor Spruce over? I shall be passing the surgery on my way back. If he is not at home, I will procure some remedies, and bring them on myself.”

Here I interposed.

“Pray do not trouble yourself,” I said, with a sneer. “A sprained ankle is a trifle, and I can attend to it. Unless my wife is in need of *religious* ministrations, you need not remain.”

I spoke brutally, as I felt; and, meeting the man’s pale, sad, astonished gaze, I became secretly humiliated. A husband, I perceive, is a ridiculous animal, and always at a disadvantage. I begin to understand how the poets, from Molière downwards, have made married men their shuttlecocks. A jealous lover has dignity; a jealous husband, none. Nobody sympathizes with my lord of Rimini, while all the world weeps for Lancelot and Francesca. Even Ford, ere he turns the tables on Sir John, poses as an ass. All the right was on my side, all the offended dignity, all the outraged honesty; yet somehow I felt, at that moment, like an ill-conditioned cur.

“I am not here in a religious capacity,” he replied courteously, “so your sneer is hardly fair. However, since I can be of no further service, I will go.”

He turned softly to Ellen, holding out his hand.

“Good-bye. I hope you will be better to-morrow.”

“Good-bye, and thank you,” she replied. “It was so good of you to bring me home.”

And so, with a courteous bow to me, which I returned with a nod, he retired victoriously. Yes, he had the best of it for the time being. For some minutes after he left, and while the scent of his perfumed handkerchief still filled the air, I stood moodily waiting. At last Ellen spoke.

“I hope you are not angry. What could I do? I could not come home in such pain, and no one else offered to escort me.”

“I did not ask you to excuse yourself,” I said coldly.

I saw the tears standing in her eyes. Her voice trembled as she murmured—

"I did not think you could have been so unkind!"

As I did not answer, she continued—

"Of late you have not been like yourself. You used to trust me; we used to be so happy! If this is to go on, we had better separate; it makes my life a misery."

She had touched the wrong chord, if she thought to move my pity. My jealous brain was at work at once. She was thinking of a separation, then? Perhaps she wished it; and perhaps the true reason was her love for that man?

I spoke out in the heat of the moment—

"If you wish to separate, it can be arranged."

She looked at me so pleadingly, so piteously, that I had to turn my eyes away. In encounters of this kind the man has no chance against the woman, especially if he is magnanimous. What are all his arguments, all his indignation, against her battery of woeful looks, her tears, her pseudo-innocence, and real helplessness? One feels like a coward, too, in such an encounter. I did, I know.

Nevertheless, I was ready to give her the *coup de grace*.

"Show me that letter," I said suddenly.

"What letter?" she asked, as if she did not comprehend.

"The letter you received from that man this morning."

For a moment her cheeks went scarlet, then became deadly pale again.

"Pray do not attempt any subterfuge," I continued. "I know that you have been in correspondence. Where is that last letter? I demand to see it."

She replied without hesitation.

"You cannot see it."

"Why?"

"Because I have burned it."

At this admission I lost my self-command, and uttered an execration.

"There was nothing in it," she said sorrowfully; "it was a mere request for an interview. You have no right to be so violent."

"No right, woman!" I cried.

"There is nothing between us to make me ashamed. If I were the most guilty woman in the world, you could not treat me more cruelly. You have no pity, none. It is my fault, my punishment, to have married a man without sympathy, without religion."

Religion again! How I hated the word! It stung me into retorting fiercely—

"It is my misfortune, rather, to have married a sentimental hypocrite!"

I had gone too far. Her proud spirit rose against me. Pale and indignant, she tried to rise to her feet. But she had forgotten her sprained ankle. Her face was contracted with sudden torture, and, with a low cry of pain, she fainted away upon the floor.

December 23.—In two more days the Christmas bells will ring, with their merry tidings of peace, good will, and plum-pudding to all the world. Well, mine is likely to be a cheerful Christmas Day. The snow is still on the ground, and more is falling; and outside the Manor, as I write, the dreariest of dreary winds is wailing. Here, inside, there is even greater gloom. A cheerless hearth, a husband and wife estranged. Bah! the old story.

Things have come to a crisis at last between us. I know now that I must either strike a cruel blow, or lose my wife for ever. Any mere armistice is impossible. Either I must assault my enemy's camp, get him by the throat, and cover him with punishment and confusion; or haul down my matrimonial flag, capitulate, and let the Church and the devil come in to take possession.

CHAPTER XXXIV. BAITING A MOUSE-TRAP (FROM THE NOTEBOOK).

Let me write down, as calmly as I can, exactly what has taken place.

Yesterday, after that little scene, I carried my swooning-wife up to her room, placed her on the bed, and sent her maid to attend to her. Then I walked off to my den, to have my dark hour alone; for I was thoroughly miserable. So far, I felt, I had been beaten with my own weapons. Ellen was going to pose as a Christian martyr, and I had committed the indiscretion of showing the full extent of my jealousy. It would have been far better, on the whole, if, instead of storming and grumbling, I had quietly kicked the clergyman out of my house; but then, I could hardly deal in that way with a man who had simply, on the face of it, performed an act of common civility. The time for kicking had gone past; I had stupidly let it slip. If, when I caught him in the act of trying to embrace my Ellen, and of addressing her softly by her Christian name, I had calmly and decisively thrashed him, he could hardly have accused me of impoliteness; nor would he have been able, without exposing his own fatuity, to noise the affair about.

Now, I was not only angry with my wife for her indiscretion, I was in a rage with myself for having behaved with so much brutality. The picture of her pale, suffering face followed me to my den, and haunted me

reproachfully. She had really met with an accident, and was in sharp physical pain; and I, who at another time would have cut off my right hand to prevent her little finger from aching, had chosen the time of her suffering to come upon her like a woman-eating tiger. Just the husband's luck again—always at a disadvantage; for precisely to the degree in which she felt herself treated unkindly and ungently by me, would rise her sympathy for the man who had been so zealous and so tender. Damn him, again!

The night passed wretchedly enough.

I sat up working till nearly daybreak. When I went upstairs, and entered my dressing-room, I felt guilty and ashamed, yet angry still. But she was asleep—I could hear her soft breathing from the adjoining bedchamber. Lamp in hand, I crept in. Yes, there she lay, soundly slumbering, her eyes red with weeping, her dark hair falling wildly around her pallid face, her neck and throat bare, her arms outside the coverlid, which rose and fell with her breathing. As I bent over her, my shadow crossed her soul in sleep, and she moaned and stirred. Poor child! I longed to kiss her, but I was ashamed.

I think we men, the strongest and coldest of us even, are weak as water, where a woman is concerned. I used to fancy once that, if a wife of mine failed in faith, or fell away from me in sin, I could strike her dead without pity; or if I suffered her to live, pass an eternity with no thought but loathing and detestation. But as I bent over that sad bed, I seemed to understand how it was that husbands, in the fulness of time, had pardoned even *that*, the foulest and deadliest of infidelities; how, with a love stronger than sin, and a hope stronger than death, they had welcomed back the penitent, in forgiveness, sorrow, and despair—even as a father would take back an erring child, part of the very blood and life within his veins. Weakness, I know; but weak as water, in virtue of its very strength, is Love.

It was horrible, horrible, this falling away from each other. I wished, just then, that I had had religion; perhaps then we might have been happier together. Women love a sort of matrimonial Village Blacksmith, who asks no questions, works hard all the week, and goes three times to church, in an irreproachably white shirt, on Sunday. They cannot bear revolt in any shape. They were the last to cling to the old gods, and they will be last to cling to the dead Christ. Does the law which works for righteousness, somehow or other, justify them? Was my dear wife's alienation a curse upon me for dealing in occult scientific mysteries, like an old necromancer, and forgetting, if I ever learned, the sweet religion of the heart? Somehow, last night, I felt as if it were so. There she lay, white as snow. I knew she had prayed to God before sleeping; and I—I could not pray. I was an outcast, an unbeliever; "atheist! atheist!" said the preacher.

I crept away to my own solitary bed, feeling more sad and lonely than I had ever done in all my life.

Till midday to-day, she kept her room; but after lunch, she managed to get downstairs. I had returned to my den, and we did not meet; nor was I in the mood for meeting, for the gentle impulses of overnight had passed away, and the morning had found me gloomy, quarrelsome, and atrabilious. She did not send for me, though I secretly hoped that she might do so. I learned from Baptisto that she was stretched upon the drawing-room sofa, which was drawn close to the window, and was reading some religious book.

Restless and wretched, I took my hat and walked out into the snow. The great fir trees, loaded with the leaden whiteness, were ranged like grim sentinels on each side of the dreary avenue, and beyond these the leafless woods stretched white and cold. The sun had gone in, and the air was full of a heavy lowering sadness—a sort of darkness visible. It was cheerless weather; and as I thought of my domestic misery, and of the clouded world, with all its sins and sorrows, I was more miserable than ever.

Nevertheless, I walked on rapidly, till I came out among the frozen fields of the open country. How desolate looked the snowy meadows, with broad patches of green, thaw-like mildew, and the fallow fields, with snow thick in the furrows and wretched low-lying hedges on every side! Here and there a few miserable small birds were fluttering, starved robins for the most part; and a kestrel was hunting the furrow, hovering in a slow, dejected way, as if field-mice were scarce, and his whole occupation, like the weather, cruelly forlorn.

Before four o'clock it was quite dark.

Through the windy darkness I made my way back to the Manor. By that time I had thought it all over. Conquered by the utter desolation within and without me, I had said to myself, "Life like this is worse than death. I will try one way more; I will go to her, I will take her to my heart, I will beg her to love and trust me, and to accept my tender forgiveness. Perhaps I have been too hard, too taciturn and sullen. She has mistaken my sorrow for coldness, my pride for cruelty and pertinacity. There shall be an end to this. She shall understand the full tenderness of my love, once and for ever." With these thoughts struggling wildly within me, I hastened home.

Then, as the devil would have it, I saw Baptisto, waiting on the threshold of my den. The moment I appeared he crept up to me, and clutched my arm.

"Senor, senor! where have you been? I have been waiting for you."

"What is it, man?" I asked, startled by his manner.

"Come and see!"

He led me towards the house. I walked a few steps, then paused nervously.

"What has happened?" I asked.

"Nothing, senor; but the clergyman is here again, with my lady."

That was enough. It turned my tenderness into anger, my lethargy into passion. Shaking off the fellow's touch, I hastened to the house. As I went I saw lights in the drawing-room; and, instead of entering the house door, I ascended the flight of iron steps which leads to the terrace. Then, with the cunning of jealousy, cold enough to subdue the fever of rage, I crept along the terrace till I reached the folding doors of the drawing-room. The doors were closed, the curtains and blinds were drawn, but there was one small space through which I could see into the room.

I looked in.

For a moment my eyes, clouded by the darkness, were dazzled by the light of the room within; but despite the loud crying of the wind around me, I heard a murmur of voices. Then I distinguished the form of my wife

on a sofa drawn up before the fire, and, bending over her, the form of the minister. Her back was turned to me, but I saw *his* face, noticed the burning eyes fixed eagerly on hers.

What were they saying—doing? I strained my eyes, my ears. At last I caught a sound. “Go now!” she was saying; “go now, I beseech you!”

Even as she spoke, he flung himself wildly on his knees, placing his arms around her.

“Oh, you are mad, mad!” she cried.

“Not mad, but desperate,” he answered. “I have thought it all over; I have struggled and struggled, but it is in vain. Ellen, have pity! There is no peace or happiness for me, in this world or the next, without your love. My darling! my angel!”

“Silence, for God’s sake! Oh, if you should be heard——”

“I do not care who hears me. I am beyond fear. As for that man, your husband, he is busy, no doubt, with his blasphemous books, his sinful investigations. Oh, my darling, that you should be linked to such a man! A man without religion—a man without God! It was that which first made me pity you, and pity is akin to love. You owe him no duty. He is a heretic—an atheist, as you know.”

As he clung to her and embraced her, she struggled nervously. Carried beyond himself, he covered her hands-with kisses, and would have kissed her lips, but she drew back.

“Go, go!” she moaned. “Hark! I hear footsteps. If you do not go now, I will never speak to you again.”

He rose to his feet, hot, flushed, and trembling like a leaf.

“I will go, since you wish it,” he said. “Good night, my darling!”

He stooped over, and—kissed her? Yes, I was sure he kissed her, though I think she shrunk away, with her face nervously turned to the door, dreading a surprise. Then I saw his shadow cross the room, and vanish through the door, which was closed behind him.

I was about to force open the French windows and enter, when a curious impulse possessed me to delay a little, and see what she would do when left alone. So I watched her. She sat trembling on her seat; then, reaching to the table, took a flask of eau-de-cologne, poured some upon her handkerchief, and bathed her face. Then, with momentary glances at the door, she smoothed down her straggling hair, and adjusted the bosom of her dress. Finally, she contrived, though not without pain, to rise to her feet, and, leaning on the marble mantelpiece, to look at her face in the mirror. I could see her face reflected, all flushed and warm, and her eyes gleaming with unusual brightness. After again smoothing her hair, she got back to the sofa, posed herself prettily, and, not without another glance at the door, took up a book and pretended to read.

By this time I was diabolically cool; so cool that I could have killed her just then in cold blood. Entering into the spirit of her hypocrisy, I refrained from entering by the terrace, but, passing round to the hall door, entered there. A few minutes afterwards, I entered the drawing-room, with as unconcerned an air as I could possibly command.

There she sat, quite calm and self-possessed, her robe arranged decently over her feet, her face pale, her hair smoothed down Madonna-like over her temples, her eyes fixed upon a book.

As I entered, she looked up with a sweet smile, just as if there had never been any quarrel between us.

“Well, dear? You see, I have got down.”

I nodded, and sank into a chair.

“You don’t ask me if my ankle is better? Well, it is nearly all right. But, George, I hope you are not angry with me still for what occurred yesterday. Do forgive me, dear!”

“Oh, I’m not angry,” I replied; “only——”

“Only we both lost our tempers; I with my stupid sprained ankle, you with your stupid books. I was so sorry you let Mr. Santley see you were annoyed. He must have thought it so odd.”

How light and free of heart she seemed! how bright and languishing her eyes were! She could laugh, too, and she was not much given to laughter, I looked at her with amazement, so little did I, or do I, understand women. There seemed to be an ugliness, a guiltiness, about her tender coquetry that evening, coming so close upon what I had seen.

“By the way,” she continued, after a few minutes’ pause, “I hope you will not scold me again, but I think I ought to tell you—that Mr. Santley has just called. There, now you are angry; but I thought it right to tell you.”

“Thank you,” I said drily. “I was aware that he had called. What brought him, pray?”

“He wished to ascertain if I had recovered from the effects of my fall,” she replied, with a little more nervousness than before.

“Oh, a mere visit of politeness!”

“Yes,” she answered, faltering.

I rose quietly, and stood on the hearthrug, looking down upon her.

“Would it surprise you to hear,” I asked grimly, “that I know exactly what took place between you?”

Her face flushed scarlet, the book fell from her hands.

“Oh, George! what do you mean?” she murmured somewhat irrelevantly.

“Precisely what I say. He made hot love to you—embraced you—kissed you, madam. He informed you that your husband was a heretic, and that to make him a cuckold would be a certain way of getting an express pass right through to paradise. Very polite indeed, you will agree!”

She saw that I knew everything, and wrung her hands in protestation and despair.

“George, if you know so much—and some one has been playing the spy—you know that it was all against my will; you know that I tried to silence him, to thrust him from me, but, being ill and helpless, sick, and in pain——”

Here her self-pity, coming sharp upon her consternation, quite conquered her, and she fell into hysterical tears.

"O God! God!" she sobbed.

What kaleidoscopes are women! From light to shade, from brightness to dimness, and back again to brightness; from one colour to another, from the tints of the thunder-cloud to the hues of the rainbow, how suddenly they can flit and change! Ellen, who had just before been so gay and smiling, seemed now liked a broken woman. I watched her gloomily, almost despairingly. I knew that ten minutes afterwards, she might change again, scattering away her tears as the sunshine scatters the drops of dew.

Midnight.—I have just left my wife's bedside. Ellen has promised me, if I spare the man and avoid any scandal, that she will never speak to him again, or even enter his church. Can I trust her? I believe *not*. However, we shall see.

Christmas Eve.—My mind is now made up. To-day I intercepted a letter from Santley to Ellen, left as usual at the lodge gate. It ran as follows:—

"To-morrow is Christmas Day, and I have not a moment to spare. I will call, however, next day, on the business about which we spoke *yesterday*. Pray for me till then, as I pray for you.—C. S."

The italics are the satyr's own.

This letter, then, has decided me. My scheme of revenge is now perfectly complete, and I shall no longer hesitate to carry it out. To make all certain, I shall send a verbal message by Baptisto to-morrow to the effect that Mrs. Haldane "will be glad to see Mr. Santley as arranged, the day after Christmas Day." In the mean time I shall make my preparations. All the servants but two have been given a holiday for that day—I have taken care of that; and as they purpose going into the neighbouring town, they will not return till very late. The two remaining are the kitchen-maid, who is an idiot and notices nothing; and Baptisto, who is for once to combine two functions—that of cook (he cooks like an angel) and waiter at table. Ellen is quite satisfied with this arrangement. She knows nothing of Santley's letter.

We see little or nothing of each other, and a shadow as of death hangs over the entire house.

Christmas Day.—I astonished Ellen very much this morning, by expressing my intention of accompanying her to church; but, instead of rejoicing, as she would have done a little time ago, she seemed rather frightened and startled. We drove over to the old church at Hamleigh, seven miles off, and heard a drowsy sermon by the drowsiest of octogenarians—the right sort of preacher, in my opinion, for a creed so worn out, mildewy, and old-fashioned. Ellen did not seem to share my appreciation of the old fellow's antiquated twaddle. She sat like a marble woman. We drove home without a word.

A pretty Christmas! But, never mind, I am going to have my revenge.

Everything lends itself to my purpose. To begin with, Foxglove Manor is miles away from any other habitation; and no one ever comes near the "uncanny" place, except on special business. All the servants, but the idiot of a kitchen-maid, leave early for their holiday. For a day at least I can do as I please; and my intentions are simply murderous. In the course of twelve hours a human creature may be disposed of, and buried out of sight, if necessary, in these grounds. Baptisto knows my terrible purpose, and approves it, with his usual bloodthirstiness, to the full.

"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and tomorrow!"

Come, then, my satyr, my wolf in sheep's clothing, and I shall be ready for you—=

```"And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

```The way to dusty Death!"

CHAPTER XXXV. THE ASSIGNATION.

On the morning after Christmas Day, 18—, the Rev. Charles Santley, vicar of Omblerley, rose early from that sweet slumber which only the righteous enjoy, and from those nightly visions of celestial bliss which only the pure of heart are suffered to behold. Although, infant-like, he had been "talking with angels in his sleep" all night, he looked pale, careworn, and anxious. He dressed himself with unusual care, surveyed himself again and again in the mirror, sighed softly, and descended to the sitting-room, where his sister was already awaiting him at the breakfast-table.

To his surprise, she looked unusually agitated, and addressed him eagerly the moment he appeared.

"I am so glad you are come down. Rachel has just been here from the cottage, where they are in a terrible state of alarm."

Rachel was the name of Miss Russell's maidservant.

"But what is the matter?"

"Edith went out early yesterday evening, and she has not returned. They cannot guess what has become of her. Oh, Charles, go over at once! If anything has happened to her!"

The clergyman listened in no little agitation.

"Did she leave no message?" he asked.

"None. She is such a strange girl; and lately, I am afraid, she has been, unhappy. I am going down to the station to make inquiries, and they fancy she may have taken the train to London."

"It is very strange!"

"Strange? It is horrible! Oh, Charles, she has never been quite the same since her cousin came down here visiting. I thought that you were her choice, and I hoped you would some day marry her; but since young Hetherington was here——"

Santley, who had broken a little bread and drunk a cup of tea, rose impatiently.

"You women think of nothing but marrying and giving in marriage," he said. "Well, I will go over and speak to Miss Russell. I cannot think that any harm has happened to Edith."

"I hope and pray not. But to be-away all night—it is unaccountable."

"Perhaps," suggested Santley, more troubled than he cared to show, "she has gone to London."

"But why go without a word?"

"I really cannot tell. Young ladies-take strange fancies; and if, as you suggest, there is anything between young Hetherington and herself——"

"I did not suggest anything of the kind."

"Excuse me, Mary, you did."

"I am sure she cares nothing for her cousin," returned Miss Santley.

Her brother shrugged his shoulders, and, putting on his hat and overcoat, walked out of the Vicarage. On reaching the open air, where all looked dark and cold, he trembled like a leaf. What could it mean? What last freak had come over the infatuated girl? Could it be possible that she had carried out her wild threat to leave the place, and take her secret with her—perhaps to some nameless grave? He remembered their last conversation, when she had first told him of her condition, and beseeched him at once to make her his wife. He remembered how wild she had seemed, how despairing, and of how little avail, to calm her, his words had been. If any harm had come to her, the evil lay at his door. It was horrible to think of! Although another woman had come between them, although he no longer loved her with that wild frenzy which had first urged him to evil, he had still a conscience, and he could not bear to think that any harm had come to her. Then, again, he shuddered at the thought of any exposure. He had meant to marry her, sooner or later; and he had already made arrangements to' hide from the world, any knowledge of her condition. She was to have gone away to a secret place; and then, when her travail was over, he had meant to act honourably by her. And now, by some act of madness, she had perhaps put it out of his power! Surely, if she had gone away in accordance with the plan they had made together, she would have sent him some intimation of her purpose. It was extraordinary, altogether.

On reaching the cottage, he found Miss Russell in violent grief, and quite bewildered what to do. He tried to console her, pointing out that perhaps some little lover's quarrel with her cousin had taken her niece up to town; and the old lady listened eagerly, hoping against hope.

"Of late she has been so strange," sobbed the old lady, "so unlike herself. Often, listening at her door o' nights, I have heard her crying as if her heart was like to break; and she would never tell me what was the matter. Do you think—do you really think, sir, it was her cousin Walter?"

"I am almost certain of it," said the good shepherd. "Did they correspond?"

"I think so—sometimes; but latterly they were estranged. Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"Depend upon it, she has gone to London to see him. You will no doubt have a letter from her in the course of the day. Keep up your spirits! Miss Dove is a good young lady, and I am sure God will protect her. Is there anything more that I can do for you?"

"It was so kind of you to come," said the poor soul. "Your words are indeed a comfort."

"I am glad to hear you say so. Your dear niece was always a favourite of mine."

"Oh, sir, I know that; and sometimes I thought—— But there, it's no time to talk of that *now*. If she had only gone to you for advice, you would have guided her for her good, and this would never have happened. She was always pious-minded, but latterly, I'm afraid, she didn't go to church as often as she ought."

"Don't say that, Miss Russell. She was most regular in her religious duties—a pattern, indeed, to all my flock. There, there! I feel satisfied there is no cause for alarm. I will go myself and make every inquiry."

"Oh, sir, you are an angel!" cried the old lady, looking at him in admiration. And she really meant what she said.

"Alas! no," he answered, shaking his head solemnly—"only a poor miserable sinner. We are all miserable sinners. Good morning. Put your trust in God."

"I do indeed, sir. But, sir, before you go, may I ask you a favour?"

"Certainly."

"If you would kindly kneel down with me a moment, and say a prayer for my poor girl, I think it might help to bring her back. The Lord hears the prayers of the righteous, Mr. Santley."

Thus entreated, Santley could not refuse. To do him justice, he felt no little moral nausea at the proposal; but he was helpless under the circumstances. So they knelt down in the parlour together, and the good man extemporized a short but eloquent prayer for the occasion, entreating the Lord to bring back the stray lamb to the fold, and beseeching a blessing then and for ever on all that house. Miss Russell wept profusely. His words were so beautiful, his voice so musical, his manner so seraphic. At last he rose to his feet, looking pale and almost scared at a proceeding which (to his own conscience) looked something like blasphemy; and then, amidst profuse blessings from the distracted old lady, he respectfully took his leave.

While on his way to make inquiries in the village, he met his sister returning. She had discovered nothing, save that several persons had gone on to London by the midnight train the previous night, and that one of them was a lady who *might* have been Miss Dove. There was nothing for it but to wait out the day, and see if any communication came. In the mean time Miss Santley said she would hasten up to the cottage, to condole and consult with Mrs. Dove.

"Shall you be in to lunch?" she asked, as they parted on the roadside.

"No; not till evening. I think I shall walk over to Lewstone, to see about some books. I will make inquiries on the way, in case Edith has gone in that direction."

Lewstone was a small county town, seven miles off, where there was a library, a newspaper, and a great brewery. The way to it lay past Foxglove Manor. Santley did not care to tell his sister that he had an appointment with Mrs. Haldane for that morning. He knew that Miss Santley regarded with some anxiety her brother's relations with the handsome lady of the Manor. Much as she admired him, and great as was her faith in his spiritual purity, she knew him sufficiently well to be aware that his weak point was his admiration for beauty in the opposite sex. Not for a moment did she dream—indeed, she would have supposed the idea as almost blasphemous—that that admiration was not perfectly harmless and honourable; but it led him, she thought, to take delight in feminine society generally, and to overlook the attractions of the woman she wanted him to marry. He would marry some day—it was inevitable; and she had made up her mind that he was to marry Edith, who was her friend, and would doubtless allow her to keep her place at the Vicarage, whereas another woman a stranger, might take possession of him and resent all sisterly interference.

"Shall you call at the Manor as you pass?" she inquired.

"I think so; I am not quite sure."

"Perhaps it will be better," she said, thoughtfully. "They may know something about Edith."

The sun was now high up in the heavens, but deeply veiled in wintry cloud. It was a dark, dismal day—darkness in the sky and whiteness on the ground. The road which led to the Manor was unusually cheerless and dismal, and few people were abroad. Before long Santley came into the shadow of the Manor woods, which skirted one side of the highway for several miles. It was a gloomy walk.

Nevertheless, Santley soon forgot his anxiety, in the prospect of a meeting with Ellen Haldane. He had been greatly troubled the previous Christmas Day, by the fact that she had not put in an appearance at church; but her message, making the appointment, which had been duly conveyed to him by Baptisto had filled him with eager expectation. It was the first time she had actually desired him to come to her, and his hopes rose high. Perhaps his devotion had at last moved her heart; perhaps she had at last discovered that true happiness was only to be found, not with her heretic husband, but with the man whom she had loved when a girl. In the eyes of the world, there might be wickedness in tempting her from her wifely duty; but surely, in the eyes of heaven, there was no great sin. By living on with an unbeliever, she was in danger of losing her soul alive. The man was admittedly an atheist, an enemy of the Church, and she was wretched in his society, without sympathy, without conservation, without religion. And on one point the clergyman's mind was now made up. If Ellen was willing, he would take her with him to some foreign land, where he might labour in some way useful to the Lord, and forget all the petty humiliations of an English village. There might be, there would be, a scandal; but what need they care, when they were far away? In any case, scandal was likely to come, now that Edith Dove was in so sad a predicament. No; after all, he would not marry Edith. She was a foolish girl, and would soon find a more suitable husband; and whether or not, he had long ago discovered that they were not at all suited to each other.

Thus musing, Santley drew nearer and nearer to the Manor gates.

From the glimpse we have given of his thoughts, it may be gathered that the man's moral deterioration was at last complete. What had been at first a mere religious amorousness, a soft sensuous delight in female sympathy and female beauty, much the same as that which filled him when the organ played, and the scented incense rose, and the dainty congregation fluttered and flushed beneath him, had gradually developed, through self-indulgence, into a determined and uncontrollable sensuality. The devil, with a bait of warm nakedness, had hooked him fast. And already, in his own heart, he knew that he was lost; and so long as he reached the summit of his desires, he did not care. One sign of his degeneration was unmistakable: he had lost for ever his old faith in the chastity and purity of women. He could remember the time, not long past, when a beautiful woman was to him a spiritual thing, something sanctified, to be approached with awe—such as fills the worshipper who gazes on the Madonna of some great painter. Now he often found himself gazing on the Madonnas in his own study, with a satyr's delight in their plumpness, their naked arms, their swelling breasts. His nature was subdued to what it worked in, like the dyer's hand. His easy conquest over Edith Dove, whose sin was in loving so madly and so much, had degraded his whole nature. Once having snapped the chain of conventional morality, which is the only band to bind such men as this, he was reckless and exultant; and to possess Ellen Haldane, in her superb beauty and glowing womanhood, was his daily thought and his nightly dream.

This is speaking plainly, but it is a simple statement of the fact. As for the ultimate consequence of his acts, he was quite unable to realize them, having lost the power of reason and self-control.

He approached the lodge. How cold and chill it looked, in the darkness of the overhanging, snow-clad boughs! He put on his stereotyped smile, expecting to see little Mrs. Feme step out, as was her custom, and drop him a country curtsy. But the lodge seemed empty that morning.

He passed through the side gate, which was unfastened, and stepped into the avenue—the long, dreary colonnade of trees, a mile long, winding up to the steps of the Manor house. Glancing up it, he fancied he saw in the distance the figure of a man, looking his way; but in another moment it was gone.

Bleak, lonely, and inexpressibly dismal looked the avenue, with its white road of snow between the dark trees, and the one dark figure of the clergyman slowly advancing. The gloom of the place seemed to settle upon his spirit, and to dispel it he quickened his footsteps.

Suddenly, he heard from the distance a low, deep sound, like the tolling of a church bell.

He started, listening, and at first he could not believe the evidence of his ears. There was no church near, and the sound seemed unaccountable and strangely ominous. After a pause, slow as the drawing of a deep, long breath, it was repeated.

Toll! toll!

Santley was by nature a superstitious man, and, though no coward, he was terrified. What could it mean? It was like a funeral bell, tolling for the dead. Listening attentively, he found that the sound came down the

avenue, and that at every step he took it was more plainly heard. He hastened on, with increasing wonder and alarm.

Toll! toll! toll!

Yes, there could be no mistake—it was the tolling of a bell. Hollow and faint, yet filling the dark silence, it fell upon the wintry air. There was no stir in the shrouded woods, which closed dismally on every side; no answer from the dull, leaden, brooding sky—only the dull, dreadful, dreary peal, like a chime from the very gates of the tomb.

It was horrible.

He advanced, coming ever nearer to the sound, and at last, to his amazement, he discovered from whence it came. At a turning of the avenue, he came in full view of the ruined chapel, and, looking up to the naked belfry, he saw the old bell slowly swinging, while giving forth that solemn, melancholy peal.

Toll! toll! toll! with measured intervals, just as those which are counted when the bell rings for the dead.

Shocked and surprised, Santley hurried up to the chapel door, and looked in. Standing in the doorway was Baptisto, dressed from head to foot in solemn black, holding the rope, and with face turned upward, leisurely ringing the bell.

CHAPTER XXXVI. A FUNERAL PEAL.

Toll! toll! toll! toll! toll!

Heard from just underneath, the sound was hideous; for the bell was rusty and old, and jangled with dull vibrations long after each peal had ceased. The minister looked and listened with horror. Knowing as he did that the place had been turned to unholy uses, and retained none of its sacred character, he felt the whole proceeding to be diabolic.

He called to Baptisto, but the Spaniard, still keeping his sallow face turned upward, and monotonously continuing his work, did not seem to hear.

Toil! toll! toll! toll!—a sound to set the soul, as well as the teeth, on edge; a peal worthy of Satan himself.

All at once it ceased, with a last quivering jangle of moribund moaning notes.

Baptisto released the rope, took off his hat, and taking out his handkerchief, quietly wiped his brow; then, turning his dark eyes as if by accident towards the door, he perceived the minister.

He did not seem at all surprised, but sighed heavily, and turned up the whites of his eyes; then with a bow of profound respect, he advanced. In his suit of deep black, bound up with crape, and his high hat, crape-bound also, he looked like a highly respectable English undertaker. The resemblance was complete when he put his snow-white handkerchief to his mouth, and coughed solemnly behind it.

“In Heaven’s name, man, what are you about?” cried Santley, aghast.

Baptisto sighed again, turned up his eyes, and shook his head dismally.

“Senor,” he replied in a low voice, “I was ringing the chapel bell.”

“So I heard. But why?” the clergyman demanded.

“Hush! not so loud, senor,” he said, sinking his voice still lower. “Respect our sorrow!”

Santley’s astonishment increased, and he gazed wildly at Baptisto.

“Have you gone mad?” he returned, unconsciously obeying the request and sinking his voice. “Your sorrow? What sorrow? Be good enough to explain this mystery.”

“Will you step into the house, senor, and speak to my master. He will explain to you, I do not doubt; oh yes, he will explain.”

And Baptisto sighed again.

“He is at home, then?”

“Yes, senor!”

“And Mrs. Haldane?”

Baptisto groaned, and shook his head’ from side to side.

“You know I have an appointment with your mistress to-day?”

“Yes, senor, I know that,” answered Baptisto; then, as if greatly affected he turned away and put his handkerchief to his eyes.

“In the name of God,” cried Santley, “what does it all mean?”

Baptisto turned, and fixed his great black eyes on those of the clergyman. “Senor, what do they say in your own church? ‘In the midst of life, we are in death!’”

As he spoke, he pointed upward solemnly. Santley started as if stabbed. Then for the first time he began to understand. The dreary bell, the servant’s suit of black, the man’s unaccountably solemn and mysterious manner, all seemed to point to some horrible fatality.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed. “Is any one dead? Who is it? Speak—tell me——”

Baptisto paused, still fixing his eyes on Santley, and preparing to watch the full effect of his words.

“Alas, senor, my mistress! my poor mistress!”

Santley staggered back, and his face, which had before been very pale, became livid.

"Not dead! no, no!" he moaned.

"Senor," replied the Spaniard, "it is true. She died last night."

Alas, the blackness of the wintry sky! That dreary darkness of the earth, the snow-wrapt woods! Before that woeful message, delivered so sadly yet so impressively by the Spaniard, the last brightness of the light seemed to fade away! Though the bell had ceased to toll, its dull vibration seemed still to ring on the air! The clergyman staggered back, his heart stopped; for a moment he seemed about to faint, and he had to clutch the doorway of the chapel for support. Baptisto saw the movement, but made no sign; even if the other had been falling to the earth, indeed, he would have offered him no assistance.

With one hand upon his heart, as if some sharp pain was there, the clergyman struggled for speech. At last it came.

"It is a lie," he panted; "it *must* be a lie. No, no! She is not dead; it is impossible. Speak, man! If you have any mercy, say it is a lie! She lives!"

The Spaniard, who with a very ugly expression had heard himself accused of falsehood, and whose black eyes had gleamed very balefully, almost smiled—the faint, wicked, inner smile peculiar to him.

"Yes, you are right, senor; she lives!"

Santley drew a quick breath of relief, and, coming closer, clutched the Spaniard's arm.

"I knew it—I was sure of it. What did you mean by telling me that falsehood?"

Quietly, but firmly, Baptisto took the other's hand and displaced it from his arm. His air of cold respect did not change, but the expression of his eyes and mouth was malignant.

"I did not lie, senor."

"What! and yet you said——"

"I said my lady lived, senor, and it is true. We Spaniards do not lie. She lives indeed—not here, but *yonder*, senor, among the angels of the sky. Ah yes, she is there! Her body is at rest; her soul, senor, lives still for ever."

"Dead! O God!... When did she die?"

"Last night, senor, as I said."

It was true, then, though so inconceivable. There was no mistaking the words, the manner of the man; and yet beneath them both, there was a sinister appearance of horrible satisfaction. The grief seemed simulated, the solemnity strangely false and treacherous. The cruel black eyes, which shone so balefully, seemed to express a malignant pleasure in the torture the tongue was inflicting. And yet, all the while, Baptisto's manner was perfectly polite—the manner of a servant to a superior, stately in the manner of his race, but characteristically calm and respectful.

"Since you doubt me, senor," continued the Spaniard, "speak to my master. He himself will tell you of his sorrow, and you will know from him that, after all, I do not lie."

As the man spoke, he fixed his eyes on something beyond the doorway, and bowed profoundly. Santley turned, and saw, standing close to him, the master of Foxglove Manor.

CHAPTER XXXVII. THE DEATH-BED.

Haldane, like Baptisto, was clad funereally. A long black travelling cloak was wrapped around him, and a Spanish sombrero, also black, was drawn over his forehead. He was ghastly pale. He stood with knitted brows, gazing quietly at the clergyman.

Santley tried to speak, but could not. Again his left hand clutched his heart, and he seemed about to fall. Then he heard, as if in a dream—for the voice seemed far away—these words:

"I see, reverend sir, that Baptisto has told you everything. Yes, it is quite true, and yet so sudden, that even I can scarce realize my loss."

"It is incredible," cried Santley.. "Only a few hours since, I know, she was alive and well; and now——"

"And now," returned Haldane, in the same cold, clear voice, "the end has come. It is strange that you, with your religious views, should be so surprised at what is sadly common. We mortals, are like men travelling in ships upon a great sea; we eat, drink, and are merry—too often forgetting that there is only a mere plank between us and the grave."

Santley listened in wonder, less at the words than at the calmness, the perfect self-control, with which they were uttered. He had always thought Haldane hard and callous, but now he seemed to him a very monster of cold-bloodedness.

"I cannot believe it," he cried; "and you—you seem so calm. Surely, if she were dead, indeed——"

"What would you have me do?" interrupted Haldane. "Weep, wring my hands? Will wailing and gnashing of teeth buy back the lost? If it would do so, reverend sir, then I might rave and tear my hair? But no; philosophy has taught me to contemplate the inevitable with resignation."

"But she was so young! So—so beautiful!"

"Alas! the young too often die first, and the prettiest flowers are the first to fade away. She was always delicate, and latterly, I fear, the spirit was too strong for the frail body. It is comfort to reflect, now all is

done, that she had at least the consolations of your holy faith. Death comes to all. Life is but the business of a day. One dies at dawn, another not till afternoon; another creeps wearily on till evening, when the stars of the eternity twinkle down upon his sad grey hairs. She died in her prime, and was at least spared the sorrows and infirmities that attend the lingering decay of nature. So peace be with her!"

"It is too horrible!" cried Santley. "If this is true, life is a hideous nightmare—a waking curse. She was too young, too good, to die!"

"It is strange," returned Haldane thoughtfully, "that you, with your beautiful faith in immortality, should fear death so much. I have often noticed this inconsistency in men of your religion. Strong as is your belief in another life—a life, moreover, of eternal delight and happiness—you cling with curious tenacity to this life, which, at the same time, you admit to be miserable. We men of science, on the other hand, who believe death to be the final dissolution of the creature into his component element, can contemplate the change with equanimity."

Santley looked at him in positive horror. Cold as ice, the man discussed his loss as if it were a mere matter for intellectual argument, a question in which he felt merely the interest of a dispassionate spectator of human affairs. And this, with the very shadow of death upon him; with his wife lying dead in the house, struck down, as it were, by the very thunderbolt of God. So far, then, he, Santley, was justified. He had not wronged the man, when he thought him a creature devoid of common tenderness and feeling, warmed out of his humanity by his frightful creed of negation. Such a being was beyond the pale of Christian brotherhood. He had done right; he had not sinned, when he had sought to lead Mrs. Haldane from the martyrdom of an evil wedlock, to the shining heights of a happier and more spiritual life.

"How did she die? It must have been very sudden. Tell me, for pity's sake!"

"Calm yourself, reverend sir. Ah! you must have a tender disposition to feel another's loss so much. You could not feel it more deeply, if you had lost a person very dear to you—a wife of your own bosom, so to speak."

"I—I esteemed the lady," stammered the clergyman, shrinking before the others cold, scrutinizing gaze. "She was so good, so noble!"

"Ah! was she not? But you asked me how she died? I think it was some obscure affection of the *heart*. She was always so emotional, so impulsive; and latterly, I fear, she was under great excitement. You will be grieved to hear she passed away in bitter mental pain."

Santley started. Haldane continued, in the same cold voice, always keeping his eyes fixed steadily on those of the clergyman.

"There was something on her mind—some load, some trouble, some cruel self-reproach. I gathered from her fragmentary words that she was unhappy, that she sought my forgiveness for some fault of which she considered herself guilty. Whatever that fault was, it preyed upon her life, and hastened her end."

"Why did not you send for me? It is horrible to think she died without the last offices of religion. I would have comforted her, prayed with her; I——"

He paused in confusion, shrinking before the other's steady gaze.

"There was no time," answered Haldane; "and besides, to be honest, I did not care to have a clergyman."

"It was not an outrage!" cried Santley. "It was blasphemous!"

"Pardon me. I don't believe in confession, even at the extreme moment and I thought that, if she had anything to reveal, it had better be told to the person most interested, namely, her husband."

"Anything to reveal!" exclaimed

Santley, shuddering. "What do you mean?"

"What I say. I am aware you are not a Roman Catholic, but I am afraid your sentiments lean dangerously to the offices of that pertinacious priesthood. You would doubtless have asked her to pour her secret into your ears, with a view to absolution. I preferred to keep her dying message sacred to myself. If she had erred and was penitent, as I suppose, no priest, Catholic or Protestant, lay or clerical, could absolve her?"

Utterly bewildered and aghast, the unfortunate clergyman listened on. Surely hell had opened, and the thick sulphurous fumes were rising up to cover and darken the wholesome earth. That cold, grim figure, talking so calmly and watching him so keenly; that other dark figure of the Spaniard, still crouching near them in the doorway; surely, too, these were not men, but devils, sent to torture him and drive him mad. He looked around him. The snow-clad wood stretched on every side, save where the white lawns opened, marked with damp black spots of thaw, and stretching up to the doors of the gloomy mansion; but overhead the dark heavens had opened for a moment, and one sickly beam, falling aslant from the vaporous sky, was gleaming on the mansion's roof. Unconsciously he fixed his eyes on that spot of brightness, in wonder and in terror, for he was thinking of the piteous sight within the house.

Dull as his faculties seemed, paralyzed by the extraordinary shock he had received, he had not failed to understand Haldane's statement that his wife had suffered mental agony, and had made, or tried to make, some kind of confession.. After a long pause, still fixing his eyes on the sunbeam upon the roof, he murmured, almost vacantly—

"I am not quite myself, and do not seem to comprehend. Did you say that Mrs. Haldane asked for a clergyman before she died?"

"Certainly. She asked—for *you*!" Had his eyes not been turned away, he would have been startled by the expression on Haldane's face—so full of cold satisfaction and contempt.

"For me?" he murmured; "for me?"

"Yes. You had great influence over her—a singular influence. Perhaps, having been her spiritual adviser and knowing her thoughts so intimately, you could help me to discover the cause of the sorrow, the self-reproach, of which I have spoken."

"I—I do not understand. She always seemed so bright, so happy."

"She had no cause for secret grief? None, you think?"

"None."

Unconsciously, as he spoke, he turned and met the gaze of his cross-questioner. He flushed nervously, and turned his eyes away. Did Haldane suspect the secret of his love? Had Ellen, before she died, spoken anything to incriminate him? Surely not; else his reception would have been different. Yet in her husband's manner and look, despite his frigid politeness, there seemed a strange suspicion. The cold, cruel eyes never ceased to scrutinize him; they seemed to read his very soul.

"I see, reverend sir, that you cannot realize what has taken place."

"I cannot realize it!"

"You will at least believe the evidence of your own eyes. Step with me to the house, and look upon her!"

As he spoke, Haldane moved towards the house. After a moment's hesitation, Santley followed. Yes, he would look upon her for the last time; he would kneel and pray beside her. As he walked, he staggered like a drunken man.

They passed from the dismal shadow of the trees, crossed the snowy lawn, and ascended the steps leading to the house door. How dark and funereal looked the old mansion as they entered! All was silent; not a soul stirred; their footsteps sounded hollow on the paven floor of the open hall.

Haldane led the way into the drawingroom. The blinds were drawn, there was no fire, and the chamber seemed like a tomb.

"Wait here one moment," said Haldane; and he retired, closing the door.

Santley sat and waited. His very life seemed ebbing away within him, but the low, deep thud of his overburdened heart kept time like a clock, and his ears were full of a sound like low thunder. His lips were dry as dust, and he moistened them vainly with his trembling tongue. Even then, as he sat shivering, he heard again from the distance the faint chime of the desolate chapel bell.

Toll! toll! toll! toll!

The door opened.

Haldane, bareheaded, appeared on the threshold.

"Come this way," he said in a whisper.

Santley rose and tremulously followed. Through the dark lobbies, up the broad staircase, he went in terror, till Haldane paused at the closed door of the room on the first story, and, placing his finger solemnly on his lips, turned a key and entered.

Santley followed, and found himself at last in the chamber of death.

It was a large bedchamber, dimly lighted by the faint rays that crept through the blind, and scented, or so it seemed, with some sickly perfume. In one corner stood the white, cold bed, snowy sheeted, snowy curtained; and there, stretched out chill and stark, lay something whiter and colder—the marble bust of what had once been a living creature.

Yes, it was she, beautiful even in death. Her eyes were closed, her hair was smoothed softly over her brows, her face was fixed like marble in ghastly pallor, her waxen hands were folded on the sheet which covered her from feet to chin. She almost seemed to be sleeping, not dead, she was so calm, peaceful, and lovely, in that last repose.

On a small table beside the bed lay her Bible (Santley knew it well; it was a present from himself, with his own name written on the flyleaf), and a waxen taper, unlighted. Lying on the coverlet, close to her fingers, was a wreath of immortelles.

And through the window, which was left open at the top to admit the pure air, came again, wafted by the wind, the low, dreadful tolling of the chapel bell.

Toll! toll!

Haldane stood close by the bedside, not looking at his wife, but always keeping his stern eyes fixed upon the clergyman. Step by step, horrified yet fascinated, Santley crept nearer and nearer to the bed, his eyes dilated, his face even more ghastly than the face on which he gazed. He noticed everything—the marble features, the folded hands, the closed eyes beneath their waxen lids; he felt in his nostrils the sick perfume of death.

Then, overmastered by the piteous sight, he raised his arms wildly in the air, uttered a cry of anguish and despair, and fell, moaning and sobbing, on his knees by the bedside.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. TORTURE AND CONFESSION.

For some minutes he remained kneeling, his strong frame shaken by deep sobs, his lips murmuring some incoherent prayer. Then he felt a touch upon the shoulder. He looked up, shuddering. "Come!" said Haldane, looking darkly down upon him.

"No, no!" he cried, in the extremity of his agitation. "Let me stay here! Let me pray by her side a little while!"

"Come away!" answered Haldane, more sternly. "This is no place for you."

Santley rose trembling to his feet, and gazed again upon the cold sleeping face and form.

"Leave me! leave me!" he exclaimed, turning wildly towards his torturer. "Leave me alone with her!"

The face of the master of the house became terrible in its sternness, as he responded—

"Command yourself, man, and follow me! You forget yourself. This place is sacred."

"My office is sacred. I desire you to leave me alone with the dead."

"And I refuse. I do not want your prayers, nor does she need them. Come!"

With a low moan, Santley turned again towards the bed, stretching out his arms; but this time Haldane interposed, with angry determination—

"Are you mad? I command you to come away."

"O God! God!"

"Do not blaspheme. She who sleeps there is nothing, or should be nothing, to you. Leave the room, or, by Heaven, I shall have to make you!"

Beside himself with excitement, Santley glared at Haldane, and clenched his hands, as if he would have struck him; but, remembering the place in which he stood, and the solemnity of the occasion, he conquered his insane impulse, and tottered to the door. Haldane followed, and as he turned on the threshold, put out his hand and pushed him into the lobby; then followed, and turned the key in the lock.

"Come with me," he said, in a voice of command.

Santley obeyed, and the two descended the stairs. On the way down they met Baptisto ascending, with whom Haldane whispered hurriedly for a moment. Then they made their way through the dark lobbies, and again entered the gloomy drawing-room. With a groan Santley threw himself on a chair, and hid his face in his hands.

"You are strangely moved," said Haldane, coldly. "What was my wife to you, that you should exhibit this unseemly grief?"

Santley drew his hands from his face and looked up wildly.

"What was she to me?" he cried. "More than life—the light of all the world. Now that light is gone, and I am desolate."

"Strange words," said Haldane quietly, "to come from so holy a man! You are not in your sane mind."

"God knows I am not," returned the clergyman, "and yet... I am sane enough to know what I am saying. Yes, you may stare! I am sick of disguise. I'll wear the mask no more. I loved your wife."

Still perfectly retaining his composure, and almost smiling, Haldane said, with a dark sneer—

"Most reverend sir, I knew it."

"You know it *now!*"

"Pardon me, I have known it all along."

"You may have guessed something, but not all. I loved your wife. You were unworthy of her. I sought to win her from you, and I succeeded—yes, for she hated you, and loved me. God was on my side, for you were an unbeliever, a blasphemer. I tried to make her leave the shelter of your roof for mine. She was my first love. I tried, do you hear, day and night, to make her my own—my own in this world, and in the next." Again that calm reply—

"Most sainted sir, I knew it."

"And I tell you, I succeeded. She loved me. She would have followed me to the world's end. This house was hell to her, because you had no religion. Her soul was mine."

"And *now?*" said the other coldly. "And *now*, most holy and reverend sir?"

"And *now*, though she has passed away in her beauty and her holiness, I love her still. She is dead, and I shall die. In heaven, at least, we shall be together!"

"Are you so sure that she is *there?*" said Haldane, still very calmly. "Are you so sure that *you* will follow her? I am not so sure. If there be the heaven you speak of, it was never made for the guilty. The door of your paradise is wide, but it is too narrow, I have heard, for the sinner who dies without repentance."

"The sinner? Who is the sinner?"

"She who sleeps upstairs?"

"It is a falsehood," said Santley, rising to his feet. "She was an angel, without a stain, and you—you made her wretched. Yes, wretched! She was too good for you—too holy and spiritual. A saint! a martyr! God will cherish and justify her!"

"Saints have fallen; and she fell."

"Fell? You dare not accuse her!"

"I do accuse her; I accuse you both!... Ah! my man of God, there was no need to throw aside the mask at all; I knew the face behind it from the first. She is punished as she deserves. Now it is your turn."

His manner had changed, from one of cold self-control to one of concentrated passion. With voice raised and hand pointing, he advanced towards the clergyman. They stood close together, face to face.

But Santley fell back, horrified.

"Whatever I am, she was pure—too pure and good for this black world. Speak reverently of her! Although I loved her—and I tell you my love is justified—she was not guilty of any sin. She was only too faithful to her wifely vow—faithful in thought and deed. Again I tell you, speak reverently of her!"

"No hypocrisy can save her now," said Haldane, sternly. "You have thrown aside the mask, as you say; it is useless to assume it again. I know everything—her guilt, and yours!"

"She was not guilty. You cannot believe it!"

"Why should I doubt it? The thing was a thousand times stronger than your proofs of Holy Writ. Now, if I

said to you that she had confessed her guilt, what would you say?"

"I should say that it was not true!"

"Not true!"

"A lie—the wickedest of lies."

"Then, if she was innocent, your guilt is trebled, and you are her murderer."

"Her murderer? her murderer?"

"Yes. You have been liberal in confession; I will follow your example. You saw her lying yonder? Calm, cold, and beautiful, was she not?—yes, as a sleeping infant. Shall I tell you how she died? By poison. By the deadliest of all poisons."

"Poisoned?" cried the clergyman, raising his voice to a scream.

"Precisely. A painless death, though sure and sudden. You see, although I kept within my right, I was merciful. Death was better than disgrace, and so—I killed her!"

Santley clutched at Haldane—then, with a moan, sank swooning upon the floor.

When he recovered, he staggered to his feet, and looked around him. He was still there, in the room, which was now quite dark, but he was alone. He awoke as from death, with the cold sweat upon his forehead, his form shaking like a leaf. What a change the experience of the last hour had made in him! He felt as if he had been mad for years. As the sick horror of his position spread over his bewildered senses, he groaned aloud.

Then remembering where he was, and fearing the surrounding darkness, he groped towards the door.

Suddenly it opened, and Haldane himself, holding a lamp in his hand, appeared upon the threshold. As the light flashed upon the minister's form, it showed a face horrible in its anguish and despair. With his hair wild and dishevelled, his neckcloth disarranged, his black frock suit disordered, Santley seemed transformed. His beauty was turned into ugliness, his elegance into coarseness; his head, no longer erect and proud, drooped between his shoulders like an old man's.

"Where are you going?" said Haldane, interposing, and placing down the lamp he carried.

"Up yonder, to see if it is true. It is surely a frightful dream! Let me pass!"

"Stay where you are! Your presence shall not outrage the dead again."

"She *is* dead, then?"

"What you have seen, you have seen."

"And—you—you killed her? Is it true?"

"Perfectly."

With a wild cry, Santley clutched Haldane; but his hold was so weak, so tremulous, that the other's strong frame scarcely shook.

"You shall not escape," cried the minister. "Coward! murderer! I will deliver you up to justice!"

"Pshaw!"

With a powerful movement, Haldane disengaged himself, and his opponent fell back into the room. Santley was not a strong man, and just then he seemed positively helpless; nor would he at any time have been a match for the square-built, broad-shouldered master of Foxglove Manor.

"Hands off, if you please," said Haldane. "If it comes to a trial of strength, I shall crush your reverend carcass like an egg. Another man, in my position, would have wrung your neck long ago. Do you know why I have been so gentle with you?"

Santley gazed at him vacantly, and did not speak.

"Because I prefer to prolong your agony as long as possible, and to let the world know of what stuff its priests are made."

"You are a murderer," gasped Santley again, clutching at him, but with the feeble grasp of a sick child. "You are a murderer, on your own confession. I tell you, I will give you up."

"*Après?*" said Haldane, coolly.

"You have destroyed your wife—the purest and best woman God ever made. She was innocent of all wrong. She was an angel married to a devil, that was all."

"Will you swear to me, before the God you worship, that there was nothing between you?"

"Yes, I will swear it. I loved her, but she was pure. If there was any sin, it was on my shoulders, for I tempted her. Yet you destroyed the innocent, and let the guilty live."

Overcome by his emotion, Santley sank into a chair, sobbing. Haldane watched him for a short space in silence; then approached him and placed a hand on his shoulder. He tried to shake off the touch, with a shiver of loathing.

"I am glad that you perceive your own guilt; that is something. Under the mask of friendship—worse, under cover of your holy calling, you came to this house. I welcomed you, entertained you. I gave you my hand freely, as man to man; trusted you, even respected you, despite your superstitions. How did you reward this hospitality? By seducing, or seeking to seduce, the wife of the man who welcomed you without suspicion. This was your religion—this was your sense of Christian brotherhood. My man of God was a hypocrite—an adulterer. I tell you, a dog would have more honour, more purity. You made my house a hell. In return, I have put hell into your heart. You hear? Into your heart, if you have a heart, which would seem doubtful. Another would have killed you; I preferred to let you live."

The clergyman looked up piteously. His force seemed broken, his eyes streamed with tears.

"You should have killed me," he returned. "I was to blame, not she. You may kill me now. I shall then be at rest with *her*?"

Haldane's face blackened.

"Do not couple your names together. The guilt of her death is yours, not mine."

"Mine?"

"Yes. I was only the instrument, you were the cause. The seed of all this sorrow was sown in your black heart. Had you never tempted her, had you never filled her mind with the poison bred in your own, she would be living-now, a happy, honoured wife. You see, my man of God, that you are the murderer; you have killed her, not I."

"O God! God!" moaned Santley, hiding his face in horror.

"It is too late to call on God. If *that* is true," pursued the other, "this; also is true—that you have lost her eternally. Your God is a God of justice. He does not, either in hell or heaven, bring the murderer and his victim together. You murdered her soul first; then, since you made it inevitable, I destroyed its mortal dwelling. Since you believe in hell, surely this is enough to damn you. Say she is innocent. The better for her; the worse for you. She is among the angels your place is elsewhere, eternally; *there* you may wail and gnash your teeth in vain. You see, reverend sir, I am comforting you with your own beautiful creed. Your faith in it was great; through your faith in it, you are lost for ever."

With a cry, almost an imprecation, Santley staggered to his feet, unable to listen any longer. Sorrow, shame, terror, horror, contended within him. Already it seemed as if the earth was opened to swallow him, the forked tongues of fire-shooting up to envelop and consume him.

He rushed towards the door. This time the other did not interpose.

"Where are you going, pray?" he demanded quietly.

Santley turned round upon him, livid, glaring like a madman.

"To fetch the police," he answered.

"I shall denounce you. Whatever becomes of me, you shall die, upon the gallows."

"Permit me to light you to the door," answered the philosopher, smiling. "You could not go upon a better errand.. Sound the alarm, fetch the police hither; the sooner the better. When they come, they shall be acquainted with the truth. They shall know, all the world shall know, that I killed my wife; and *why?* Because a clergyman, a man of God, honoured by many, respected by all, had come to my house like a satyr, and made it a nest of pollution. I shall stand in the dock, and the chief witness, against me will be yourself—the Rev.. Charles Santley, Vicar of Omberley, a living light, a pillar of the Church, self-convicted as hypocrite, liar, adulterer, seducer, satyr—filthy from the soul to the finger-tips. How the sweet maids of your congregation will stare! It will be a *cause célèbre*—a nine-days' wonder. And on the next Sabbath, perhaps, you will preach the gospel of love and purity, as usual!"

Santley clung to the doorway, limp and crushed, a picture of mingled fury and desolation.

"By the way, I shall call witnesses in my own defence. First, Miss Dove,—you see, I know her—one of the many who have ornamented slippers for the holy man's feet, and cloths for his altar. She will tell them of meetings by night, of holy trysts, of Eden, and—of the fall. Oh, it will be a famous affair, and greatly to the honour of the Church. But why are you lingering so long? Go at once, reverend sir, and proclaim the murder. You see, I am quite ready."

He pointed to the hall door. With a wild cry, Santley passed along the lobby, opened the door, and rushed out into the air.

CHAPTER XXXIX. GETHSEMANE.

By this time darkness had fallen, though it was still early in the afternoon. There was a high wind, moaning around among the leafless trees; and, from time to time, flakes of snow were falling—large, and far apart. As he descended the snow-clad steps, he stumbled and fell among the drift, but rose again immediately, covered with patches of whiteness, and pursued his way.

Was it the wind shrieking, or something in his own troubled brain? He looked wildly around him, plunging this, way and that, like a blind man. The darkness frothed before his eyes, and burst into spangled stars, as when one receives a violent blow, or as when one is sinking in deep water and choking for breath.

Presently he turned and looked back from the centre of the frozen lawn. Behind him, blacker than the blackness of the night, lay the great shadow of the Manor house; but from one window above the entrance came a feeble light. He knew the window well. It was that of the chamber wherein he had looked upon the dead.

Alone in the darkness, he threw up his arms and uttered a wail of despair. As his voice rose upon the wind, other voices seemed to echo him with sounds of mocking laughter. Haldane had told him that he had lost his soul alive—Indeed it seemed so, and hell was already around, and in him.

But he remembered his purpose, and hastened on. Whatever the issue might be, he was determined to hand over that man to the law, to make him expiate on the gallows his act of cowardly, treacherous vengeance. He had not spared *her*, and he should, at least, pay the penalty. *Then*, when he had avenged her death, he cared not what became of himself. He could die, too; yes, and would.

Ah! but the man was right, when he had torn his soul open and showed the cancerous sore within it. He had broken the laws of God, and he had lost eternally what he loved. There was no justification for him—none. He had been an adulterer in thought, if not in deed—a hypocrite, hiding a loathsome lust under the garment of religion. Why had he not been warned in time? He might, have known that the man he had to deal with—a man who believed in nothing—would pause at nothing. He remembered, too late, that monkish tale of

jealousy and murder, which might have told him, had he not been so mad, what was lurking so pitilessly in the man's mind. It was little comfort now to reflect that he was innocent in act. The consequences had been the same, as horrible, as irrevocable; as if he had sinned seventy times and seven. By his abominable solicitation, he had betrayed the woman he adored. Yes, he had killed her! What hope could there be for him, in this world or another, after that?

Nevertheless, he hastened on, fighting with his own thoughts in the darkness stumbling through the drifted snow. He found the avenue and entered it—passing into deeper darkness, hearing the wind shriek more loudly on every side. The police barrack was at Omberley, five miles distant. He would hasten there without delay, tell what had taken place, and return with the officers that night. He would not rest until he had the murderer bound and captured: for even yet, if he did come back quickly, he might escape.

Then he thought of all the shame, the scandal, which must assuredly come with the revelation of the truth. The women who had thought him almost a sainted creature, the villagers who had watched him with simple reverence—all who had respected him and heard the gospel of love from his lips, would point at him as a shameless creature, a scandal to his holy office. He could never mount the pulpit again, or walk in the sun. They would strip the priestly raiment from his back, and hound him away into the world. Even his own sister, who thought him the purest and best of men, would shrink from him with loathing; nay, how could he look her, or any pure creature, in the face?

All that, and more, he thought, could have been borne, could he only have restored the dead to life. His own fall and degradation would have been a trifle, if he had not sacrificed that sainted being—the woman of his early love, the creature of his idolatry, the object of his insane and fatal passion. She had suffered for his guilt, but she had not atoned for it. Nothing could atone, nothing. How gladly that night would he have died, if by death he could have restored her to the sunshine of the world!

Then, in his despair, he reproached her God—the God who had made her so beautiful, and him so weak. Why had God ever brought them together? Why, having once separated them, had He ever caused them to meet again? It was cruel, unmerciful, to tempt a man so much! He had only asked for a little love, and without love life was so dark. And before temptation came, had he not done God good service? More than one doubting heart had been turned, by his persuasion, back to the faith of Christ; more than one erring sinner had, through him, been led back, penitent and weeping, to the Church's fold! All men had respected him for his blameless life, for his good deeds.

He had been kind to the suffering, generous to the poor. He had been an example of Christian charity to his fellows. He had reflected honour on the university which gave him to the Church, and on the Church which had accepted him into her bosom. Though so young, he had risen high, by his own talents, his intelligence, his own blameless character. And now he had lost everything, because he had pined for a little sympathy, a little love.

As these thoughts passed through his brain, his eyes were blinded with tears, and, in utter self-pity, he sobbed aloud.

How dark it was! how miserably dark and cold! He could not see an inch before him, could not even perceive the white ground beneath his feet; but the wind wailed louder and louder on every side.

He remembered how gladly, the previous day, he had proclaimed the good tidings of the birth of Christ. The bells had rung, and from every side, over the white landscape, cold, but cheerful and light with sunshine, the people had come gathering in—rich and poor, old and young, all gaily clad for Christmas-tide. He had stood away—stood in the pulpit, and had seen the shining faces upturned reverently to his, and had heard the clear voices ring out in happiness and praise. Ah, it had been a beautiful time! Only yesterday, and already it seemed so far away!

In his misery, he quite forgot how much and how often he had fretted under the yoke of his priestly duties; how he had despised the ignoble natures of his flock; how he had panted again and again for a freer life and for more eventful days! What he had lost for ever now seemed strangely dear. As he reviewed his life in the village, he remembered none of its cares, none of its indignities; it seemed all peaceful, all beautiful, *now!* Yes, it was heaven, though he had not known it; heaven, though he had fallen from it. And he could never return to it again; never preach in the church, never minister to man or woman, never know the blessing and the peace of a divine vocation any more!

Suddenly he paused, stumbling in bewilderment and terror He had stepped into a deep snowdrift, which rose nearly to his knees. He looked wildly round, but could discern nothing. He pressed his way forward, and stumbled against the frozen root of a great tree. He turned and groped another way; again something interposed. Gradually, straining his eyes through the darkness, he discerned that he was surrounded by trees on every side.

He had wandered from the avenue, and was long among the plantations—he could not tell in what direction.

How long he wandered among the dreary woods he could not tell.

A mortal fever was upon him, and he struggled confusedly this way and that, sometimes stumbling and falling amid the snow, sometimes coming violently against the frozen tree-trunks, sometimes rushing among briars and tangled underwoods which clutched him like fingers, and rent his clothing as he tore himself away.

He shouted, thinking he might be heard. His shout rose faintly on the wind, and was echoed by unearthly voices.

Then he seemed to see sheeted shapes passing before him; ghostly faces flashing into his own, and fading away. He saw *her* face, marble-white as he had seen it in death, and with horrible rebuking eyes.

Ah, that night! that night! He passed an eternity of agony, in a few hours!

At last he fell, half fainting, on the stump of a tree, and rested, afraid to venture further. Pausing there, he clasped his hands together and prayed.

For her; for himself. He prayed to Heaven for help and mercy. In his abject fear and humiliation, he prostrated his soul before his God. His strength seemed failing him, and he felt as if he were dying. Ah, the

horrible darkness! the nameless terror! Would he ever live to see the light again?

The snow thickened and fell upon him; he shook it off again and again, but still it fell, blinding and covering him. He became very cold, despite the fever in his veins—cold as death. Afraid to perish that way, he rose to his feet and struggled on.

At last, after wandering on and on for an indefinite space of time, he saw a light breaking through the trees. He shouted, and ran forward.

The light came from the windows of some building, and streamed brightly out into the darkness, lighting up the snowy ground, revealing the trees and branches in silhouette. Wild and despairing, he approached nearer, and saw a door, through the hinges of which shone a faint radiance. Then he recognized the place. It was the ruined chapel of Foxglove Manor.

He did not hesitate, but pushed open the door. He found himself in the building which George Haldane had turned from a temple of God into a laboratory of science. In the centre of it, surrounded by books, papers, and scientific implements of divers kinds, a man sat, calmly writing by the light of a brilliant oil-lamp.

As Santley entered, he looked up. The master of Foxglove Manor.

Spectral and ghastly, his hair dishevelled, his dress torn and disordered, covered with mud, the minister staggered into the chapel. Who, in that frenzied apparition, would have recognized the sometime spruce and comely Vicar of Omerley? In one of his falls he had cut his forehead on a tree or stone, and blood was oozing from the wound. He was a horrible sight—horrible and pitiable.

Haldane looked up, and nodded.

“So, it is *you!*” he said, pushing his papers aside.

A large meerschaum pipe lay on the table beside him, with a box of lucifers. He struck a light, and quietly began to smoke, as he continued—

“You have returned quickly. Pray, have you brought the police with you?” Without answering him directly, Santley approached the table, and, fixing his wild eyes upon him, demanded in a hollow voice—

“What are you doing?”

The philosopher leant back in his chair, and blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

“Writing, as you see.”

“Writing!” echoed Santley.

“Yes; at my history. To-night’s experience has furnished me with material for a new chapter—on ‘Spiritual Vivisection.’”

The man was inconceivable, even satanic. Santley was again dominated by his supernatural *sang froid*—his supreme self-control.

“Have you a heart, man?” he cried, gazing in horror upon him.

Haldane smiled diabolically.

“A reference to the most rudimentary system of physiology,” he replied, “would convince you that I could not exist without one.”

“Death in your house, murder in your heart, you can sit here so calmly, still busy with your blasphemies? You cannot be human.”

“On the contrary, I am particularly human.”

“No, no; you are a devil! a devil!”

“If you were a philosopher, you would know that devils do not exist; even your own not too intellectual Church has rejected demonology. I am simply a physician; yours.”

“Mine! my physician.”

“I have opened your heart, to show you the canker existing within it. I have shown you, in an interesting experiment, that the disease of supersensuous desire, which with you is constitutional and inherited, culminates in moral scrofula, imbecility, hysterical mania, and death. It is, moreover, capable of spreading contagion—a sort of cancerous cell, which, inhaled by the lips or from the polluted atmosphere, must inevitably bring disease and death to others. The kiss of the leper, reverend sir! For the future, I should recommend you to carry a clapper with you, as they do in the East, to warn off the unwary.”

The comparison was a hideous one but indeed, at that moment, it did not seem inappropriate. Wild, ghastly, dishevelled, bloody, and degraded, Santley looked a creature to be avoided and even feared. He listened to the cold periods of his torturer, fixed his pale eyeballs, which seemed vacant of all light, upon his face; then suddenly, with a spasmodic scream, he leapt upon him and seized him by the throat.

The attack was so unexpected and so sudden, that Haldane was taken by surprise. He sprang to his feet, while the other clung around him like a wild cat. But the struggle was only brief.

In another minute he had gripped the vicar with his powerful arms, and pinned him against the wall of the chapel. There he writhed and wrestled, impotent, furious, foaming at the mouth.

“If you don’t control yourself better,” said the philosopher, between his set teeth, “you will soon want a strait-waistcoat. Be quiet, will you?”

And he shook him as a wiry terrier shakes a rat.

“Let me go!”

“I have a good mind to give you your *coup de grâce?*” returned Haldane, with a little less composure than before. “Why, I could strangle you if I pleased.”

“Strangle me, then!”

“Bah! you are not worth the trouble,” said the other, throwing him off. “Tell me, again, where are your police officers? Why did you not bring them?”

Utterly conquered and helpless, Santley did not reply. Haldane pointed to the door.

"At any rate, get out of this. I am going to close my studies and go to bed."

And he proceeded to turn down the lamp, previous to blowing it out.

Santley moved towards the door. As he did so, the lamp was extinguished, and the chapel left in pitch darkness. He groped his way out, and stood waiting on the threshold. The philosopher followed, and they stood together in the open darkness. Then Haldane closed the door and turned the key.

"Your way lies yonder, reverend sir," he said, pointing towards the avenue. "Take my advice and sleep upon it, before you return to arrest me. I will keep your secret, if you will keep mine."

"I will make no terms with you," cried the vicar. "I will return, and have you dragged to justice."

"As you please," was the reply. Haldane walked slowly in the direction of the house. Santley, after a minute's wild hesitation, rushed away again into the night.

By this time the snow had ceased falling, and the air was a little clearer. With little difficulty, Santley found the avenue, and, running rather than walking, followed it till he reached the lodge.

As he did so, he heard voices singing in merry chorus. He waited, and presently a light cart drove up, turning into the avenue. He called out, and it stopped. He came close, and found that it contained five persons, two men and three women.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Where are you going?"

Mrs. Feme, the lodge-keeper, who was one of the party, informed him that they were Mr. Haldane's servants, returning from their holiday excursion to the neighbouring town.

"Go up to the house at once!" he cried. "Seize your master, detain him till I return. Your mistress has been murdered!"

They cried out in terror and astonishment, asking for particulars.

"I cannot stay," he answered wildly.

"Go on, and watch till I return. It is as I say; he has murdered your mistress. I am going for the police."

Then he fled on in the direction of the village. But as he went, his pace seemed to fail him, and his head to go round and round.

At last he reached the village, where all was dark and desolate, and, passing by the shadow of his own church, reached the Vicarage gate. Here he paused, almost spent. He could not go any further. He would go in and get a little brandy, then he would hasten on for assistance.

He staggered in through the gate, and across the garden. There was a light in the window, for Miss Santley was sitting up for her brother, wondering what had kept him so late. He crept close to the window and tapped upon it.

"Mary! Mary!" he moaned.

She heard him, looked out, and then opened the door, standing on the threshold with a lighted candle in her hand.

At the sight of his blood-stained face and disordered dress, she uttered a cry of fear.

As she did so, he stretched out his hands, and fell like a corpse across the threshold.

CHAPTER XL. THREE LETTERS.

They carried him into the house and laid him on a bed; then, seeing him still speechless, and to all appearance senseless, Miss Santley sent for Dr. Spruce, who lived close by. By the time that the doctor, a homely old country practitioner, with much professional skill and worldly wisdom, entered the chamber, Santley was sitting up and talking incoherently. He tried to leave his bed and fly forth upon some wild errand, and his speech was a confused medley, in which the words "murder," "poison," and "Ellen Haldane," were constantly repeated. He did not seem to recognize any one, and his whole appearance was alarming in the extreme.

Miss Santley told how she had found him, and in what condition. The doctor shook his head.

"I'm afraid it's brain fever," he muttered. "You must keep him very quiet."

Before morning, the doctor's prediction proved to be right. Brain fever of the most violent kind had set in. He lay as if at death's door, incoherently raving.

Alarmed by the constant references to the one subject of "murder," and the constant repetitions of Mrs. Haldane's name, Miss Santley next day sent a messenger up to Foxglove Manor to make inquiries. Her messenger ascertained from Mrs. Feme, the lodge-keeper, that the vicar had been seen by the servants the previous night, in a state resembling mania, and had told them some wild story of Mrs. Haldane's death by violence. For the rest, Mrs. Feme said, nothing of an extraordinary nature had occurred at the Manor, and her mistress, though slightly indisposed, was up and about.

So Miss Santley kept watch by the delirious man's bedside, while he lay and fought for life.

The crisis passed. One morning the vicar opened his eyes, and saw his sister sitting silently close to his bed. The fever had almost left him, and he recognized his own room in the Vicarage.

"Is it you, Mary?" he asked, reaching out his hand, now worn almost to a skeleton.

"Yes, it is I. But you must not speak."

"Have I been ill, Mary?"

"Yes; very, very ill."

He closed his eyes, and seemed to fall into a sleep, which lasted for some hours. Suddenly he started up, as if listening, and seemed about to spring from the bed.

"What is it, dear?" asked his sister, softly soothing him.

He recognized her, and became calm in a moment.

"I was dreaming. I thought I was up at the Manor. Mary, quick—speak to me! Have they buried her?"

She looked at him in wonder and terror.

"Hush, dear! The doctor says you are to keep very quiet."

"But I must know. Tell me, or you will kill me! What has happened? How long have I been lying here?"

"Many days. But you are better now."

"Do you know what has taken place?" he whispered. "Ellen Haldane is dead—murdered! He killed her."

She shook her head pityingly.

"No, no! Do not distress yourself, dear, or you will be ill again. Mrs. Haldane is quite well."

"Quite well? No, no!"

"You have been dreaming, that is all."

"Only dreaming?" he repeated, vacantly. "But I tell you I saw her, dead, shrouded for her grave. Mary, it must be true!"

She succeeded at last, after repeated assurances, in soothing his distracted spirit, and he fell asleep again, moaning to himself.

It was quite true, as his sister told him, that Mrs. Haldane lived. She did not tell him, however, that she had left the Manor, with her husband, and gone away back to Spain.

Was it all a dream, then, after all?

A week later, when Santley was convalescent, but still horribly overshadowed and perplexed, his sister gave him a letter, which (she said) had been left for him by the master of Foxglove Manor. It was marked "strictly private." Santley waited until he was alone, and then, tearing it open with tremulous fingers, read as follows:

—
"Sir,

"I hear that you have been ill. Before leaving for Spain, I have left this with your sister, with instructions that it is to be given you when you are strong enough to read and understand. What it contains, observe, is strictly between you and me; and if you keep your own counsel, no one will know the secret of your indisposition but ourselves.

"In the first place, be comforted by my assurance that my wife is in excellent health. If, in your delirium, you have been under delusions concerning her, dispel them; all that has passed. She lives; and you will live. If you have thought otherwise (and we know sick men have wild fancies), consider that you have merely had an extraordinary dream. Yet, remembering that men have often ere now been warned by visions of calamities to ensue as the consequence of their own mad acts, accept the dream as a sort of divine admonition—an inspiration to lead you towards a better and calmer life. In your dream, sir, you have had your own heart vivisected, and have thus been made conscious of its disease; you have suffered terribly, as all patients must suffer, under the knife. But you will be healed. You will begin the world afresh, and, God willing, become a new man, thanking God, every day you live, that it was only a dream.

"By the time you read this we shall be far away. With my sincere hopes for your perfect recovery, I am, sir, yours truly,

"George Haldane.

"P.S.—My wife knows nothing of your dream, in any of its phenomena. Some day, perhaps, I shall enlighten her, but not yet. She sends you her best wishes."

That was all Santley read and re-read in amazement, not quite comprehending, yet dimly guessing that there had been some strange mystery. At last, relieved by the thought that all his guilty agony had perhaps been a dream indeed, he sunk back upon the pillow of his armchair, and wept aloud.

That same afternoon, as he sat looking at his loving nurse, he questioned her concerning Edith. It was the first time, since his recovery, that he had mentioned her name.

"Where is she? Have they heard from her? Is she well?"

"She is well, I believe," replied Miss Santley. "Just after you fell ill, her aunt heard from her, and went away to join her in London. They are there together now."

"Do you know their address?"

"Yes; I heard from Rachel that they are staying at the Golden Cross Hotel, near the station."

In the evening, Santley insisted on having pen, ink, and paper. His sister begged him not to fatigue himself by writing, but he was determined.

"Charles," she said softly, as she brought him what he wanted, "is it to Edith you are going to write?"

"Yes," he replied; and she stooped and kissed him approvingly. Then she left him alone, and he wrote as follows:—

"Dearest Edith,

"Come to me; come back to Omberley. I have had a dangerous illness, but through it, God has opened my eyes. I love you, darling. We will be married at once in the dear old church. Yours till death,

"Charles Santley."

Two days afterwards, the reply came, in Ellen's own handwriting, thus:

"I, too, have had an illness, in which, also, God has been pleased to open my eyes. I know, now, that it is all over between us. I shall never marry you; I shall never return to Omberley. I am going abroad with my aunt, who knows all I have suffered, and approves an eternal separation.

"Edith Dove."

Some months later, the vicar resigned his living in the parish, and disappeared from the scene of his early labours. The year following, it was publicly stated in the religious newspapers that the Rev. Charles Santley, sometime Vicar of Omberley, had entered the Church of Rome.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FOXGLOVE MANOR: A NOVEL, VOLUME 3 (OF 3) ***

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