Title: Helbeck of Bannisdale — Volume II

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Release date: December 1, 2005 [EBook #9442]
Most recently updated: August 4, 2012

Language: English



Produced by Andrew Templeton, Juliet Sutherland, Thomas

Berger, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

# HELBECK OF BANNISDALE

by

**MRS. HUMPHRY WARD**

… metus ille … Acheruntis … Funditus humanam qui vitam turbat ab imo

In two volumes

Vol. II.

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# BOOK III *Continued*

### HELBECK OF BANNISDALE

### CHAPTER II.

"Look out there! For God's sake, go to your places!"

The cry of the foreman reached the ears of the clinging women. They fell apart—each peering into the crowd and the tumult.

Mounted on a block of wood about a dozen yards from them—waving his arm and shouting to the stream of panic-stricken workmen—they saw the man who had been their guide through the works. Four white-hot ingots, just uncovered, blazed deserted on their truck close to him, and a multitude of men and boys were pushing past them, tumbling over each other in their eagerness to reach the neighbourhood of the furnace. The space between the ingots and some machinery near them was perilously narrow. At any moment, those rushing past might have been pushed against the death-bearing truck. Ah! another cry. A man's coat-sleeve has caught fire. He is pulled back—another coat is flung about him—the line of white faces turns towards him an instant—wavers—then the crowd flows on as before.

Another man in authority comes up also shouting. The man on the block dismounts, and the two hold rapid colloquy. "Have they sent for Mr. Martin?" "Aye." "Where's Mr. Barlow?" "He's no good!" "Have they stopped the mills?" "Aye—there's not a man'll touch a thing—you'd think they'd gone clean out of their minds. There'll be accidents all over the place if somebody can't quiet 'em."

Suddenly the buzzing groups behind the foreman parted, and a young broad-shouldered workman, grimed from head to foot, his blue eyes rolling in his black face, came staggering through.

"Gie ma a drink," he said, clutching at the old woman; "an let ma sit down!"

He almost fell upon an iron barrow that lay face downwards on the path. Laura, sitting crouched and sick upon the ground, raised her head to look at him. Another man, evidently a comrade, followed him, took the mug of cold tea from the old woman's shaking hand, lifted his head and helped him drink it.

"Blast yer!—why ain't it spirits?" said the youth, throwing himself back against his companion. His eyes closed on his smeared cheeks; his jaw fell; his whole frame seemed to sink into collapse; those gazing at him saw, as it were, the dislocation and undoing of a man.

"Cheer up, Ned—cheer up," said the older man, kneeling down behind him—"you'll get over it, my boy—it worn't none o' your fault. Stand back there, you fellows, and gie im air."

"Oh, damn yer! let ma be," gasped the young fellow, stretching himself against the other's support, like one who feels the whole inner being of him sick to death, and cannot be still for an instant under the anguish.

The woman with the tea began to cry loudly and ask questions. Laura rose to her feet, and touched her.

"Don't cry—can't you get some brandy?" Then in her turn she felt herself caught by the arm.

"Miss Fountain—Miss Laura—I can get you out of this!—there's a way out here by the back."

Mason's white countenance showed over her shoulder as she turned.

"Not yet—can't anyone find some brandy? Ah!"

For their guide came up at the moment with a bottle in his hand. It was Laura who handed him the mug, and it was she who, stooping down, put the spirit to the lips of the fainting workman. Her mind seemed to float in a mist of horror, but her will asserted itself; she recovered her power of action sooner than the men around her. They stared at the young lady for a moment; but no more. The one hideous fact that possessed them robbed all else of meaning.

"Did he see it?" said Laura to the man's friend. Her voice reached no ear but his. For they were surrounded by two uproars—the noise of the crowd of workmen, a couple of thousand men aimlessly surging and shouting to each other, and the distant thunder of the furnace.

"Aye, Miss. He wor drivin the tub, an he saw Overton in front—it wor the wheel of his barrer slipped, an soomthin must ha took him—if he'd ha let goa straight theer ud bin noa harm doon—bit he mut ha tried to draw it back—an the barrer pulled him right in."

"He didn't suffer?" said Laura eagerly, her face close under his.

"Thank the Lord, he can ha known nowt aboot it!—nowt at aw. The gas ud throttle him, Miss, afore he felt the fire."

"Is there a wife?"

"Noa—he coom here a widower three weeks sen—there's a little gell——"

"Aye! they be gone for her an t' passon boath," said another voice; "what's passon to do whan he cooms?"

"Salve the masters' consciences!" cried a third in fury. "They'll burn us to hell first, and then quieten us with praying."

Many faces turned to the speaker, a thin, wiry man one of the "agitators" of the town, and a dull groan went round.

* * * * *

"Make way there!" cried an imperious voice, and the crowd between them and the entrance side of the shed began to part. A gentleman came through, leading a clergyman, who walked hurriedly, with eyes downcast, holding his book against his breast.

There was a flutter of caps through the vast shed. Every head stood bared, and bent. On went the parson towards the little platform with the railway. The furnace had sunk somewhat—its roar was less acute—— Laura looking at it thought of the gorged beast that falls to rest.

But another parting of the throng—one sob!—the common sob of hundreds.

Laura looked.

"It's t' little gell, Ned! t' little gell!" said the elder workman to the youth he was supporting.

And there in the midst of the blackened crowd of men was a child, frightened and weeping, led tenderly forward by a grey-haired workman, who looked down upon her, quite unconscious of the tears that furrowed his own cheeks.

"Oh, let me—let me go!" cried Laura. The men about her fell back. They made a way for her to the child. The old woman had disappeared. In an instant Laura, as of right, took the place of her sex. Half an hour before she had been the merest passing stranger in that vast company; now she was part of them, organically necessary to the act passing in their midst. The men yielded her the child instinctively, at once; she caught the little one in her sheltering arm.

"Ought she to be here?" she asked sharply of the grey-haired man.

"They're goin to read the Burial Service, Miss," he said, as he dashed away the mist from his eyes. "An we thowt that the little un would like soom day to think she'd been here. So I found her—she wor in school."

The child looked round her in terror. The platform in front of the furnace had been hurriedly cleared. It was now crowded with men—masters and managers in black coats mingled with workmen, to the front the parson in his white. He turned to the throng below and opened his book.

"*I am the Resurrection and the Life.*"

A great pulsation passed through the mob of workmen. On all sides strong men broke down and wept.

The child stared at the platform, then at these faces round her that were turned upon her.

"Daddy—where's Daddy?" she said trembling, her piteous eyes travelling up and down the pretty lady beside her.

Laura sat down on the edge of a truck and drew the little shaking creature to her breast. Such a power of tenderness went out from her, so soft was the breast, so lulling the scent of the roses pinned into the lady's belt, that the child was stilled. Every now and then, as she looked at the men, pressing round her, a passion of fear seemed to run through her; she shuddered and struggled in Laura's hold.

Otherwise she made not a sound. And the great words swept on.

* * * * *

How the scene penetrated!—leaving great stabbing lines never to be effaced in the quivering tissues of the girl's nature. Once before she had heard the English Burial Service. Her father—groaning and fretting under the penalties of friendship—had taken her, when she was fifteen, to the funeral of an old Cambridge colleague. She remembered still the cold cemetery chapel, the gowned mourners, the academic decorum, or the mild regret amid which the function passed. Then her father's sharp impatience as they walked home—that reasonable men in a reasonable age should be asked to sit and listen to Paul's logic, and the absurdities of Paul's cosmical speculations!

And now—from what movements, what obscurities of change within herself, had come this new sense, half loathing, half attraction, that could not withdraw itself from the stroke, from the attack of this Christian poetry—these cries of the soul, now from the Psalms, now from Paul, now from the unknown voices of the Church?

Was it merely the setting that made the difference—the horror of what had passed, the infinite relief to eye and heart of this sudden calm that had fallen on the terror and distraction of the workmen—the strangeness of this vast shed for church, with its fierce perpetual drama of assaulting flame and flying shadow, and the gaunt tangled forms of its machinery—the dull glare of that distant furnace that had made so little—hardly an added throb, hardly a leaping flame! of the living man thrown to it half an hour before, and seemed to be still murmuring and growling there, behind this great act of human pity, in a dying discontent?

Whence was it—this stilling, pacifying power?

All around her men were sobbing and groaning, but as the wave dies after the storm. They seemed to feel themselves in some grasp that sustained, some hold that made life tolerable again. "Amens" came thick and fast. The convulsion of the faces was abating; a natural human courage was flowing back into contracted hearts.

"*Blessed are the dead—for they rest from their labours—*" "*as our hope is this our brother doth.*"

Laura shivered. The constant agony of the world, in its constant search for all that consoles, all that eases, laid its compelling hand upon her. By a natural instinct she wrapped her arms closer, more passionately, round the child upon her knee.

* * * * *

"Won't she come?" said Mason.

He and Seaton were standing in the downstairs parlour of a small house in a row of workmen's cottages, about half a mile from the steel works.

Mason still showed traces, in look and bearing, of the horror he had witnessed. But he had sufficiently recovered from it to be conscious into the bargain of his own personal grievance, of their spoilt day, and his lost chances. Seaton, too, showed annoyance and impatience; and as Polly entered the room he echoed Mason's question.

Polly shook her head.

"She says she won't leave the child till the last moment. We must go and have our tea, and come back for her."

"Come along then!" said Mason gloomily, as he led the way to the door.

The little garden outside, as they passed through it, was crowded with women discussing the accident, and every now and then a crowd would gather on the pavement and disperse again. To each and all the speakers, the one intolerable thing was the total disappearance of the poor lost one. No body—no clothes—no tangible relic of the dead: it was a sore trial to customary beliefs. Heaven and hell seemed alike inconceivable when there was no phantom grave-body to make trial of them. One woman after another declared that it would send her mad if it ever happened to any belonging of hers. "But it's a mercy there's no one to fret—nobbut t' little gell—an she's too sma'." There was much talk about the young lady that had come home with her—"a nesh pretty-lukin yoong creetur"—to whom little Nelly clung strangely—no doubt because she and her father had been so few weeks in Froswick that there had been scarcely time for them to make friends of their own. The child held the lady's gown in her clutch perpetually, Mr. Dixon reported—would not lose sight of her for a moment. But the lady herself was only a visitor to Froswick, was being just taken through the works, when the accident happened,

and was to leave the town by an evening train—so it was said. However, there would be those left behind who would look after the poor lamb—Mrs. Starr, who had taken the tea to the works, and Mrs. Dixon, the Overtons' landlady. They were in the house now; but the lady had begged everyone else to keep outside.

The summer evening crept on.

At half-past six Polly with Hubert behind her climbed the stairs of the little house. Polly pushed open the door of the back room, and Hubert peered over her shoulder.

Inside was a small workman's room, with a fire burning, and the window wide open. There were tea-things on the table; a canary bird singing loudly in a cage beside the window; and a suit of man's clothes with a clean shirt hanging over a chair near the fire.

In a rocking-chair by the window lay the little girl—a child of about nine years old. She was quite colourless, but she was not crying. Her eyes still had the look of terror that the sight of the works had called up in them, and she started at every sound. Laura was kneeling beside her, trying to make her drink some tea. The child kept pushing the tea away, but her other hand held fast to Laura's arm. On the further side of the table sat two elderly women.

"Laura, there's only just time!" said Polly softly, putting her head through the door.

The child started painfully, and the cup Laura held was with difficulty saved from falling.

Laura stooped and kissed the little one's cheek.

"Dear, will you let me go now? Mrs. Dixon will take care of you—and I'll come and see you again soon."

Nelly began to breathe fast. She caught Laura's sleeve with both hands.

"Don't you go, Miss—I'll not stay with her." She nodded towards her landlady.

"Now, Nelly, you must be a good girl," said Mrs. Dixon, rising and coming forward—she was a strange, ugly woman, with an almost bald head—"you must do what your poor papa wud ha wished you to do. Let the lady go, an I'll take care on you same as one o' my own, till they can come and take you to the House."

"Oh! don't say that!" cried Laura.

But it was too late. The child had heard the word—had understood it.

She looked wildly from one to the other, then she threw herself against the side of the chair, in a very madness of crying. Now, she pushed even Laura away. It seemed as though at the sound of that one word she had felt herself indeed forsaken, she had become acquainted with her grief.

Laura's eyes filled with tears.

Polly, standing at the door, spoke to her in vain.

* * * * *

"There's another train—Mr. Seaton said so!" Laura threw the words over her shoulder as though in anger. Hubert Mason stood behind her. In her excitement it seemed to her that he was dragging her by force from this sobbing and shrieking misery before her.

"I don't believe he's right. I never heard of any train later than the 7.10," said Mason, in perplexity.

"Go and ask him."

Mason went away and returned.

"Of course he swears there is. You won't get Seaton to say he's mistaken in a hurry. All I know is I never heard of it."

"He must be right," said Laura obstinately. "Don't trouble about me—send a cab. Oh!"

She put her hands to her ears for an instant, as they stood by the door, as though to shut out the child's cries. Hubert looked down upon her, hesitating, his face flushed, his eyes drawn and sombre.

"Now—you'll let me take you home, Miss Laura? It'll be very late for you. I can get back to-morrow."

She looked up suddenly.

"No, *no*!" she said, almost stamping. "I can get home alone quite well. I want no one."

Then she caught the lad's expression—and put her hand to her brow a moment.

"Come back for me now at any rate—in an hour," she said in another voice. "Please take me to the train—of course. I must go then."

"Oh, Laura, I *can't* wait!" cried Polly from the stairs—"I wish I could. But mother's sending Daffady with the cart—and she'd be that cross."

Laura came out to the stairway.

"Don't wait. Just tell the carriage—mind"—she hung over the banisters, enforcing the words—"tell them that I'm coming by the later train. They're not to send down for me again—I can get a cab at the inn. Mind, Polly,—did you hear?"

She bent forward, caught Polly's assent, and ran back to the child.

* * * * *

An hour later Mason found Laura with little Nelly lying heavily asleep in her arms. At sight of him she put finger on lip, and, rising, carried the child to her bed. Tenderly she put her down—tenderly kissed the little hand. The child's utter sleep seemed to soothe her, for she turned away with a smile on her blanched lips. She gave money to Mrs. Starr, who was to nurse the little one for a week, and then, it seemed to Mason, she was all alacrity, all eagerness to go.

"Oh! but we're late!" she said, looking at her watch in the street. And she hastily put her head out of the window and implored the cabman to hurry.

Mason said nothing.

The station, when they reached it, was in a Saturday night ferment. Trains were starting and arriving, the platforms were packed with passengers.

Mason said a word to a porter as they rushed in. The porter answered; then, while they fled on, the man stopped a moment and looked back as though about to run after them. But a dozen passengers with luggage laid hands upon him at once, and he was left with no time for more than the muttered remark:

"Marsland? Why, there's no train beyond Braeside to-night."

"No. 4 platform," said Hubert to his companion. "Train just going." Laura threw off her exhaustion and ran.

The guard was just putting his whistle to his lips. Hubert lifted her into her carriage.

"Good-bye," she said, waving to him, and disappeared at once into a crowd of fellow-passengers.

"Right for Marsland?" cried Hubert to the guard.

The guard, who had already whistled, waved his flag as he replied:

"Marsland? No train beyond the junction to-night."

Hubert paused for a moment, then, as the train was moving briskly out, sprang upon the foot-board. A porter rushed up, the door was opened, and he was shoved in amid remonstrances from front and rear.

The heavily laden train stopped at every station—was already nearly an hour late. Holiday crowds got in and out; the platforms were gay with talk and laughter.

Mason saw nothing and heard nothing. He sat leaning forward, his hat slouched over his eyes. The man opposite thought he had fallen asleep.

Whose fault was it? Not his! He might have made sure? Why, wasn't Seaton's word good enough? *She* thought so.

Why hadn't he made sure?—in that interval before he came back for her. She might have stayed at Froswick for the night. Plenty of decent people would have put her up. He remembered how he had delayed to call the cab till the last moment.

… Good God! how could a man know what he had thought! He was fair moidered—bedazzled—by that awful thing—and all the change of plans. And there was Seaton's word for it. Seaton was a practical man, and always on the railway.

What would she say—when the train stopped? In anticipation he already heard the cry of the porters—"Braeside—all change!" The perspiration started on his brow. Why, there was sure to be a decent inn at Braeside, and he would do everything for her. She would be glad—of course she would be glad to see him—as soon as she discovered her dilemma. After all he was her cousin—her blood relation.

And Mr. Helbeck? The lad's hand clenched. A clock-face came slowly into view at a wayside station. 8.45. He was now waiting for her at Marsland. For the Squire himself would bring the trap; there was no coachman at Bannisdale. A glow of fierce joy passed through the lad's mind, as he thought of the Squire waiting, the train's arrival, the empty platform, the returning carriage. What would the Squire think? Damn him!—let him think what he liked.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in another carriage, Laura leant back with shut eyes, pursued by one waking dream after another. Shadow and flame—the whirling sparks—the cry!—that awful wrenching of the heart in her breast—the parting crowd, and the white-faced child, phantom-like, in its midst. She sat up, shaken anew by the horror of it, trying to put it from her.

The carriage was now empty. All the other travellers had dismounted, and she seemed to be rushing through the summer night alone. For the long daylight was nearly done. The purple of the June evening was passing into the more mysterious purple of the starlight; a clear and jewelled sky hung softly over valleys with "seaward parted lips," over woods with the wild rose bushes shining dimly at their edge; over knolls of rocky ground, crowned with white spreading farms; over those distant forms to the far north where the mountains melted into the night.

Her heart was still wrung for the orphaned child—prized yesterday, no doubt—they said he was a good father!—desolate to-day—like herself. "Daddy!—where's Daddy?" She laid her brow against the window-sill and let the tears come again, as she thought of that trembling cry. For it was her own—the voice of her own hunger—orphan to orphan.

And yet, after this awful day—this never to be forgotten shock and horror—she was not unhappy. Rather, a kind of secret joy possessed her as the train sped onward. Her nature seemed to be sinking wearily into soft gulfs of reconciliation and repose. Froswick, with its struggle and death, its newness and restlessness, was behind her—she was going home, to the old house, with its austerity and peace.

Home? Bannisdale, home? How strange! But she was too tired to fight herself to-night—she let the word pass. In her submission to it there was a secret pleasure.

… The first train had come in by now. Eagerly, she saw Polly on the platform—Polly looking for the pony cart. Was it old Wilson, or Mr. Helbeck? Wilson, of course! And yet—yet—she knew that Wilson had been away in Whinthorpe on farm business all day. And Mr. Helbeck was careful of the old man. Ah well! there would be something—and someone—to meet her when she arrived. Her heart knew that.

Now they were crossing the estuary. The moon was rising over the sands, and those far hills, the hills of Bannisdale. There on the further bank were the lights of Braeside. She had forgotten to ask whether they changed at the junction—probably the Marsland train would be waiting.

The Greet!—its voice was in her ears, its many channels shone in the flooding light. How near the hills seemed!—just a moonlight walk along the sands, and one was there, under the old tower and the woods. The sands were dangerous, people said. There were quicksands among them, and one must know the paths. Ah! well—she smiled. Humdrum trains and cabs were good enough for her to-night.

She hung at the open window, looking down into the silver water. How strange, after these ghastly hours, to feel yourself floating in beauty and peace—a tremulous peace—like this? The world going your way—the soul yielding itself to fate—taking no more painful thought for the morrow——

* * * * *

"Braeside! All change!"

Laura sprang from the carriage. The station clock opposite told her to her dismay that it was nearly

half-past eleven.

"Where's the Marsland train?" she said to the porter who had come forward to help her. "And how dreadfully late we are!"

"Marsland train, Miss! Last one left an hour ago—no other till 6.12 to-morrow morning."

"What do you mean? Oh! you didn't hear!—it's the train for *Marsland* I want."

"Afraid you won't get it then, Miss, till to-morrow. Didn't they warn you at Froswick? They'd ought to. This train only makes the main-line connection—for Crewe and Rugby—no connection Whinthorpe way after 8.20."

Laura's limbs seemed to waver beneath her. A step on the platform. She turned and saw Hubert Mason.

"You!"

Mason thought she would faint. He caught her arm to support her. The porter looked at them curiously, then moved away, smiling to himself.

Laura tottered to the railing at the back of the platform and supported herself against it.

"What are you here for?" she said to him in a voice—a voice of hatred—a voice that stung.

He glanced down upon her, pulling his fair moustache. His handsome face was deeply flushed.

"I only heard there was no train on, from the guard, just as you were starting; so I jumped into the next carriage that I might be of some use to you here if I could. You needn't look at me like that," he broke out violently—"I couldn't help it!"

"You might have found out," she said hoarsely.

"Say you believe I did it on purpose!—to get you into trouble!—you may as well. You'd believe anything bad about me, I know."

Already there was a new note in his voice, a hoarse, tyrannous note, as though he felt her in his power. In her terror the girl recalled that wild drive from the Browhead dance, with its disgusts and miseries. Was he sober now? What was she to do?—how was she to protect herself? She felt a passionate conviction that she was trapped, that he had planned the whole catastrophe, knowing well what would be thought of her at Bannisdale—in the neighbourhood.

She looked round her, making a desperate effort to keep down exhaustion and excitement. The main-line train had just gone, and the station-master, with a lantern in his hand, was coming up the platform.

Laura went to meet him.

"I've made a mistake and missed the last train to Marsland. Can I sit here in the station till the morning?"

The station-master looked at her sharply—then at the man standing a yard or two behind her. The young lady had to his eye a wild, dishevelled appearance. Her fair hair had escaped its bonds in all directions, and was hanging loose upon her neck behind. Her hat had been crumpled and bent by the child's embracing arms; the little muslin dress showed great smears of coal-dust here and there, and the light gloves were black.

"No, Miss," he said, with rough decision. "You can't sit in the station. There'll be one more train down directly—the express—and then we shut the station for the night."

"How long will that be?" she asked faintly. He looked at his watch.

"Thirty-five minutes. You can go to the hotel, Miss. It's quite respectable."

He gave her another sharp glance. He was a Dissenter, a man of northern piety, strict as to his own morals and other people's. What on earth was she doing here, in that untidy state, with a young man, at an hour going on for midnight? Missed train? The young man said nothing about missed trains.

But just as he was turning away, the girl detained him.

"How far is it across the sands to Marsland station?"

"Eight miles, about—shortest way."

"And the road?"

"Best part of fifteen."

He walked off, throwing a parting word behind him.

"Now understand, please, I can't have anybody here when we lock up for the night."

Laura hardly heard him. She was looking first to one side of the station, then to the other. The platform and line stood raised under the hill. Just outside the station to the north the sands of the estuary stretched bare and wide under the moon. In the other direction, on her right hand, the hills rose steeply; and close above the line a limestone quarry made a huge gash in the fell-side. She stood and stared at the wall of glistening rock that caught the moon; at the little railing at the top, sharp against the sky; at the engine-house and empty trucks.

Suddenly she turned back towards Mason. He stood a few yards away on the platform, watching her, and possessed by a dumb rage of jealousy that entirely prevented him from playing any rational or plausible part. Her bitter tone, her evident misery, her refusal an hour or two before to let him be her escort home—all that he had feared and suspected that morning—during the past few weeks,—these things made a dark tumult about him, in which nothing else was audible than the alternate cries of anger and passion.

But she walked up to him boldly. She tried to laugh.

"Well! it is very unlucky and very disagreeable. But the station-master says there is a respectable inn. Will you go and see, while I wait? If it won't do—if it isn't a place I can go to—I'll rest here while you ask, and then I shall walk on over the sands to Marsland. It's eight miles—I can do it."

He exclaimed:

"No, you can't."—His voice had a note of which he was unconscious, a note that increased the girl's fear of him.—"Not unless you let me take you. And I suppose you'd sooner die than put up with another hour of me!—The sands are dangerous. You can ask them."

He nodded towards the men in the distance.

She put a force on herself, and smiled. "Why shouldn't you take me? But go and look at the inn first—please!—I'm very tired. Then come and report."

She settled herself on a seat, and drew a little white shawl about her.
From its folds her small face looked up softened and beseeching.

He lingered—his mind half doubt, half violence, He meant to force her to listen to him—either now, or in the morning. For all her scorn, she should know, before they parted, something of this misery that burnt in him. And he would say, too, all that it pleased him to say of that priest-ridden fool at Bannisdale.

She seemed so tiny, so fragile a thing as he looked down upon her. An ugly sense of power came to consciousness in him. Coupled with despair, indeed! For it was her very delicacy, her gentlewoman's grace—maddeningly plain to *him* through all the stains of the steel works—that made hope impossible, that thrust him down as her inferior forever.

"Promise you won't attempt anything by yourself—promise you'll sit here till I come back," he said in a tone that sounded like a threat.

"Of course."

He still hesitated. Then a glance at the sands decided him. How, on their bare openness, could she escape him?—if she did give him the slip. Here and there streaks of mist lay thin and filmy in the moonlight. But as a rule the sands were clear, the night without a stain.

"All right. I'll be back in ten minutes—less!"

She nodded. He hurried along the platform, asked a question or two of the station-master, and disappeared.

She turned eagerly to watch. She saw him run down the road outside the station—past a grove of trees—out into the moonlight again. Then the road bent and she saw him no more. Just beyond the

bend appeared the first houses of the little town.

She rose. Her heart beat so, it seemed to her to be a hostile thing hindering her. A panic terror drove her on, but exhaustion and physical weakness caught at her will, and shod her feet with lead.

She walked down the platform, however, to the station-master.

"The gentleman has gone to inquire at the inn. Will you kindly tell him when he comes back that I have made up my mind after all to walk to Marsland? He can catch me up on the sands."

"Very good, Miss. But the sands aren't very safe for those that don't know 'em. If you're a stranger you'd better not risk it."

"I'm not a stranger, and my cousin knows the way perfectly. You can send him after me."

She left the station. In her preoccupation she never gave another thought to the station-master.

But there was something in the whole matter that roused that person's curiosity. He walked along the raised platform to a point where he could see what became of the young lady.

There was only one exit from the station. But just outside, the road from the town passed in a tunnel under the line. To get at the sands one must double back on the line after leaving the station, walk through the tunnel, and then leave the road to your right. The stony edge of the sands came up to the road, which shot away eastwards along the edge of the estuary, a straight white line that gradually lost itself in the night.

The man watching saw the small figure emerge. But the girl never once turned to the tunnel. She walked straight towards the town, and he lost sight of her in a dense patch of shadow made by some overhanging trees about a hundred yards from the station.

"Upon my word, she's a deep 'un!" he said, turning away; "it beats me—fair."

"Hi!" shouted the porter from the end of the platform. "There's a message just come in, sir."

The station-master turned to the telegraph office in some astonishment. It was not the ordinary signal message, or the down signal would have dropped.

He read off. "If a lady arrives by 10.20, too late for Marsland train,
kindly help her make arrangements for night. Direct her to White Hart
Inn, tell her will meet her Marsland first train. Reply. Helbeck,
Bannisdale."

The station-master stared at the message. It was, of course, long after hours, and Mr. Helbeck—whose name he knew—must have had considerable difficulty in sending the message from Marsland, where the station would have been shut before ten o'clock, after the arrival of the last train.

Another click—and the rattle of the signal outside. The express was at hand. He was not a man capable of much reasoning at short notice, and he had already drawn a number of unfavourable inferences from the conduct of the two people who had just been hanging about the station. So he hastily replied:

"Lady left station, said intended to walk by sands, but has gone towards town. Gentleman with her."

Then he rushed out to attend to the express.

* * * * *

But Laura had not gone to the town. From the platform she had clearly seen a path on the fell-side, leading over some broken ground to the great quarry above the station. The grove of trees had hidden the starting of the path from her, but some outlet into the road there must be; she had left the station in quest of it.

And as soon as she reached the trees a gate appeared in the wall to the left. She passed through it, and hurried up the steep path beyond it. Again and again she hid herself behind the boulders with which the fell was strewn, lest her moving figure should be seen from below—often she stopped in terror, haunted by the sound of steps, imagining a breath, a voice, behind her.

She ran and stumbled—ran again—tore her light dress—gulped down the sob in her throat—fearing at every step to faint, and so be taken by the pursuer; or to slip into some dark hole—the ground seemed full of them—and be lost there—still worse, found there!—wounded, defenceless.

But at last the slope is climbed. She sees before her a small platform, on a black network of supporting posts—an engine-house—and beyond, truck lines with half-a-dozen empty trucks upon them, lines that run away in front of her along the descending edge of the first low hill she has been climbing.

Further on, a dark gulf—then the dazzling wall of the quarry. A patch of deepest, blackest shadow, at the seaward end of the engine-house, caught her eye. She gained it, sank down within it, strengthless and gasping.

Surely no one could see her here! Yet presently she perceived beside her a low pile of planks within the shadow, and for greater protection crept behind them. Her eyes topped them. The whole lower world, the roofs of the station, the railway line, the sands beyond, lay clear before her in the moon.

Then her nerve gave way. She laid her head against the stones of the engine-house and sobbed. All her self-command, her cool clearness, was gone. The shock of disappointment, the terrors of this sudden loneliness, the nightmare of her stumbling flight coming upon a nature already shaken, and powers already lowered, had worked with miserable effect. She felt degraded by her own fears. But the one fear at the root of all, that included and generated the rest, held her in so crippling, so torturing a vice, that do what she would, she could not fight herself—could only weep—and weep.

And yet supposing she had walked over the sands with her cousin, would anybody have thought so ill of her—would Hubert himself have dared to offer her any disrespect?

Then again, why not go to the inn? Could she not easily have found a woman on whom to throw herself, who would have befriended her?

Or why not have tried to get a carriage? Fifteen miles to Marsland—eighteen to Bannisdale. Even in this small place, and at midnight, the promise of money enough would probably have found her a fly and a driver.

But these thoughts only rose to be shuddered away. All her rational being was for the moment clouded. The presence of her cousin had suddenly aroused in her so strong a disgust, so hot a misery, that flight from him was all she thought of. On the sands, at the inn, in a carriage, he would still have been there, within reach of her, or beside her. The very dream of it made her crouch more closely behind the pile of planks.

The moon is at her height; across the bay, mountains and lower hills rise towards her, "ambitious" for that silver hallowing she sheds upon shore and bay. The night is one sigh of softness. The rivers glide glistening to the sea. Even the shining roofs of the little station and the white line of the road have beauty, mingle in the common spell. But on Laura it does not work. She is in the hall at Bannisdale—on the Marsland platform—in the woodland roads through which Mr. Helbeck has driven home.

No!—by now he is in his study. She sees the crucifix, the books, the little altar. There he sits—he is thinking, perhaps, of the girl who is out in the night with her drunken cousin, the girl whom he has warned, protected, thought for in a hundred ways—who had planned this day out of mere wilfulness—who cannot possibly have made any honest mistake as to times and trains.

She wrings her hands. Oh! but Polly must have explained, must have convinced him that owing to a prig's self-confidence they were all equally foolish, equally misled. Unless Hubert—? But then, how is she at fault? In imagination she says it all through Polly's lips. The words glow hot and piteous, carrying her soul with them. But that face in the oak chair does not change.

Yet in flashes the mind works clearly; it rises and rebukes this surging pain that breaks upon it like waves upon a reef. Folly! If a girl's name were indeed at the mercy of such chances, why should one care—take any trouble? Would such a ravening world be worth respecting, worth the fearing?

It is her very innocence and ignorance that rack her. Why should there be these mysterious suspicions and penalties in the world? Her mind holds nothing that can answer. But she trembles none the less.

How strange that she should tremble! Two months before, would the same adventure have affected her at all? Why, she would have laughed it down; would have walked, singing perhaps, across the sands with Hubert.

Some secret cause has weakened the will—paralysed all the old daring. Will he never even scold or argue with her again? Nothing but a cold tolerance—bare civility and protection for Augustina's sake? But never the old rare kindness—never! He has been much away, and she has been secretly bitter, ready to revenge herself by some caprice, like a crossed child! But the days of return—the hours of expectation, of recollection!

Her heart opens to her own reading—like some great flower that bursts its sheath. But such pain—oh, such pain! She presses her little fingers on her breast, trying to drive back this humiliating truth that is escaping her, tearing its way to the light.

How is it that contempt and war can change like this? She seems to have been fighting against something that all the time had majesty, had charm—that bore within itself the forces that tame a woman. In all ages the woman falls before the ascetic—before the man who can do without her. The intellect may rebel; but beneath its revolt the heart yields. Oh! to be guided, loved, crushed if need be, by the mystic, whose first thought can never be for you—who puts his own soul, and a hundred torturing claims upon it, before your lips, your eyes! Strange passion of it!—it rushes through the girl's nature in one blending storm of longing and despair….

… What sound was that?

She raised her head. A call came from the sands—a distant call, floating through the night. Another—and another! She stood up—she sprang on the heap of planks, straining her eyes. Yes—surely she saw a figure on that wide expanse of sand, moving quickly, moving away? And one after another the cries rose, waking dim echoes from the shore.

It was Hubert, no doubt—Hubert in pursuit, and calling to her, lest she should come unawares upon the danger spots that marked the sands.

She stood and watched the moving speck till it was lost in a band of shadow. Then she saw it no more, and the cries ceased.

Would he be at Bannisdale before she was? She dashed away her tears, and smiled. Ah! Let him seek her there!—let him herald her. Light broke upon her; she began to rise from her misery.

But she must sleep a little, or she would never have the strength to begin her walk with the dawn. For walk she would, instead of waiting for tardy trains. She saw herself climbing the fell—she would never trust herself to the road, the open road, where cousins might be hiding after all—finding her way through back lanes into sleeping villages, waking someone, getting a carriage to a point above the park, then slipping down to the door in the garden and so entering by the chapel, when entrance was possible. She would go straight to Augustina. Poor Augustina! there would be little sleep for her to-night. The tears rose again in the girl's eyes.

She drew her thin shawl round her, and crept again into the shadow of the engine-house. Not three hours, and the day would have returned. But already the dawn-breath seemed to be blowing through the night. For it had grown cold and her limbs shivered.

… She woke often in terror, pursued by sheets of flame, or falling through unfathomed space; haunted all through by a sense of doom, an awful expectancy—like one approaching some grisly Atreus-threshold and conscious of the death behind it. But sleep seized her again, a cold tormented sleep, and the hours passed.

Meanwhile the light that had hardly gone came welling gently back. The stars paled; the high mountains wrapped themselves in clouds; a clear yellow mounted from the east, flooding the dusk with cheerfulness. Then the birds woke. The diminished sands, on which the tide was creeping, sparkled with sea-birds; the air was soon alive with their white curves.

With a start Laura awoke. Above the eastern fells scarlet feather-clouds were hovering; the sun rushed upon them as she looked; and in that blue dimness to the north lay Bannisdale.

She sprang up, stared half aghast at the black depths of the quarry, beside which she had been sleeping, then searched the fell with her eyes. Yes, there was the upward path. She struck into it, praying that friend and houses might meet her soon.

Meanwhile it seemed that nothing moved in the world but she.

## CHAPTER III

It was on the stroke of midnight when the message from Braeside was handed to Mr. Helbeck by the sleepy station-master, who had been dragged by that gentleman's urgency from his first slumbers in

the neat cottage beside the line.

The master of Bannisdale thrust the slip of paper into his pocket, and stood an instant with bent head, as though reflecting.

"Thank you, Mr. Brough," he said at last. "I will not ask you to do anything more. Good-night."

Rightful reward passed, and Mr. Helbeck left the station. Outside, his pony cart stood tied to the station railing.

Before entering it he debated with himself whether he should drive on to the town of Marsland, get horses there and then, and make for Braeside at once.

He could get there in about a couple of hours. And then?

To search a sleeping town for Miss Fountain—would that mend matters?

A carriage arriving at two o'clock in the morning—the inn awakened—no lady there, perhaps—for what was to prevent her having found decent shelter in some quite other quarter? Was he to make a house-to-house visitation at that hour? How wise! How quenching to the gossip that must in any case get abroad!

He turned the pony homewards.

Augustina, all shawls and twitching, opened the door to him. A message had been sent on to her an hour before to the effect that Miss Fountain had missed her train, and was not likely to arrive that night.

"Oh, *Alan*!—where is she?"

"I got a telegram through to the station-master. Don't be anxious, Augustina. I asked him to direct her to the inn. The old White Hart, they say, has passed into new management and is quite comfortable. She may arrive by the first train—7.20. Anyway I shall meet it."

Augustina pursued him with fretful inquiries and surmises. Helbeck, pale and gloomy, threw himself down on the settle, and produced the story of the accident, so far as the garrulous and incoherent Polly had enabled him to understand it. Fresh wails on Augustina's part. What a horrible, horrible thing! Why, of course the child was terribly upset—hurt perhaps—or she would never have been so foolish about the trains. And now one could not even be sure that she had found a place to sleep in! She would come home a wreck—a simple wreck. Helbeck moved uneasily.

"She was not hurt, according to Miss Mason."

"I suppose young Mason saw her off?"

"I suppose so."

"What were they all about, to make such a blunder?"

Helbeck shrugged his shoulders, and at last he succeeded in quieting his sister, by dint of a resolute suppression of all but the most ordinary and comforting suggestions.

"Well, after all, thank goodness, Laura has a great deal of common sense—she always had," said Mrs. Fountain, with a clearing countenance.

"Of course. She will be here, I have little doubt, before you are ready for your breakfast. It is unlucky, but it should not disturb your night's rest. Please go to bed." With some difficulty he drove her there.

Augustina retired, but it was to spend a broken and often tearful night. Alan might say what he liked—it was all most disagreeable. Why!—would the inn take her in? Mrs. Fountain had often been told that an inn, a respectable inn, required a trunk as well as a person. And Laura had not even a bag—positively not a hand-bag. A reflection which was the starting-point of a hundred new alarms, under which poor Mrs. Fountain tossed till the morning.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Helbeck went to his study. It was nearly one o'clock when he entered it, but the thought of sleep never occurred to him. He took out of his pocket the telegram from Braeside, re-read it, and destroyed it.

So Mason was with her—for of course it was Mason. Not one word of such a conjunction was to be

gathered from the sister. She had clearly supposed that Laura would start alone and arrive alone. Or was she in the plot? Had Mason simply arranged the whole "mistake," jumped into the same train with her, and confronted her at the junction?

Helbeck moved blindly up and down the room, traversed by one of those storms of excitement to which the men of his stock were liable. The thought of those two figures leaving the Braeside station together at midnight roused in him a madness half jealousy, half pride. He saw the dainty head, the cloud of gold under the hat, the pretty gait, the girlish waist, all the points of delicacy or charm he had worshipped through his pain these many weeks. To think of them in the mere neighbourhood of that coarse and sensual lad had always been profanation. And now who would not be free to talk, to spatter her girlish name? The sheer unseemliness of such a kinship!—such a juxtaposition.

If he could only know the true reason of that persistency she had shown about the expedition, in the face of Augustina's wailings, and his own silence? She had been dull—Heaven knows she had been dull at Bannisdale, for these two months. On every occasion of his return from those intermediate absences to which he had forced himself, he had perceived that she drooped, that she was dumbly at war with the barriers that shut her youth away from change and laughter, and the natural amusements, flatteries and courtings that wait, or should wait, on sweet-and-twenty. More than once he had realised the fever pulsing through the girl's unrest. Of course she was dissatisfied and starved. She was not of the sort that accepts the *rôle* of companion or sick nurse without a murmur. What could he do—he, into whose being she had crept with torturing power—he who could not marry her even if she should cease to hate him—who could only helplessly put land and distance between them? And then, who knows what a girl plans, to what she will stoop, out of the mere ebullience and rush of her youth—with what haloes she will surround even the meanest heads? Her blood calls her—not this man or that! She takes her decisions—behind that veil of mystery that masks the woman at her will. And who knows—-who can know? A mother, perhaps. Not Augustina—not he—nor another.

Groans broke from him. In vain he scourged himself and the vileness of his own thoughts. In vain he said to himself, "All her instincts, her preferences, are pure, guileless, delicate—I could swear it, I, who have watched her every look and motion." Temper?—yes. Caprice?—yes. A hundred immaturities and rawnesses?—yes! but at the root of all, the most dazzling, the most convincing maidenliness. Not the down-dropt eyes, the shrinking modesties of your old Christian or Catholic types—far from it. But something that, as you dwelt upon it, seemed to make doubt a mere folly.

And yet his very self-assurances, his very protests, left him in torment. There is something in the Catholic discipline on points of sex-relation that perhaps weakens a man's instinctive confidence in women. Evil and its varieties, in this field, are pressed upon his thoughts perpetually with a scholastic fulness so complete, a deductive frankness so compelling, that nothing stands against the process. He sees corruption everywhere—dreads it everywhere. There is no part of its empire, or its action, that his imagination is allowed to leave in shadow. It is the confessional that works. The devout Catholic sees all the world *sub specie peccati*. The flesh seems to him always ready to fall—the devil always at hand.

—Little restless proud creature! What a riddle she has been to him all the time—flitting about the house so pale and inaccessible, so silent, too, in general, since that night when he had wrestled with her in the drawing-room. One moment of fresh battle between them there has been—in the park—on the subject of old Scarsbrook. Preposterous!—that she should think for one moment she could be allowed to confess herself—and so bring all the low talk of the neighbourhood about her ears. He could hear the old man's plaintive cogitations over the strange experience which had blanched his hair and beard and brought him a visible step nearer to his end. "Soombody towd my owd woman tudther day, Misther Helbeck, at yoong Mason o' t' Browhead had been i' th' park that neet. Mappen tha'll tell me it was soom gell body he'd been coortin. Noa!—he doan't gaa about wi' the likes o' thattens! Theer was never a soun' ov her feet, Misther Helbeck! She gaed ower t' grass like a bit cloud i' summer, an she wor sma' an nesh as a wagtail on t' steëans. I ha seen aw maks o' gells, but this one bet 'em aw." And after that, to think of her pouring herself out in impetuous explanation to the old peasant and his wife! It had needed a strong will to stop her. "Mr. Helbeck, I wish to tell the truth, and I ought to tell it! And your arguments have no weight with me whatever."

But he had made them prevail. And she had not punished him too severely.
A little more pallor, a little more silence for a time—that was all!

A score of poignant recollections laid hold upon him as he paced the night away. That music in the summer dusk—the softness of her little face—the friendliness—first, incredible friendliness!—of her lingering hand. Next morning he had banished himself to Paris, on a Catholic mission devised for the purpose. He had gone, torn with passion—gone, in the spirit that drives the mystic through all the forms of self-torture that religious history records—*ad majorem Dei gloriam*. He had returned to find her frozen and hostile as before—all wilfulness with Augustina—all contradiction with himself. The

Froswick plan was already on foot—and he had furthered it—out of a piteous wish to propitiate her, to make her happy. What harm could happen to her? The sister would go with her and bring her back. Why must he always play the disobliging and tyrannical host? Could he undo the blood-relationship between her and the Masons? If for mere difficulty and opposition's sake there were really any fancy in her mind for this vulgar lad, perhaps after all it were the best thing to let her see enough of him for disenchantment! There are instincts that can be trusted.

Such had been the thoughts of the morning. They do not help him through these night hours, when, in spite of all the arguments of common sense, he recurs again and again to the image of her as alone, possibly defenceless, in Mason's company.

Suddenly he perceived that the light was changing. He put his lamp out and threw back the curtain. A pale gold was already creeping up the east. The strange yew forms in the garden began to emerge from the night. A huge green lion showed his jaw, his crown, his straight tail quivering in the morning breeze; a peacock nodded stiffly on its pedestal; a great H that had been reared upon its post supports before Dryden's death stood black against the morning sky, and everywhere between the clumsy crowding forms were roses, straggling and dew-drenched, or wallflowers in a June wealth of bloom, or peonies that made a crimson flush amid the yews. The old garden, so stiff and sad through all the rest of the year, was in its moment of glory.

Helbeck opened one of the lattices of the oriel, and stood there gazing. Six months before there had been a passionate oneness between him and his inheritance, between his nature and the spirit of his race. Their privations and persecutions, their faults, their dumb or stupid fidelities, their very vices even, had been the source in him of a constant and secret affection. For their vices came from their long martyrdom, and their martyrdom from their faith. New influences had worked upon himself, influences linking him with a more European and militant Catholicism, as compared with that starved and local type from which he sprang. But through it all his family pride, his sense of ancestry with all its stimulus and obligations, had but grown. He was proud of calamity, impoverishment, isolation; they were the scars on pilgrims' feet—honour-marks left by the oppressor. His bare and rained house, his melancholy garden, where not a bed or path had suffered change since the man who planned them had refused to comply with the Test Act, and so forfeited his seat in Parliament; his dwindling resources, his hermit's life and fare—were they not all joy to him? For years he had desired to be a Jesuit; the obligations of his place and name had stood in the way. And short of being a son of St. Ignatius, he exulted in being a Helbeck—the more stripped and despised, the more happy—with those maimed generations behind him, and the triumph of his faith, his faith and theirs, gilding the mind's horizon.

And now after just four months of temptation he stands there, racked with desire for this little pagan creature, this girl without a single Christian sentiment or tradition, the child of an infidel father, herself steeped in denial and cradled in doubt, with nothing meekly feminine about her on which to press new stamps—and knowing well why she denies, if not personally and consciously, at least by a kind of inheritance.

The tangled garden, slowly yielding its splendours to the morning light, the walls of the old house, springing sheer from the grass like the native rock itself—for the first time he feels a gulf between himself and them. His ideals waver in the soul's darkened air; the breath of passion drives them to and fro.

With an anguished "Domine, exaudi!" he snatched himself from the window, and leaving the room he crossed the hall, where the Tudor badges on the ceiling, the arms of "Elizabetha Regina" above the great hearth were already clear in the cold dawn, and made his way as noiselessly as possible to the chapel.

Those strange figures on the wall had already shaken the darkness from them. Wing rose on wing, halo on halo, each face turning in a mystic passion to the altar and its steadfast light.

*Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris, qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis*.

In prayer and passionate meditation he passed through much of the time that had still to be endured. But meanwhile he knew well, in his sinful and shrinking mind, that, for that night at least, he was only praying because he could do nothing else—nothing that would give him Laura, or deliver him from the fears that shook his inmost being.

* * * * *

A little before six Helbeck left the chapel. He must bathe and dress—then to the farm for the pony cart. If she did not arrive by the first train he would get a horse at Marsland and drive on to Braeside.

But first he must take care to leave a message for Mrs. Denton, whose venomous face, as she stood listening the night before to his story of Miss Fountain's mishaps, recurred to him disagreeably.

The housekeeper would not be stirring yet, perhaps, for an hour. He went back to his study to write her some short directions covering the hours of his possible absence.

The room, as he entered it, struck him as musty and airless, in spite of the open lattice. Instinctively, before writing, he went to throw another window wide. In rushed a fresh rose-scented air, and he leant forward an instant, letting its cool current flow through him.

Something white caught his eye beneath the window.

* * * * *

Laura slowly raised her head.

Had she fallen asleep in her fatigue?

Helbeck, bending over her, saw her eyes unclose. She looked at him as she had never looked before—with a sad and spiritual simplicity as though she had waked in a world where all may tell the truth, and there are no veils left between man and woman.

Her light hat fell back from her brow; her delicate pinched features, with the stamp of suffering upon them, met his look so sweetly—so frankly!

"I was *very* tired," she said, in a new voice, a voice of appealing trust. "And there was no door open."

She raised her small hand, and he took it in his, trembling through all his man's strength.

"I was just starting to see if the train had brought you."

"No—I walked—a great part of the way, at least. Will you help me up?
It's very foolish, but I can't stand."

She rose, tottering, and leaning heavily upon his hand. She drew her own across her forehead.

"It's only hunger. And I had some milk. Was Augustina in a great way?"

"She was anxious, of course. We both were."

"Yes! it was stupid. But look—" she clung to him. "Will you take me into the drawing-room, and get me some wine—before I see Augustina?"

"Lean on me."

She obeyed, and he led her in. The drawing-room door was open, and she sank into the nearest chair. As she looked up she saw the Romney lady shining from the wall in the morning sunlight. The blue-eyed beauty looked down, as though with a careless condescension, upon the pale and tattered Laura. But Laura was neither envious nor ashamed. As Helbeck left her to get wine, she lay still and white; but in the solitude of the room while he was gone, a little smile, ghostly as the dawn itself, fluttered suddenly beneath her closed lids and was gone again.

When he returned, she did her best to drink and eat what she was told. But her exhaustion became painfully apparent, and he hung over her, torn between anxiety, remorse, and the pulsations of a frantic joy, hardly to be concealed, even by him.

"Let me wake Augustina, and bring her down!"

"No—wait a little. I have been in a quarry all night, you see! That isn't—resting!"

"I tried to direct you—I managed to telegraph to the station-master; but it must have missed. I asked him to direct you to the inn."

"Oh, the inn!" She shuddered suddenly. "No, I couldn't go to the inn."

"Why—what frightened you?"

He sat down by her, speaking very gently, as one does to a child.

She was silent. His heart beat—his ear hungered for the next word.

She lifted her tired lids.

"My cousin was there—at the junction. I did not want him. I did not wish to be with him; he had no right whatever to follow me. So I sent him to the inn to ask—and I——"

"You——?"

"I hid myself in the quarry while he was gone. When he came back, he went on over the sands, calling for me—perhaps he thought I was lost in one of the bad places."

She gave a little whimsical sigh, as though it pleased her to think of the lad's possible frights and wanderings.

Helbeck bent towards her.

"And so—to avoid him——?"

She followed his eye like a child.

"I had noticed a quarry beside the line. I climbed up there—under the engine-house—and sat there till it was light. You see"—her breath fluttered—"I couldn't—I couldn't be sure—he was sober. I dare say it was ridiculous—but I was so startled—and he had no business——"

"He had given you no hint—that he wished to accompany you?"

Something drove, persecuted the man to ask it in that hoarse, shaking tone.

She did not answer. She simply looked at him, while the tears rose softly in her clear eyes. The question seemed to hurt her. Yet there was neither petulance nor evasion. She was Laura, and not Laura—the pale sprite of herself. One might have fancied her clothed already in the heavenly super-sensual body, with the pure heart pulsing visibly through the spirit frame.

Helbeck rose, closed the door softly, came back and stood before her, struggling to speak. But she intercepted him. There was a look of suffering, a frown.

"I saw a man die yesterday," she said abruptly. "Did Polly tell you?"

"I heard of the accident, and that you had stayed to comfort the child."

"It seems very heartless, but somehow as we were in the train I had almost forgotten it. I was so glad to get away from Froswick—to be coming back. And I was very tired, of course, and never dreamt of anything going wrong. Oh, *no*! I haven't forgotten really—I never shall forget."

She pressed her hands together shuddering. Helbeck was still silent.

But it was a silence that pierced. Suddenly she flushed deeply. The spell that held her—that strange transparency of soul—broke up.

"Naturally I was afraid lest Augustina should be anxious," she said hastily, "and lest it should be bad for her."

Helbeck knelt down beside her. She sank back in her chair, staring at him.

"You were glad to be coming back—to be coming here?" he said in his deep voice. "Is that true? Do you know that I have sat here all night—in misery?"

The struggling breath checked the answer, cheeks and lips lost every vestige of their returning red. Only her eyes spoke. Helbeck came closer. Suddenly he snatched the little form to his breast. She made one small effort to free herself, then yielded. Soul and body were too weak, the ecstasy of his touch too great.

* * * * *

"You can't love me—you can't."

She had torn herself away. They were sitting side by side; but now she would not even give him her hand. That one trembling kiss had changed their lives. But in both natures, passion was proud and fastidious from its birth; it could live without much caressing.

As she spoke, he met her gaze with a smiling emotion. The long, stern face in its grizzled setting of hair and beard had suffered a transformation that made it almost strange to her. He was like a man loosed from many bonds, and dazzled by the effects of his own will. The last few minutes had made him young again. But she looked at him wistfully once or twice, as though her fancy nursed something

which had grown dear to it.

"You can't love me," she repeated; "when did you begin? You didn't love me yesterday, you know—nor the day before."

"Why do you suppose I went away the day after the ghost?" he asked her slowly.

"Because you had business, or you were tired of my very undesirable company."

"Put it as you like! Do you explain my recent absences in the same way?"

"Oh, I can't explain you!" She raised her shoulders, but her face trembled. "I never tried."

"Let me show you how. I went because you were here."

"And you were afraid—that you might love me? Was it—such a hard fate?"
She turned her head away.

"What have I to offer you?" he said passionately; "poverty—an elderly lover—a life uncongenial to you."

She slipped a hand nearer to him, but her face clouded a little.

"It's the very strangest thing in the world," she said deliberately, "that we should love each other. What can it mean? I hated you when I came, and meant to hate you. And"—she sat up and spoke with an emphasis that brought the colour back into her face—"I can never, never be a Catholic."

He looked at her gravely.

"That I understand."

"You know that I was brought up apart from religion, altogether?"

His eye saddened. Then he raised her hand and kissed it. The pitying tenderness of the action almost made her break down. But she tried to snatch her hand away.

"It was papa's doing, and I shall never blame him—never!"

"I have been in Belgium lately," he said, holding the hand close, "at a great Catholic town—Louvain—where I was educated. I went to an old priest I know, and to a Reverend Mother who has sent me Sisters once or twice, and I begged of them both—prayers for your father's soul."

She stared. The painful tears rushed into her eyes.

"I thought that—for you—that was all sure and settled long ago."

"I don't think you know much about us, little heretic! I have prayed for your father's soul at every Mass since—you remember that Rosary service in April?"

She nodded.

"And what you said to me afterwards, about the child—and doubt? I stayed long in the chapel that night. It was borne in upon me, with a certainty I shall never lose, that all was well with your poor father. Our Blessed Lord has revealed to him in that other life what an invincible ignorance hid from him here."

He spoke with a beautiful simplicity, like a man dealing with all that was most familiarly and yet sacredly real to his daily mind and thought.

She trembled. Words and ideas of the kind were still all strange and double-edged to her—suggesting on the one side the old feelings of contempt and resistance, on the other a new troubling of the waters of the heart.

She leant her brow against the back of the old sofa on which they were sitting. "And—and no prayers for me?" she said huskily.

"Dear love!—at all times—in all places—at my downsitting and mine uprising," he answered—every word an adoration.

She was silent for a moment, then she dashed the tears from her eyes.

"All the same, I shall never be a Catholic," she repeated resolutely; "and how can you marry an

unbeliever?"

"My Church allows it—under certain conditions."

Her mind flew over the conditions. She had heard them named on one or two occasions during the preceding months. Then she turned away, dreading his eye.

"Suppose I am jealous of your Church and hate her?"

"No!—you will love her for my sake."

"I can't promise. There are two selves in me. All your Catholic friends—Father Leadham—the Reverend Mother—will be in despair."

She saw him wince. But he spoke firmly. "I ask only what is lawful. I am free in such a matter to choose my own path—under my conscience."

She said nothing for a little. But she pondered on all that he might be facing and sacrificing for such a marriage. Once a cloud of sudden misgiving descended upon her, as though, a bird had brushed her with its black wing. But she shook it away. Her little hand crept back to him—while her face was still hidden from him.

"I ought not to marry you—but—but I will. There—take me!—will you guide me?"

"With all my strength!"

"Will you fight me?"

He laughed. "To the best of my ability—when I must. Did I do it well—that night—about the ghost?"

She shrugged her shoulders—half laughing, half crying.

"No!—you were violent—impossible. Will you never, never let me get the upper hand?"

"How would you do it?—little atom!" He bent over her, trying to see her face, but she pressed him away from her.

"Make me afraid to mock at your beliefs!" she said passionately; "make me afraid!—there is no other way."

"Laura!"

At last she let his arms have their will. And it was time. The exhaustion which had been driven back for the moment by food and excitement returned upon her with paralysing force. Helbeck woke to a new and stronger alarm. He half led, half carried her through the hall, on the way to Augustina.

At the foot of the stairs, as Laura was making a tottering effort to climb them with Helbeck's arm round her, Mrs. Denton came out of the dining-room straight upon them. She carried a pan and brush, and had evidently just begun her morning work.

At sight of her Laura started; but Helbeck gave her no chance to withdraw herself. He turned quietly to his housekeeper, who stood transfixed.

"Good-morning, Denton. Miss Fountain has just returned, having walked most of the way from Braeside. She is very tired, as you see—let some breakfast be got ready for her at once. And let me tell you now—what I should anyway have told you a few hours later—that Miss Fountain has promised to be my wife."

He spoke with a cold dignity, scanning the woman closely. Mrs. Denton grew very white. But she dropped a curtesy in old Westmoreland fashion.

"I wish you joy, sir—and Miss Fountain, too."

Her voice was low and mumbling, but Helbeck gave her a cheerful nod.

"Thank you. I shall be downstairs again as soon as I have taken Miss
Fountain to my sister—and I, too, should be glad of some breakfast."

"He's been agate all night," said the housekeeper to herself, as she entered the study and looked at the chairs, the lamp which its master had forgotten to extinguish, the open window. "An where's she been? Who knows? I saw it from the first. It's a bewitchment—an it'll coom to noa good."

She went about her dusting with a shaking hand.

* * * * *

Augustina was not told till later in the day. When her brother, who was alone with her, had at last succeeded in making her understand that he proposed to make Laura Fountain his wife, the surprise and shock of the news was such that Mrs. Fountain was only saved from faintness by her very strongest smelling-salts.

"Alan—my dear brother! Oh! Alan—you can't have thought it out. She's her father's child, Alan, all through. How can you be happy? Why, Alan, the things she says—poor Laura!"

"She *has* said them," he replied.

"She can't help saying them—thinking them—it's in her. No one will ever change her. Oh! it's all so strange——"

And Augustina began to cry, silently, piteously.

Helbeck bent over her.

"Augustina!" He spoke with emotion. "If she loved, wouldn't that change her? Don't all women live by their affections? I am not worth her loving—but——"

His face shone, and spoke the rest for him.

Augustina looked at him in bewilderment. Why, it was only yesterday that Laura disliked and despised him, and that Alan hardly ever spoke when her stepdaughter was there. It was utterly incomprehensible to her. Was it another punishment from Heaven for her own wilful and sacrilegious marriage? As she thought of the new conditions and relations that were coming upon them all—the disapproval of friends, the danger to her brother's Catholic life, the transformation of her own ties to Laura, her feeble soul lost itself in fear. Secretly, she said to herself, with the natural weariness of coming age:

"Perhaps I shall die—before it happens."

# BOOK IV

## CHAPTER I

Augustina was sitting in the garden with Father Bowles. Their chairs were placed under a tall Scotch fir, which spread its umbrella top between them and the sun. All around, the old garden was still full and flowery. For it was mid-September, and fine weather.

Mrs. Fountain was lying on a sort of deck-chair, and had as usual a number of little invalid appliances about her. But in truth, as Father Bowles was just reflecting, she looked remarkably well. The influences of her native air seemed so far to have brought Dr. MacBride's warnings to naught. Or was it the stimulating effect of her brother's engagement? At any rate she talked more, and with more vigour; she was more liable to opinions of her own; and in these days there was that going on at Bannisdale which provoked opinion in great plenty.

"Miss Fountain is not at home?" remarked the old priest. An afternoon gossip with Mrs. Fountain had become a very common feature of his recent life.

"Laura has gone, I believe, to meet my brother at the lodge. He has been over to Braeside on business."

"He is selling some land there?"

"I hope so!" said Augustina, with fervour.

"It is time indeed that our poor orphans were housed," said Father Bowles naïvely. "For the last three months some of our dear nuns have been sleeping in the passages."

Augustina sighed.

"It seems a little hard that there is nobody but Alan to do anything! And how long is it to go on?"

The priest bent forward.

"You mean——?"

"How long will my stepdaughter let it go on?" said Augustina impatiently. "She will be mistress here directly."

The eyes of her companion flinched, as though something had struck him. But he hastened to say:

"Do not let us doubt, my dear lady, that the soul of Miss Fountain will sooner or later be granted to our prayers."

"But there is not the smallest sign of it," cried Augustina. And she in her turn bent towards her companion, unable to resist the temptation of these priestly ears so patiently inclined to her. "And yet, Father, she isn't happy!—though Alan gives way to her in everything. It's not a bit like a girl in love—you'd expect her to be thinking about her clothes, and the man, and her housekeeping at least—if she won't think about—well! those other things that we should all wish her to think about. While we were at the sea, and Alan used to come down every now and then to stay near us in lodgings, it was all right. They never argued or disputed; they were out all day; and really I thought my brother began to look ten years younger. But now—since we have come back—of course my brother has all his affairs, and all his Church business to look after, and Laura doesn't seem so contented—nearly. It would be different if she cared for any of his interests—but I often think she hates the orphans! She is really naughty about them. And then the Sisters—oh dear!"—Augustina gave a worried sigh—"I don't think the Reverend Mother can have managed it at all well."

Father Bowles said that he understood both from the Reverend Mother and Sister Angela that they had made very great efforts to secure Miss Fountain's friendly opinion.

"Well, it didn't succeed, that's all I can say," replied Augustina fretfully. "And I don't know what they'll do after November."

November had been fixed for the marriage, which was to take place at Cambridge.

Father Bowles hung his hands between his knees and looked down upon them in gentle meditation.

"Your brother seems still very much attached——"

"Attached!"

Augustina was silent. In reality she spent half her days in secretly marvelling how such a good man as Alan could allow himself to be so much in love.

"If only someone had ever warned me that this might happen—when I was coming back to live here," she said, in her most melancholy voice; and clasping her thin hands she looked sadly down the garden paths, while her poor head shook and jerked under the influence of the thoughts—so far from agreeable!—with which it was filled.

There was a little silence. Then Father Bowles broke it.

"And our dear Squire does nothing to try and change Miss Fountain's mind towards the Church?" he asked, looking vaguely round the corner all the time.

Nothing—so Augustina declared.

"I say to him—'Alan, give her some books.' Why, they always give people books to read! 'Or get Father Leadham to talk to her.' What's the good of a man like Father Leadham—so learned, and such manners!—if he can't talk to a girl like Laura? But no, Alan won't. He says we must let her alone—and wait God's time!—And there's no altering him, as you know."

Father Bowles pondered a little, then said with a mild perplexity:

"I find, in my books, that a great many instances are recorded of holy wives—or even betrothed—who were instrumental under God in procuring the conversion of their unbelieving husbands—or—or lovers, if I may use such a word to a lady. But I cannot discover any of an opposite nature. There was the pious Nonna, for instance, the mother of the great St. Gregory Nazianzen, who converted her husband so effectually that he became a bishop, and died at the age of ninety."

"What became of her?" inquired Augustina hastily.

The priest hesitated.

"It is a very curious case—and, I understand, much disputed. Some people suppose that St. Gregory was born after his father became a bishop, and many infidel writers have made use of the story for their own malicious purposes. But if it was so, the Church may have allowed such a departure from her law, at a time of great emergency and in a scarcity of pastors. But the most probable thing is that nothing of the kind happened—" he drew himself up with decision—"that the father of St. Gregory had separated from his wife before he became a bishop—and that those writers who record the birth of St. Gregory during the episcopate of his father were altogether mistaken."

"At any rate, I really don't see how it helps us!" said Augustina.

Father Bowles looked a little crestfallen.

"There is one other case that occurs to me," he said timidly. "It is that of St. Amator, Bishop of Auxerre. He was desired by his parents to marry Martha, a rich young lady of his neighbourhood. But he took her aside, and pressed upon her the claims of the ascetic life with such fervour that she instantly consented to renounce the world with him. She therefore went into a convent; and he received the tonsure, and was in due time made Bishop of Auxerre."

"Well, I assure you, I should be satisfied with a good deal less than that in Laura's case!" said Augustina, half angry, half laughing.

Father Bowles said no more. His mind was a curious medley of scraps from many quarters—from a small shelf of books that held a humble place in his little parlour, from the newspapers, and from the few recollections still left to him of his seminary training. He was one of the most complacently ignorant of men; and it had ceased to trouble him that even with Augustina he was no longer of importance.

Mrs. Fountain made him welcome, indeed, not only because he was one of the chief gossips of the neighbourhood, but because she was able to assume towards him certain little airs of superiority that no other human being allowed her. With him, she was the widow of a Cambridge scholar, who had herself breathed the forbidden atmosphere of an English University; she prattled familiarly of things and persons wherewith the poor priest, in his provincial poverty and isolation, could have no acquaintance; she let him understand that by her marriage she had passed into hell-flame regions of pure intellect, that little parish priests might denounce but could never appreciate. He bore it all very meekly; he liked her tea and talk; and at bottom the sacerdotal pride, however hidden and silent, is more than a match for any other.

Augustina lay for a while in a frowning and flushed silence, with a host of thoughts, of the most disagreeable and heterogeneous sort, scampering through her mind. Suddenly she said:

"I don't think Sister Angela should talk as she does! She told me when she heard of the engagement that she could not help thinking of St. Philip Neri, who was attacked by three devils near the Colosseum, because they were enraged by the success of his holy work among the young men of Rome. I asked her whether she meant to call Laura a devil! And she coloured, and got very confused, and said it was so sad that Mr. Helbeck, of all people, should marry an unbelieving wife—and we were taught to believe that all temptations came from evil spirits."

"Sister Angela means well, but she expresses herself very unwarrantably," said the priest sharply. "Now the Reverend Mother tells me that she expected something of the kind, almost from the first."

"Why didn't she tell me?" cried Augustina. "But I don't really think she did, Father. She makes a mistake. How *could* she? But the dear Reverend Mother—well! you know—though she is so wonderfully humble, she doesn't like anybody to be wiser than she. And I can hardly bear it—I *know* she puts it all down to some secret sin on Alan's part. She spends a great part of the night—that she told me—in praying for him in the chapel."

Father Bowles sighed.

"I believe that our dear Reverend Mother has often and often prayed for a good wife for Mr. Helbeck. Miss Fountain, no doubt, is a very attractive and accomplished young lady, but—"

"Oh, don't, please, go through the 'buts,'" said Mrs. Fountain with a shrug of despair. "I don't know what's to become of us all—I don't indeed. It isn't as though Laura could hold her tongue. Since we came back I can see her father in her all day long. I had a talk with the Bishop yesterday," she said in a lower voice, looking plaintively at her companion.

He bent forward.

"Oh! he's just, broken-hearted. He can hardly bring himself to speak to Alan about it at all. Of course, Alan will get his dispensation for the marriage. They can't refuse it to him when they give it to so many others. But!"—she threw up her hands—"the Bishop asked me if Laura had been really baptized. I told him there was no doubt at all about it—though it was a very near thing. But her mother did insist that once. And it appears that if she hadn't——"

She looked interrogatively at the priest.

"The marriage could not have taken place," he said slowly. "No Catholic priest could have celebrated it, at least. There would have been a diriment impediment."

"I thought so," said Augustina excitedly, "though I wasn't sure. There are so many dispensations nowadays."

"Ah, but not in such cases as that," said the priest, with an unconscious sigh that rather startled his companion.

Then with a sudden movement he pounced upon something on the further side of the table, nearly upsetting the tea-tray. Augustina exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon," he said humbly; "it was only a nasty fly." And he dropped the flattened creature on the grass.

Both relapsed into a melancholy silence. But several times during the course of it Mrs. Fountain looked towards her companion as though on the point of saying something—then rebuked herself and refrained.

But when the priest had taken his leave, and Mrs. Fountain was left alone in the garden with the flowers and the autumn wind, her thoughts were painfully concerned with quite another part of the episcopal conversation from that which she had reported to Father Bowles. What right had the Bishop or anyone else to speak of "stories" about Laura? Of course, the dear Bishop had been very kind and cautious. He had said emphatically that he did not believe the stories—nor that other report that Mr. Helbeck's sudden proposal of marriage to Miss Fountain had been brought about by his chivalrous wish to protect the endangered name of a young girl, his guest, to whom he had become unwisely attached.

But why should there be "stories," and what did it all mean?

That unlucky Froswick business—and young Mason? But what had Mason to do with it—on that occasion? As Augustina understood, he had seen the child off from Froswick by the 8.20 train—and there was an end of him in the matter. As for the rest of that adventure, no doubt it was foolish of Laura to sit in the quarry till daylight, instead of going to the inn; but all the world might know that she took a carriage at Wryneck, half-way home, about four o'clock in the morning, and left it at the top gate of the park. Why, she was in her room by six, or a little after!

What on earth did the Bishop mean? Augustina fell into a maze of rather miserable cogitation. She recalled her brother's manner and words after his return from the station on the night of the expedition —and then next day, the news!—and Laura's abrupt admission: "I met him in the garden, Augustina, and—well! we soon understood each other. It had to come, I suppose—it might as well come then. But I don't wonder it's all very surprising to you——" And then such a wild burst of tears—such a sudden gathering of the stepmother in the girl's young arms—such a wrestle with feelings to which the bewildered Augustina had no clue.

Was Alan up all that night? Mrs. Denton had said something of the sort.
Was he really making up his mind to propose—because people might talk?
But why?—how ridiculous! Certainly it must have been very sudden. Mrs.
Denton met them coming upstairs a little after six; and Alan told her
then.

"Oh, if I only *could* understand it," thought Augustina, with a little moan. "And now Alan just lives and

breathes for her. And she will be here, in my mother's place—Stephen's daughter."

Mrs. Fountain felt the burning of a strange jealousy. Her vanity and her heart were alike sore. She remembered how she had trembled before Alan in his strict youth—how she had apostatised even, merely to escape the demands which the intensity of Alan's faith made on all about him. And now this little chit of twenty, her own stepdaughter, might do and say what she pleased. She would be mistress of Alan, and of the old house. Alan's sister might creep into a corner, and pray!—that was enough for her.

And yet she loved Laura, and clung to her! She felt the humiliation of her secret troubles and envies. Her only comfort lay in her recovered faith; in the rosary to which her hands turned perpetually; in her fortnightly confession; in her visits to the sacrament. The great Catholic tradition beat through her meagre life, as the whole Atlantic may run pulsing through a drifting weed.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, near the entrance gate of the park, on a wooded knoll that overlooked the park wall and commanded the road beyond, Laura Fountain was sitting with the dogs—waiting for Helbeck.

He had been at Whinthorpe all day, on some business in which she was specially interested. The Romney lady was not yet sold. During May and June, Laura had often wondered why she still lingered on the wall. An offer had actually been made—so Augustina said. And there was pressing need for the money that it represented—that, every sojourner in Bannisdale must know. And yet, there still she hung.

Then, with the first day of her engagement, Laura knew why. "You saved her," said Helbeck. "Since that evening when you denounced me for selling her—little termagant!—I have racked my brains to keep her."

And now for some time there had been negotiations going on between Helbeck and a land agent in Whinthorpe for the sale of an outlying piece of Bannisdale land, to which the growth of a little watering-place on the estuary had given of late a new value. Helbeck, in general a singularly absent and ineffective man of business, had thrown himself into the matter with an astonishing energy, had pressed his price, hurried his solicitors, and begged the patience of the nuns—who were still sleeping in doorways and praying for new buildings—till all should be complete.

That afternoon he had ridden over to Whinthorpe in the hopes of signing the contract. He did not yet know—so Laura gathered—with whom he was really treating. The Whinthorpe agent had talked vaguely of "a Manchester gentleman," and Helbeck had not troubled himself to inquire further.

When they were married, would he still sell all that he had, and give to the poor—in the shape of orphanages and reformatories? Laura was almost as unpractical, and cared quite as little about money, as he. But her heart yearned towards the old house; and she already dreamt of making it beautiful and habitable again. As a woman, too, she was more alive to the habitual discomforts of the household than Helbeck himself. Mrs. Denton at least should go! So much he had already promised her. The girl thought with joy of that dismissal, tightening her small lips. Oh! the tyranny of those perpetual grumblings and parsimonies, of those sour unfriendly looks! Economy—yes! But it should be a seemly, a smiling economy in future—one still compatible with a little elegance, a little dignity.

Laura liked to think of her own three hundred a year; liked to feel it of importance in the narrow lot of this impoverished estate. To a rich bridegroom it would have been a trifle for contempt. To Helbeck and herself—though she scarcely believed that he had realised as yet that she possessed a farthing!—it would mean just escape from penury; a few more fires and servants and travellings; enough to ease his life from that hard strain that had tugged at it so long. For *her* money should not go to nuns or Jesuits!—she would protect it zealously, and not for her own sake.

… Oh! those days by the sea! Those were days for remembering. That tall form always beside her—those eyes so grey and kind—so fiery-kind, often!—revealing to her day by day more of the man, learning a new language for her alone, in all the world, a language that could set her trembling, that could draw her to him, in a humility that was strange and difficult, yet pure joy!—her hand slipping into his, her look sinking beneath his, almost with an appeal to love to let her be. Then—nothing but the sparkling sands and the white-edged waves for company! A little pleasant chat with Augustina; duty walks with her bath chair along the sea-wall; strolls in the summer dusk, while Mrs. Fountain, wrapped in her many shawls, watched them from the balcony; their day had known no other events, no other disturbance than these.

As far as things external were concerned.—Else, each word, each look made history. And though he had not talked much to her of his religion, his Catholic friends and schemes, all that he had said on

these things she had been ready to take into a softened heart. His mystic's practice and belief wore still their grand air for her—that aspect of power and mystery which had in fact borne so large a part in the winning of her imagination, the subduing of her will. She did not want then to know too much. She wished the mystery still kept up. And he, on his side, had made it plain to her that he would not attempt to disturb her inherited ideas—so long as she herself did not ask for the teaching and initiation that could only, according to his own deepest conviction, bear fruit in the willing and prepared mind.

But now—— They were at Bannisdale again, and he was once more Helbeck of Bannisdale, a man sixteen years older than she, wound round with the habits and friendship and ideals which had been the slow and firm deposit of those years—habits and ideals which were not hers, which were at the opposite pole from hers, of which she still only dimly guessed the motives and foundations.

"Helbeck of Bannisdale." Her new relation to him, brought back into the old conditions, revealed to her day by day fresh meanings and connotations of the name. And the old revolts, under different, perhaps more poignant forms, were already strong.

What *time* this religion took! Apart from the daily Mass, which drew him always to Whinthorpe before breakfast, there were the morning and evening prayers, the visits to the Sacrament, the two Masses on Sunday morning, Rosary and Benediction in the evening, and the many occasional services for the marking of Saints'-days or other festivals. Not to speak of all the business that fell upon him as the chief Catholic layman of a large district.

And it seemed to her that since their return home he was more strict, more rigorous than ever in points of observance. She noticed that not only was Friday a fast-day, but Wednesday also was an "abstinence" day; that he looked with disquiet upon the books and magazines that were often sent her by the Friedlands, and would sometimes gently beg her—for the Sisters' sake—to put them out of sight; that on the subject of balls and theatres he spoke sometimes with a severity no member of the Metropolitan Tabernacle could have outdone. What was that phrase he had dropped once as to being "under a rule"? What was "The Third Order of St. Francis"? She had seen a book of "Constitutions" in his study; and a printed card of devout recommendations to "Tertiaries of the Northern Province" hung beside his table. She half thirsted, half dreaded, to know precisely what these things meant to him. But he was silent, and she shrank from asking.

Was he all the more rigid with himself on the religious side of late, because of that inevitable scandal which his engagement had given to his Catholic friends—perhaps because of his own knowledge of the weakening effects of passion on the will? For Laura's imagination was singularly free and cool where the important matters of her own life were concerned. She often guessed that but for the sudden emotion of that miserable night, and their strange meeting in the dawn, he might have succeeded in driving down and subduing his love for her—might have proved himself in that, as in all other matters, a good Catholic to the end. That she should have brought him to her feet in spite of all trammels was food for a natural and secret exultation. But now that the first exquisite days of love were over, the trammels, the forgotten trammels, were all there again—for the fretting of her patience. That his mind was often disturbed, his cheerfulness overcast, that his letters gave him frequently more pain than pleasure, and that a certain inward unrest made his dealings with himself more stern, and his manner to those around him less attractive than before,—these things were constantly plain to Laura. As she dwelt upon them, they carried flame and poison through the girl's secret mind. For they were the evidences of forces and influences not hers—forces that warred with hers, and must always war with hers. Passion on her side began to put forward a hundred new and jealous claims; and at the touch of resistance in him, her own will steeled.

As to the Catholic friends, surely she had done her best! She had called with Augustina on the Reverend Mother and Sister Angela—a cold, embarrassed visit. She had tried to be civil whenever they came to the house. She had borne with the dubious congratulations of Father Bowles. She had never once asked to see any portion of that correspondence which Helbeck had been carrying on for weeks with Father Leadham, persuaded though she was, from its effects on Helbeck's moods and actions, that it was wholly concerned with their engagement, and with the problems and difficulties it presented from the Catholic point of view.

She was preparing even to welcome with politeness that young Jesuit who had neglected his dying mother, against whom—on the stories she had heard—her whole inner nature cried out.…

* * * * * The sound of a horse approaching. Up sprang the dogs, and she with them.

Helbeck waved his hand to her as he came over the bridge. Then at the gate he dismounted, seeing Wilson in the drive, and gave his horse to the old bailiff.

"Cross the bridge with me," he said, as he joined her, "and let us walk home the other side of the

river. Is it too far?"

His eyes searched her face—with the eagerness of one who has found absence a burden. She shook her head and smiled. The little frown that had been marring the youth of her pretty brow smoothed itself away. She tripped beside him, feeling the contagion of his joy—inwardly repentant—and very happy.

But he was tired and disappointed by the day's result. The contract was not signed. His solicitor had been summoned in haste to make the will of a neighbouring magnate; some of the last formalities of his own business had been left uncompleted; and in short the matter was postponed for at least a day or two.

"I wish it was done," he said, sighing—and Laura could only feel that the responsibilities and anxieties weighing upon him seemed to press with unusual strength.

A rosy evening stole upon them as they walked along the Greet.—The glow caught the grey walls of the house on the further bank—lit up the reaches of the stream—and the bare branch work of a great ruined tree in front of them. Long lines of heavy wood closed the horizon on either hand, shutting in the house, the river, and their two figures.

"How solitary we are here!" he said, suddenly looking round him. "Oh!
Laura, can you be happy—with poverty—and me?"

"Well, I shan't read my prayer-book along the river!—and I shan't embroider curtains for the best bedroom—alack! Perhaps a new piano might keep me quiet—I don't know!"

He looked at her, then quickly withdrew his eyes, as though they offended. Through his mind had run the sacred thought, "Her children will fill her life—and mine!"

"When am I to teach you Latin?" he said, laughing.

She raised her shoulders.

"I wouldn't learn it if I could do without it! But you Catholics are bred upon it."

"We are the children of the Church," he said gently. "And it is her tongue."

She made no answer, and he talked of something else immediately. As they crossed the little footbridge he drew her attention to the deep pool on the further side, above which was built the wooden platform, where Laura had held her May tryst with Mason.

"Did I ever tell you the story of my great-grandfather drowning in that pool?"

"What, the drinking and gambling gentleman?"

"Yes, poor wretch! He had half killed his wife, and ruined the property—so it was time. He was otter hunting—there is an otter hole still, half-way down that bank. Somehow or other he came to the top of the crag alone, probably not sober. The river was in flood; and his poor wife, sitting on one of those rock seats with her needlework and her books, heard the shouts of the huntsmen—helped to draw him out and to carry him home. Do you see that little beach?"—he pointed to a break in the rocky bank. "It was there—so tradition says—that he lay upon her knee, she wailing over him. And in three months she too was gone."

Laura turned away.

"I won't think of it," she said obstinately. "I will only think of her as she is in the picture."

On the little platform she paused, with her hand on the railing, the dark water eddying below her, the crag above her.

"I could—tell *you* something about this place," she said slowly. "Do you want to hear?"

She bent over the water. He stood beside her. The solitude of the spot, the deep shadow of the crag, gave love freedom.

He drew her to him.

"Dear!—confess!"

She too whispered:

"It was here—I saw Hubert Mason—that night."

"Culprit! Repeat every word—and I will determine the penance."

"As if there had not been already too much! Oh! what a lecture you read me—and you have never apologised yet! Begin—*begin*—at once!"

He raised her hand and kissed it.

"So? Now—courage!"

And with some difficulty—half laughing—she described the scene with Hubert, her rush home, her meeting with old Scarsbrook.

"I tell you," she insisted at the end, "there is good in that boy somewhere—there *is*!"

Helbeck said nothing.

"But you always saw the worst," she added, looking up.

"I am afraid I only saw what there was," he said dryly. "Dear, it gets cold, and that white frock is very thin."

They walked on. In truth, he could hardly bear that she should take Mason's name upon her lips at all. The thoughts and comments of ill-natured persons, of some of his own friends—the sort of misgiving that had found expression in the Bishop's talk with his sister—he was perfectly aware of them all, impossible as it would have been for Augustina or anyone else to say a word to him on the subject. The dignity no less than the passion of a strong man was deeply concerned. He repented and humbled himself every day for his own passing doubts; but his resolution only stiffened the more. There was no room, there should never be any room in Laura's future life, for any further contact with the Mason family.

And, indeed, the Mason family itself seemed to have arrived at very similar conclusions! All that Helbeck knew of them since the Froswick day might have been summed up in a few sentences. On the Sunday morning Mason, in a wild state, with wet clothes and bloodshot eyes, had presented himself at the Wilsons' cottage, asking for news of Miss Fountain. They told him that she was safely at home, and he departed. As far as Helbeck knew, he had spent the rest of the Sunday drinking heavily at Marsland. Since then Laura had received one insolent letter from him, reiterating his own passion for her, attacking Helbeck in the fiercest terms, and prophesying that she would soon be tired of her lover and her bargain. Laura had placed the letter in Helbeck's hands, and Helbeck had replied by a curt note through his solicitor, to the effect that if any further annoyance were offered to Miss Fountain he would know how to protect her.

Mrs. Mason also had written. Madwoman! She forbade her cousin to visit the farm again, or to hold any communication with Polly or herself. A girl, born of a decent stock, who was capable of such an act as marrying a Papist and idolater was not fit to cross the threshold of Christian people. Mrs. Mason left her to the mercy of her offended God.

* * * * *

And in this matter of her cousins Laura was not unwilling to be governed. It was as though she liked to feel the curb.

And to-night as they strolled homewards, hand locked in hand, all her secret reserves and suspicions dropped away—silenced or soothed. Her charming head drooped a little; her whole small self seemed to shrink towards him as though she felt the spell of that mere physical maturity and strength that moved beside her youth. Their walk was all sweetness; and both would have prolonged it but that Augustina had been left too long alone.

She was no longer in the garden, however, and they went in by the chapel entrance, seeking for her.

"Let me just get my letters," said Helbeck, and Laura followed him to his study.

The afternoon post lay upon his writing-table. He opened the first, read it, and handed it with a look of hesitation to Laura.

"Dear, Mr. Williams comes to-morrow. They have given him a fortnight's holiday. He has had a sharp attack of illness and depression, and wants change. Will you feel it too long?"

Involuntarily her look darkened. She put down the letter without reading it.

"Why—I want to see him! I—I shall make a study of him," she said with some constraint.

But by this time Helbeck was half through the contents of his next envelope. She heard an exclamation of disgust, and he threw down what he held with vehemence.

"One can trust nobody!" he said—"*nobody!*"

He began to pace the floor with angry energy, his hands thrust into his pockets. She—in astonishment—threw him questions which he hardly seemed to hear. Suddenly he paused.

"Dear Laura!—will you forgive me?—but after all I must sell that picture!"

"Why?"

"I hear to-day, for the first time, who is to be the real purchaser of that land, and why it is wanted. It is to be the site of a new Anglican church and vicarage. I have been tricked throughout—tricked—and deceived! But thank God it is not too late! The circumstances of this afternoon were providential. There is still time for me to write to Whinthorpe." He glanced at the clock. "And my lawyers may tear up the contract when they please!"

"And—that means—you will sell the Romney?" said Laura slowly.

"I must! Dear little one!"—he came to stoop over her—"I am most truly grieved. But I am bound to my orphans by all possible engagements—both of honour and conscience."

"Why is it so horrible that an Anglican church should be built on your land?" she said, slightly holding him away from her.

"Because I am responsible for the use of my land, as for any other talent. It shall not be used for the spread of heresy."

"Are there any Catholics near it?"

"Not that I know of. But it has been a fixed principle with me throughout my life"—he spoke with a firm and, as she thought, a haughty decision—"to give no help, direct or indirect, to a schismatical and rebellious church. I see now why there has been so much secrecy! My land is of vital importance to them. They apparently feel that the whole Anglican development of this new town may depend upon it. Let them feel it. They shall not have a foot—not an inch of what belongs to me!"

"Then they are to have no church," said Laura. She had grown quite pale.

"Not on my land," he said, with a violence that first amazed and then offended her. "Let them find sympathisers of their own. They have filched enough from us Catholics in the past."

And he resumed his rapid walk, his face darkened with an anger he vainly tried to curb. Never had she seen him so roused.

She too rose, trembling a little.

"But I love that picture!" she said. "I beg you not to sell it."

He stopped, in distress.

"Unfortunately, dear, I have promised the money. It must be found within six weeks—and I see no other way."

She thought that he spoke stiffly, and she resented the small effect of her appeal.

"And you won't bend a single prejudice to—to save such a family possession—though I care for it so much?"

He came up to her with outstretched hands.

"I have been trying to save it all these weeks! Nothing but such a cause as this could have stood in the way. It is not a prejudice, darling—believe me!—it belongs, for me at any rate, to Catholic obligation."

She took no notice of the hands. With her own she clung to the table behind her.

"Why do you give so much to the Sisters? It is not right! They give a very bad education!"

He stared at her. How pale she had grown—and this half-stifled voice!——

"I think we must be the judges of that," he said, dropping his hands. "We teach what we hold most important."

"Nobody like Sister Angela ought to teach!" she cried—"you give money to bring pupils to Sister Angela. And she is not well trained. I never heard anyone talk so ignorantly as she does to Augustina. And the children learn nothing, of course—everyone says so."

"And you are so eager to listen to them?" he said, with sparkling eyes.
Then he controlled himself.

"But that is not the point. I humbly admit our teaching is not nearly so good as it might be if we had larger funds to spend upon it. But the point is that I have promised the money, and that a number of arrangements—fresh teachers among them—are already dependent on it. Dearest, won't you recognise my difficulties, and—and help me through them?"

"You make them yourself," she said, drawing back. "There would be none if you did not—hate—your fellow-citizens."

"I hate no one—but I cannot aid and abet the English Church. That is impossible to me. Laura!" He observed her carefully. "I don't understand. Why do you say these things?—why does it hurt you so much?"

"Oh! let me go," she cried, flinging his hand away from her. "Let me go!"

And before he could stop her, she had fled to the door, and disappeared.

* * * * *

Helbeck and Augustina ate a lonely dinner.

"You must have taken Laura too far this afternoon, Alan," said Mrs. Fountain fretfully. "She says she is too tired to come down again to-night—so very unlike her!"

"She did not complain—but it may have been a long round," said her companion.

* * * * *

After dinner, Helbeck took his pipe into the garden, and walked for long up and down the bowling-green, torn with solitary thought. He had put up his pipe, and was beginning drearily to feel the necessity of going back to his study, and applying himself—if he could force his will so far—to some official business that lay waiting for him there, when a light noise on the gravel caught his ear.

His heart leapt.

"Laura!"

She stopped—a white wraith in the light mist that filled the garden. He went up to her overwhelmed with the joy of her coming—accusing himself of a hundred faults.

She was too miserable to resist him. The storm of feeling through which she had passed had exhausted her wholly; and the pining for his step and voice had become an anguish driving her to him.

"I told you to make me afraid!" she said mournfully, as she found herself once more upon his breast —"but you can't! There is something in me that fears nothing—not even the breaking of both our hearts."

## CHAPTER II

A week later the Jesuit scholastic Edward Williams arrived at Bannisdale.

In Laura his coming roused a curiosity half angry, half feminine, by which Helbeck was alternately harassed and amused. She never tired of asking questions about the Jesuits—their training, their rules, their occupations. She could not remember that she had ever seen one till she made acquaintance with

Father Leadham. They were alternately a mystery and a repulsion to her.

Helbeck smilingly told her that she was no worse than the mass of English people. "They have set up their bogey and they like it." She would be surprised to find how simple was the Jesuit secret.

"What is it?—in two words?" she asked him.

"Obedience—training. So little!" he laughed at her, and took her hand tenderly.

She inquired if Mr. Williams were yet "a full Jesuit."

"Oh dear no! He has taken his first vows. Now he has three years' philosophy, then four years' theology. After that they will make him teach somewhere. Then he will take orders—go through a third year's noviceship—get a doctor's degree, if he can—and after that, perhaps, he will be a professed 'Father.' It isn't done just by wishing for it, you see."

The spirit of opposition reared its head. She coloured, laughed—and half without intending it repeated some of the caustic things she had heard occasionally from her father or his friends as to the learning of Jesuits. Helbeck, under his lover's sweetness, showed a certain restlessness. He hardly let himself think the thought that Stephen Fountain had been quoted to him very often of late; but it was there.

"I am no judge," he said at last. "I am not learned. I dare say you will find Williams ignorant enough. But he was a clever boy—besides his art."

"And they have made him give up his art?"

"For a time—yes—perhaps altogether. Of course it has been his great renunciation. His superiors thought it necessary to cut him off from it entirely. And no doubt during the novitiate he suffered a great deal. It has been like any other starved faculty."

The girl's instincts rose in revolt. She cried out against such waste, such mutilation. The Catholic tried to appease her; but in another language. He bade her remember the Jesuit motto. "A Jesuit is like any other soldier—he puts himself under orders for a purpose."

"And God is to be glorified by the crashing out of all He took the trouble to give you!"

"You must take the means to the end," said Helbeck steadily. "The Jesuit must yield his will—otherwise the Society need not exist. In Williams's case, so long as he had a fascinating and absorbing pursuit, how could he give himself up to his superiors? Besides"—his grave face stiffened—"in his case there were peculiar difficulties. His art had become a temptation. He wished to protect himself from it."

Laura's curiosity was roused; but Helbeck gently put her questions aside, and at last she said in a flash of something like passion that she wondered which the young man had felt most—the trampling on his art, or the forsaking his mother.

Helbeck looked at her with sudden animation.

"I knew you had heard that story. Dear—he did not forsake his mother! He meant to go—the Fathers had given him leave. But there was a mistake, a miscalculation—and he arrived too late."

Laura's beautiful eyes threw lightnings.

"A *miscalculation!*" she cried scornfully, her quick breath beating—"That puts it in a nutshell."

Helbeck looked at her sadly.

"So you are going to be very unkind to him?"

"No. I shall watch him."

"Look into him rather! Try and make out his spring. I will help you."

She protested that there was nothing she less desired. She had been reading some Jesuit biographies from Augustina's room, and they had made her feel that the only thing to be done with such people was to keep them at a distance.

Helbeck sighed and gave up the conversation. Then in a moment, compunctions and softenings began to creep over the girl's face. A small hand made its way to his.

"There is Wilson in the garden—shall we go and talk to him?"

They were in Helbeck's study—where Augustina had left them alone for a little after luncheon.

Helbeck put down his pipe with alacrity. Laura ran for her hat and cape, and they went out together.

A number of small improvements both inside and outside the house had been recently inaugurated to please the coming bride. Already Helbeck realised—and not without a secret chafing—the restraints that would soon be laid upon the almsgiving of Bannisdale. A man who marries, who may have children, can no longer deal with his money as he pleases. Meanwhile he found his reward in Laura's half-reluctant pleasure. She was at once full of eagerness and full of a proud shyness. No bride less grasping or more sensitive could have been imagined. She loved the old house and would fain repair its hurts. But her wild nature, at the moment, asked, in this at least, to be commanded, not to command. To be the managing wife of an obedient husband was the last thing that her imagination coveted. So that when any change in the garden, any repair in the house, was in progress, she would hover round Helbeck, half cold, half eager, now only showing a fraction of her mind, and now flashing out into a word or look that for Helbeck turned the whole business into pure joy. Day by day, indeed, amid all jars and misgivings, the once solitary master of Bannisdale was becoming better acquainted with that mere pleasantness of a woman's company which is not passion, but its best friend. In the case of those women whom nature marks for love, it is a company full of incident, full of surprise. Certainly Helbeck found it so.

A week or more had now passed since the quarrel over the picture. Not a word upon the subject had passed between them since. As for Laura, she took pains not to look at the picture—to forget its existence. It was as though she felt some hidden link between herself and it—as though some superstitious feeling attached to it in her mind.

Meanwhile a number of new understandings were developing in Helbeck. His own nature was simple and concentrated, with little introspective power of the modern kind—even through all the passions and subtleties of his religion. Nevertheless his lover's sense revealed to him a good deal of what was going on in the semi-darkness of Laura's feelings and ideas. He divined this jealousy of his religious life that had taken possession of her since their return from the sea. He felt by sympathy that obscure pain of separation that tormented her. What was he to do?—what could he do?

The change astonished him, for while they were at the sea, it seemed to him that she had accepted the situation with a remarkable resolution. But it also set him on new trains of thought; it roused in him a secret excitement, a vague hope. If her earlier mood had persisted; if amid the joys of their love she had continued to put the whole religious matter away from her, as many a girl with her training might and would have done—then indeed he must have resigned himself to a life-long difference and silence between them on these vital things.

But, since she suffered—since she felt the need of that more intimate, more exquisite link—? Since she could not let it alone, but must needs wound herself and him——?

Instinctively he felt the weakness of her intellectual defence. Once or twice he let himself imagine the capture of her little struggling soul, the break-down of her childish resistance, and felt the flooding of a joy, at once mystical and very human.

But that natural chivalry and deep self-distrust he had once expressed to Father Leadham kept him in check; made him very slow and scrupulous. Towards his Catholic friends indeed he stood all along in defence of Laura, an attitude which only made him more sensitive and more vulnerable in other directions.

Meanwhile his own struggles and discomforts were not few. No strong man of Helbeck's type endures so complete an overthrow at the hands of impulse and circumstance as he had done, without going afterwards through a period of painful readjustment. The new image of himself that he saw reflected in the astonished eyes of his Catholic companions worked in him a number of fresh forms of self-torment. His loyalty to Laura, indeed, and to his own passion was complete. Secretly, he had come to believe, with all the obstinate ardor of the religious mind, that the train of events which had first brought Laura into his life, and had then overcome his own resistance to her spell, represented, not temptation, but a Divine volition concerning him. No one so impoverished and forlorn as she in the matters of the soul! But not of her own doing. Was she responsible for her father? In the mere fact that she had so incredibly come to love him—he being what he was—there was surely a significance which the Catholic was free to interpret in the Catholic sense. So that, where others saw defection from a high ideal and danger to his own Catholic position, he, with hidden passion, and very few words of explanation even to his director, Father Leadham, felt the drawing of a heavenly force, the promise of an ultimate and joyful issue.

At the same time, the sadness of his Catholic friends should find no other pretext. Upon his fidelity now and here, not only his own eternal fate, but Laura's, might depend. Devotion to the crucified Lord and His Mother, obedience to His Church, imitation of His saints, charity to His poor—these are the means by which the Catholic draws down the grace, the condescension that he seeks. He felt his own life offered for hers. So that the more he loved her, the more set, the more rigid became all the habits and purposes of religion. Again and again he was tempted to soften them—to spend time with her that he had been accustomed to give to Catholic practice—to slacken or modify the harshness of that life of self-renouncement, solitude, unpopularity, to which he had vowed himself for years—to conceal from her the more startling and difficult of his convictions. But he crushed the temptation, guided, inflamed by that profound idea of a substituted life and a vicarious obedience which has been among the root forces of Christianity.

* * * * *

One evening, as she was dressing for the very simple meal that only Mrs. Denton dignified by the name of "dinner," Laura reminded herself that Mr. Williams must have arrived, and that she would probably find him in the hall on her descent.

It happened to be the moment for donning a new dress, which she had ordered from a local artist. She had no mind to exhibit it to the Jesuit. On the other hand the temptation to show it to Helbeck was irresistible. She put it on.

When she entered the hall, her feelings of dislike to Mr. Williams, and her pride in her new dress, had both combined to give her colour and radiance. Helbeck saw her come in with a start of pleasure. Augustina fidgeted uncomfortably. She thought that Laura might have dressed in something more quiet and retiring to meet a guest who was a religious, almost a priest.

Helbeck introduced the newcomer. Laura's quick eyes travelled over the young man who bowed to her with a cold awkwardness. She turned aside and seated herself in a corner of the settle, whither Helbeck came to bend over her.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" he asked her in a low voice. At the moment of her entrance she had thought him pale and fatigued. He had been half over the country that day on Catholic business. But now his deep-set eyes shone again. He had thrown off the load.

"Experimenting with a Whinthorpe dressmaker," she said; "do you approve?"

Her smile, her brilliance in her pretty dress, intoxicated him. He murmured some lover's words under his breath. She flushed a little deeper, then exerted herself to keep him by her. Till supper was announced they had not a word or look for anyone but each other. The young "scholastic" talked ceremoniously to Augustina.

"Who talks of Jesuit tyranny now?" said Helbeck, laughing, as he and Laura led the way to the dining-room. "If it is not too much for him, Williams has leave to finish some of his work in the chapel while he is here. But he looks very ill—don't you think so?"

She understood the implied appeal to her sympathy.

"He is extraordinarily handsome," she said, with decision.

At table, however, she came to terms more exactly with her impression. The face of the young Jesuit was indeed, in some ways, singularly handsome. The round, dark eyes, the features delicate without weakness, the high brow narrowed by the thick and curly hair that overhung it, the small chin and curving mouth, kept still something of the look and the bloom of the child—a look that was only intensified by the strange force of expression that was added to the face whenever the lids so constantly dropped over the eyes were raised. For one saw in it a mingling at once of sharp observation and of distrust; it seemed to spring from some fiery source of personality, which at the very moment it revealed itself, yet warned the spectator back, and stood, half proudly, half sullenly, on the defensive. Such a look one may often see in the eyes of a poetic and morbid child.

But the whole aspect was neither delicate nor poetic. For the beauty of the head was curiously and unexpectedly contradicted by the clumsiness of the frame below it. "Brother" Williams might have the head of a poet; he had the form and movements, the large feet and shambling gait, of the peasant. And Laura, scanning him with some closeness, noticed with distaste a good many signs of personal slovenliness and ill-breeding. His hands were not as clean as they might have been; his clerical coat

badly wanted a brushing.

His talk to Augustina could hardly have been more formal. In speaking to ladies he seldom raised his eyes; and as far as she herself was concerned Laura was certain, before half an hour was over, that he meant to address her and to be addressed by her, as little as possible.

Towards Helbeck the visitor's manner was more natural and more attractive. It was a manner of affection, and great deference; but even here the occasional bursts of conversation into which the Squire drew his guest were constantly interrupted by fits of silence or absence on the part of the scholastic.

Perhaps the subject on which they talked most easily was that of Jesuit Missions—especially of certain West African stations. Helbeck had some old friends there; and Laura thought she detected that the young scholastic had himself missionary ambitions.

Augustina too joined in with eagerness; Laura fell silent.

But she watched Helbeck, she listened to Helbeck throughout. How full his mind and heart were of matters, persons, causes, that must for ever represent a sealed world to her! The eagerness, the knowledge with which he discussed them, roused in her that jealous, half-desolate sense that was becoming an habitual tone of mind.

And some things offended her taste. Helbeck showed most animation, and the young Jesuit most response, whenever it was a question not so much of Catholic triumphs, as of Protestant rebuffs. The follies, mistakes, and defeats of Anglican missions in particular—Helbeck's memory was stored with them. By his own confession he had made a Jesuit friend departing for the mission, promise to tell him any funny or discreditable tales that could be gathered as to their Anglican rivals in the same region. And while he repeated them for Williams's amusement, he laughed immoderately—he who laughed so seldom. The Jesuit too was convulsed—threw off all restraint for the first time.

The girl flushed brightly, and began to play with Bruno. Years ago she remembered hearing her father say approvingly of Helbeck's manner and bearing that they were those "of a man of rank, though not of a man of fashion;" and it was hardly possible to say how much of Helbeck's first effect on her imagination had been produced by that proud unworldliness, that gently, cold courtesy in which he was commonly wrapped. These silly pointless stories that he had been telling with such relish disturbed and repelled her. They revealed a new element in his character, something small and ugly, that was like the speck in a fine fruit, or, rather, like the disclosure of an angry sore beneath an outward health and strength.

She recalled the incident of the land, and that cold isolation in which Helbeck held himself towards his Protestant neighbours—the passionate animosity with which he would sometimes speak of their charities or their pietisms, the contempt he had for almost all their ideals, national or social. Again and again, in the early days at Bannisdale, it had ruffled or provoked her.

Helbeck soon perceived that she was jarred. When she called to Bruno he checked his flow of anecdote, and said to her in a lower voice:

"You think us uncharitable?"

She looked up—but rather at the Jesuit than at Helbeck.

"No—only it is not amusing! If Augustina or I could speak for the other side—that would be more fun!"

"Laura!" cried Augustina, scandalised.

"Oh, I know you wouldn't, if you could," said the girl gayly. "And I can't. So there it is. One can't stop you, I suppose!"

She threw back her bright head and turned to Helbeck. The action was pretty and coquettish; but there was a touch of fever in it, nevertheless, which did not escape the stranger sitting opposite to her. Brother Williams raised his down-dropped lids an instant. Those brilliant eyes of his took in the girl's beauty and the change in Helbeck's countenance.

"You shall stop what you like," said Helbeck. A mute conversation seemed to pass between him and Miss Fountain; then the Squire turned to his sister, and asked her cheerfully as to the merits of a new pony that she and Laura had been trying that afternoon.

* * * * *

After dinner Helbeck, much troubled by the pinched features and pale cheeks of his guest, descended himself to the cellar in search of a particular Burgundy laid down by his father and reputed to possess a rare medicinal force.

Mr. Williams was left standing before the hearth, and the famous carved mantelpiece put up by the martyr of 1596. As soon as Helbeck was gone he looked carefully—furtively—round the room. It was the look of the peasant appraising a world not his.

A noise made by the wind at one of the old windows disturbed him. He looked up and was caught by a photograph that had been propped against one of the vases of the mantelpiece. It was a picture—recently taken—of Miss Fountain sitting on the settle in the hall with the dogs beside her. And it rendered the half-mocking animation of her small face with a peculiar fidelity.

The young man was conscious of a strong movement of repulsion. Mr. Helbeck's engagement had sent a thrill of pain through a large section of the Catholic world; and the Jesuit had already divined a hostile force in the small and brilliant creature whose eyes had scanned him so coldly as she sat beside the Squire. He fell into a reverie, and took one or two turns up and down the room.

"Shall I?" he said to himself in an excitement that was half vanity, half religion.

* * * * *

Half an hour later Laura was in the oriel window of the drawing-room, looking out through the open casement at the rising of a golden moon above the fell. Her mind was full of confusion.

"Is he never to be free to say what he thinks and feels in his own house?" she asked herself passionately. "Or am I to sit by and see him sink to the level of these bigots?"

Augustina was upstairs, and Laura, absorbed in her own thoughts and the night loveliness of the garden, did not hear Helbeck and Mr. Williams enter the room, which was as usual but dimly lighted. Suddenly she caught the words:

"So you still keep her? That's good! One could not imagine this room without her."

The voice was the voice of the Jesuit, but in a new tone—more eager, more sincere. What were they talking of?—the picture? And she, Laura, of course was hidden from them by the heavy curtain half drawn across the oriel. She could not help waiting for Helbeck's reply.

"Ah!—you remember how she was threatened even when you first began to come here! I have clung to her, of course—there has always been a strong feeling about her in the family. Last week I thought again that she must go. But—well! it is too soon to speak—I still have some hopes—-I have been straining every nerve. You know, however, that we must begin our new buildings at the orphanage in six weeks—and that I must have the money?"

He spoke with his usual simplicity. Laura dropped her head upon the window-sill, and the tears rushed into her eyes.

"I know—we all know—what you have done and sacrificed for the faith," said the younger man with emotion.

"*You* will not venture to make a merit of it," said Helbeck gravely. "For we serve the same ends—only you perceive them more clearly—and follow them more persistently than I."

"I have stronger aids—and shall have to answer for more!" said Williams, in a low voice. "And I owe it all to you—my friend and rescuer."

"You use a great deal too strong language," said Helbeck, smiling.

Williams threw him an uncertain look. The colour mounted in the young man's sickly cheek. He approached the Squire.

"Mr. Helbeck—I know from something a common friend told me—that you think—that you have said to others—that my conversion was not your doing. You are mistaken. I should like to tell you the truth. May I?"

Helbeck looked uncomfortable, but was not ready enough to stave off the impending confidence. Williams fixed him with eyes now fully lifted, and piercingly bright.

"You said little—that is quite true. But it was what you did, what I saw as I worked here beside you week after week that conquered me. Do you remember once rebuking me in anger because I had made

some mistake in the chapel work? You were very angry—and I was cut to the heart. That very night you came to me, as I was still working, and asked my pardon—you! Mr. Helbeck of Bannisdale, and I, a boy of sixteen, the son of the wheelwright who mended your farm carts. You made me kneel down beside you on the steps of the sanctuary—and we said the Confiteor together. Don't say you forget it!"

Helbeck hesitated, then spoke with evident unwillingness.

"You make a great deal of nothing, my dear Edward. I had treated you to one of the Helbeck rages, I suppose—and had the grace to be ashamed of myself."

"It made me a Catholic," said the other emphatically, "so I naturally dwell upon it. Next day I stole a 'Garden of the Soul' and a book of meditations from your study. Then, on the pretext of the work, I used to make you tell me or read me the stories of the saints—later, I often used to follow you in the morning when you went to Mass. I watched you day by day, till the sense of something supernatural possessed me. Then you noticed my coming to Mass—you asked Father Bowles to speak to me—you seemed to shrink—or I thought so—from speaking yourself. But it was not Father Bowles—it was not my first teachers at St. Aloysius it was you—who brought me to the faith!"

"Well, if so, I thank God. But I think your humility——"

"One moment," said the Jesuit hurriedly. "There is something on my mind to say to you—if I might be allowed to say it—if the gratitude, the strong and filial gratitude, which I feel towards you—for that, and much, much else," his voice shook, "might be my excuse——"

Helbeck was silent. Laura to her dismay heard the sound of steps. Mr. Williams had walked to the open door of the drawing-room and closed it. What was she to do? Indecision—a wilful passion of curiosity—held her where she was.

It was some moments, however, before the conversation was resumed. At last the young man said in a tone of strong agitation:

"You may blame me—my superiors may blame me. I have no leave—no commission whatever. The impulse to speak came to me when I was waiting for you in the dining-room just now. I can only plead your own goodness to me—and—the fact that I have remembered you before the Blessed Sacrament for these eight years.... It was an impression at meditation that I want to tell you of—an impression so strong that I have never since been able to escape from it—it haunts me perpetually. I was in our chapel at St. Aloysius. The subject of meditation was St. John vii. 36, 'Every man went unto his own house,' followed immediately by the first words of the eighth chapter, 'and Jesus went unto Mount Olivet.' ... I endeavoured strictly to obey the advice of St. Ignatius. I placed myself at the feet of our Lord. I went through the Preludes. Then I began on the meditation. I saw the multitude returning to their homes and their amusements—while our Lord went alone to the Mount of Olives. It was evening. The path seemed to me steep and weary—and He was bent with fatigue. At first He was all alone—darkness hung over the hill and the olive gardens. Then, suddenly, I became aware of forms that followed Him, at a long distance—saints, virgins, martyrs, confessors. They swept along in silence. I could just see them as a dim majestic crowd. Presently, a form detached itself from the crowd—to my amazement, I saw *you* distinctly—there seemed to be a special light upon your face. And the rest appeared to fall back. Soon I only saw the Form toiling in front, and you following. Then at the brow of the hill the Lord turned—and you, who were half-way up the last steep, paused also. The Lord beckoned to you. His Divine face was full of sweetness and encouragement—and you made a spring towards Him. Then something happened—something horrible—but I could hardly see what. But a figure seemed to snatch at you from behind—you stumbled—then you fell headlong. A black cloud fell from the sky—and covered you. I heard a wailing cry—I saw the Lord's face darkened—and immediately afterwards the train of saints swept past me once more, with bent heads, beating their breasts. I cannot describe the extraordinary vividness of it! The succession of thoughts and images never paused; and when I woke, or seemed to wake, I found myself bathed in sweat and nearly fainting."

There was a dead silence.

The scholastic began again, in still more rapid and troubled tones, to excuse himself. Mr. Helbeck might well think it presumption on his part to have repeated such a thing. He could only plead a strange pressure on his conscience—a sense of obligation. The fact was probably nothing—meant nothing. But if calamity came—if it meant calamity—and he had not delivered his message—would there not have been a burden on his soul?

Suddenly there was a sound. The handle of the drawing-room turned.

"Why, you are dark in here!" said Augustina. "What a wretched light that lamp gives!"

At the same moment the heavy curtain over the oriel window was drawn to one side, and a light figure entered the room.

The Jesuit made a step backwards. "Laura!" cried Helbeck in bewilderment.
"Where have you come from?"

"I was in the window watching the moon rise. Didn't you know?"

She walked up to him, and without hesitation she did what she had never yet done before a spectator: she slipped her little hand into his. He looked down upon her, rather pale, his lips moving. Then withdrawing his hand, he quietly and proudly put his arm round her. She accepted the movement with equal pride, and without a word.

Augustina looked at them with discomfort—coughed, fumbled with her spectacles, and began to hunt for her knitting. The Jesuit, whiter and sicklier than before, murmured that he would go and rest after his journey, and with eyes steadily cast down he walked away.

"I don't wonder!" thought Augustina, in an inward heat; "they really are too demonstrative!"

That night for the first time since her arrival at Bannisdale, Laura, instead of saying good-night as soon as the clock reached a quarter to ten, quietly walked beside Augustina to the chapel.

She knelt at some distance from Helbeck. But when the prayers, which were read by Mr. Williams, were over, and the tiny congregation was leaving the chapel, she felt herself drawn back. Helbeck did not speak, but in the darkness of the corridor he raised her hands and held them long against his lips. She quickly escaped from him, and without another word to anyone she was gone.

But an hour or two later, as she lay wakeful in her room above the study, she still heard the sound of continuous voices from below.

Helbeck and the scholastic!—plunged once more in that common stock of recollections and interests in which she had no part, linked and reconciled through all difference by that Catholic freemasonry of which she knew nothing. The impertinent zeal of the evening—the young man's ill manners and hypocrisies—would be soon forgiven. In some ways Mr. Helbeck was more Jesuit than the Jesuits. He would not only excuse the audacity—was she quite sure that in his inmost heart he would not shrink before the warning?

"What chance have I?" she cried, in a sudden despair; and she wept long and miserably, oppressed by new terrors, new glimpses, as it were, of some hard or chilling reality that lay waiting for her in the dim corridors of life.

* * * * *

Next morning after breakfast, Helbeck and Mr. Williams disappeared. A light scaffolding had been placed in the chapel. Work was to begin.

Laura put on her hat, took a basket, and went into the garden to gather fresh flowers for the house. Along the edges of the bowling-green stood rows of sunflowers, a golden show against the deep bronze of the thick beech hedges that enclosed the ground. Laura was trying, without much success, to reach some of the top blossoms of a tall plant when Helbeck came upon her.

"Be as independent as you please," he said laughing, "but you will never be able to gather sunflowers without me!"

In a moment her basket was filled. He looked down upon her.

"You should live here—in the bowling-green. It frames you—your white hat—your grey dress. Laura!"—his voice leapt—"do I do enough to make you happy?"

She flushed—turned her little face, and smiled at him—but rather sadly, rather pensively. Then she examined him in her turn. He looked jaded and tired. From want of sleep?—or merely from the daily fatigue of that long walk, foodless, to Whinthorpe for early Mass? That morning, as usual, by seven o'clock she had seen him crossing the park. A cheerless rain was falling from a grey sky. But she had never yet known him stopped by weather.

There was a quick association of ideas—and she said abruptly:

"Why did Mr. Williams say all that to you last night, do you suppose?"

Helbeck's countenance changed. He sauntered on beside her, his hands in his pockets, frowning. But

he did not reply, and she became impatient.

"I have been reading a French story this morning," she said quickly. "There is a character in it—a priest. The author says of him that he had 'une imagination faussée et troublée.'" She paused, then added with great vivacity—"I thought it applied to someone else—don't you?"

The fold in Helbeck's forehead deepened a little.

"Have you judged him already? I don't know—I can't take Williams, you see, quite as you take him. To me he is still the strange gifted boy I taught to draw—whom I had to protect from his brutal father. He has chosen the higher life, and will soon be a priest. He is therefore my superior. But at the same time I think I understand him and his character. I understand the kind of impulse—the impetuosity—that made him do and say what he did last night."

"It was our engagement, of course, that he meant—by your fall—the black cloud that covered you?"

The impetuous directness was all Laura; so was the sensitive change in eye and lip. But Helbeck neither wavered, nor caressed her. He had a better instinct. He looked at her with a penetrating glance.

"I don't think he quite knew what he meant. And you? Now I will carry the war into the enemy's country! Were you quite kind—quite right in doing what you did last night? Foolish or no, he was speaking in a very intimate way—of things that he felt deeply. It must have given him great pain to be overheard."

Her breath fluttered.

"It was quite an accident that I was there. But how could I help listening? I must know—I ought to know—what your Catholic friends think—what they say of me to you!"

She was conscious of a childish petulance. But it was as though she could not help herself.

"I wish you had not listened," he said, with gentle steadiness. "Won't you trust those things to me?"

"What power have I beside theirs?" she said, turning away her head. He saw the trembling of the soft throat, and bent over her.

"I only ask you, for both our sakes, not to test it too far!"

And taking her hand by force, he crushed it passionately in his own.

But she was only half appeased. Her mind, indeed, was in that miserable state when love finds its only pleasure in self-torment.

With a secret change of ground she asked him how he was going to spend the day. He answered, reluctantly, that there was a Diocesan Committee that would take the afternoon, and that the morning must be largely given to the preparation of papers.

"But you will come and look in upon me?—you will help me through?"

She raised her shoulders resentfully.

"And you have been, to Whinthorpe already!—Why do you go to Mass every morning?" she asked, looking up. "I know very few Catholics do. I wish you'd tell me."

He looked embarrassed.

"It has been my custom for a long time," he said at last.

"But *why?*"

"Inquisitive person!"

Her look of pain checked him. He observed her rather sadly and silently for a moment, then said:

"I will tell you, dear, of course, if you want to know. It is one of the obligations of the Third Order of St. Francis, to which I belong."

"What does that mean?"

He shortly explained. She cross-examined. He was forced to describe to her in detail all the main

constitutions of the Third Order; its obligations as to fasting, attendance at Mass, and at the special meetings of the fraternity; its prescriptions of a rigid simplicity in life and dress; its prohibition of theatre-going.

She stood amazed. All her old notions of Catholics as gay people, who practised a free Sunday and allowed you to enjoy yourself, had been long overthrown by the Catholicism of Bannisdale. But this—this might be Daffady's Methodism!

"So that is why you would not take us to Whinthorpe the other day to see that London company?"

"It was an unsuitable play," he said hastily. "Theatres are not wholly forbidden us; but the exceptions must be few, and the plays such as a Catholic can see without harm to his conscience."

"But I love acting!" she cried, almost with a sense of suffocation. "Whenever I could, I got papa to take me to the play. I shall always want to go."

"There will be nothing to prevent you."

"So that anything is good enough for those who are not tertiaries!" she cried, confronting him.

Her cheeks burned. Had there been any touch of spiritual arrogance in his tone?

"I think I shall not answer that," he said, after a pause.

They walked on—she blindly holding herself as far as possible from him; he, with the mingled ardour and maladroitness of his character, longing and not quite venturing to cut the whole coil, and silence all this mood in her, by some masterfulness of love.

Suddenly she paused—she stepped to him—she laid her fingers on his arms—bright tears shone in her eyes.

"You can't—you can't belong to that—when we are married?"

"To the Third Order? But, dear!—there is nothing in it that conflicts with married life! It was devised specially for persons living in the world. You would not have me give up what has been my help and salvation for ten years?"

He spoke with great emotion. She trembled and hid her face against him.

"Oh! I could not bear it!" she said. "Can't you realise how it would divide us? I should feel outside—a pariah. As it is, I seem to have nothing to do with half your life—there is a shut door between me and it."

A flash of natural, of wholly irresistible feeling passed through him. He stooped and kissed her hair.

"Open the door and come in!" he said in a whisper that seemed to rise from his inmost soul.

She shook her head. They were both silent. The deep shade of the "wilderness" trees closed them in. There was a gentle melancholy in the autumn morning. The first leaves were dropping on the cobwebbed grass; and the clouds were low upon the fells.

Presently Laura raised herself. "Promise me you will never press me," she said passionately; "don't send anyone to me."

He sighed.

"I promise."

## CHAPTER III

One afternoon towards the end of Mr. Williams's visit, Laura was walking along a high field-path that overlooked the whole valley of the Flent. Helbeck had gone to meet the Bishop on some urgent business; but the name of his Catholic affairs was legion.

The weather, after long days of golden mist, of veiled and stealing lights on stream and fell, had

turned to rain and tumult. This afternoon, indeed, the rain had made a sullen pause. It had drawn back for an hour or two from the drenched valleys, even from the high peaks that stood violet-black against a space of rainy light. Yet still the sky was full of anger. The clouds, dark and jagged, rushed across the marsh lands before the northwest wind. And the colour of everything—of the moss, the peaks, the nearer crags and fields—was superbly rich and violent. The soaked woods of the park from which she had just emerged were almost black, and from their heart Laura could hear the river's swollen voice pursuing her as she walked.

There was something in the afternoon that reminded her of her earliest impressions of Bannisdale and its fell country—of those rainy March winds that were blowing about her when she first alighted at the foot of the old tower.

The association made her tremble and catch her breath. It was not all joy—oh! far from it! The sweet common rapture of common love was not hers. Instinctively she felt something in her own lot akin to the wilder and more tragic aspects of this mountain land, to which she had turned from the beginning with a daughter's yearning.

Yet the tragedy, if tragedy there were, was all from within, not from without. Augustina—though Laura guessed her mind well enough—complained no more. The marriage was fixed for November; the dispensation from the Bishop had been obtained. No lover could be more ardent, more tender, than Helbeck.

Why then this weariness—this overwhelming melancholy that seized her in all her solitary moments? Her nature had lost its buoyancy, its old gift for happiness.

The truth was that her will was tired out. Her whole soul thirsted to submit, and yet could not submit. Was it the mere spell of Catholic order and discipline, working upon her own restless and ill-ordered nature? It had so worked, indeed, from the beginning. She could recall—with trembling—many a strange moment in Helbeck's presence, or in the chapel, when she had seemed to feel her whole self breaking up, dissolving in the grip of a power that was at once her foe and the bearer of infinite seduction. But always the will, the self, had won the victory, had delivered a final "*No!*" into which had rushed the whole energy of her being.

And now—if it were only possible to crush back that "No"—to beat down this resistance which, like an alien garrison, defended, as it were, a town that hated it; if she could only turn and knock—knock humbly—at that closed door in her lover's life and heart. One touch!—one step!

Just as Helbeck could hardly trust himself to think of the joy of conquest, so she shrank bewildered before the fancied bliss of yielding.

To what awful or tender things would it admit her! That ebb and flow of mystical emotion she dimly saw in Helbeck, a life within a life;—all that is most intimate and touching in the struggle of the soul—all that strains and pierces the heart—the world to which these belong rose before her, secret, mysterious, "a city not made with hands," now drawing, now repelling. Voices came from it to her that penetrated all the passion and the immaturity of her nature.

The mere imagination of what it would mean to surrender herself to Helbeck's teaching in these strange and moving things—what it would be to approach them through the sweetness, the chiding, the training of his love—could shake and unnerve her.

What stood in the way?

Simply a revolt and repulsion that seemed to be more than and outside herself—something independent and unconquerable, of which she was the mere instrument.

Had the differences between her and Helbeck been differences of opinion, they would have melted like morning dew. But they went far deeper. Helbeck, indeed, was in his full maturity. He had been trained by Jesuit teachers; he had lived and thought; his mind had a framework. Had he ever felt a difficulty, he would have been ready, no doubt, with the answer of the schools. But he was governed by heart and imagination no less than Laura. A serviceable intelligence had been used simply to strengthen the claims of feeling and faith. Such as it was, however, it knew itself. It was at command.

But Laura!—Laura was the pure product of an environment. She represented forces of intelligence, of analysis, of criticism, of which in themselves she knew little or nothing, except so far as they affected all her modes of feeling. She felt as she had been born to feel, as she had been trained to feel. But when in this new conflict—a conflict of instincts, of the deepest tendencies of two natures—she tried to lay hold upon the rational life, to help herself by it and from it, it failed her everywhere. She had no tools, no weapons. The Catholic argument scandalised, exasperated her; but she could not meet it. And the

personal prestige and fascination of her lover did but increase with her, as her feeling grew more troubled and excited, and her intellectual defence weaker.

Meanwhile to the force of temperament there was daily added the force of a number of childish prejudices and dislikes. She had come to Bannisdale prepared to hate all she saw there; and with the one supreme exception, hatred had grown at command. She was a creature of excess; of poignant and indelible impressions. The nuns, with their unintelligible virtues, and their very obvious bigotries and littlenesses; the slyness and absurdities of Father Bowles; the priestly claims of Father Leadham; the various superstitions and peculiarities of the many priests and religious who had passed through the house since she knew it—alas! she hated them all!—and did not know how she was to help hating them in the future. These Catholic figures were to her so many disagreeable automata, moved by springs she could not possibly conceive, and doing perpetually the most futile and foolish things. She knew, moreover, by a sure instinct, that she had been unwelcome to them from the first moment of her appearance, and that she was now a stumbling-block and a grievance to them all.

Was she—by submission—to give these people, so to speak, a right to meddle and dabble in her heart? Was she to be wept over by Sister Angela—to confess her sins to Father Bowles—still worse, to Father Leadham? As she asked herself the question, she shrank in sudden passion from the whole world of ideas concerned—from all those stifling notions of sin, penance, absolution, direction, as they were conventionalised in Catholic practice and chattered about by stupid and mindless people. In defiance of them, her whole nature stood like a charged weapon, ready to strike.

For she had been bred in that strong sense of personal dignity which is the modern substitute for the abasements and humiliations of faith. And with that sense of dignity went reserve—the intimate conviction that no feeling which is talked about, which can be observed and handled and measured by other people, is worth a rush. It was what seemed to her the spiritual intrusiveness of Catholicism, its perpetual uncovering of the soul—its disrespect for the secrets of personality—its humiliation of the will—that made it most odious in the eyes of this daughter of a modern world, which finds in the development and dignifying of human life its most characteristic faith.

There were many moments indeed in which the whole Catholic system appeared to Laura's strained imagination as one vast *chasse*—an assemblage of hunters and their toils—against which the poor human spirit that was their quarry must somehow protect itself, with every possible wile or violence.

So that neither submission, nor a mere light tolerance and forgetting, were possible. Other girls, it seemed, married Catholics and made nothing of it—agreed pleasantly to differ all their lives. Her heart cried out! There could be no likeness between these Catholic husbands and Alan Helbeck.

In the first days of their engagement she had often said to herself: "I need have nothing to do with it!" or "Some things are so lovely!—I will only think of them." In those hours beside the sea it had been so easy to be tolerant and kind. Helbeck was hers from morning till night. And she, so much younger, so weak and small and ignorant, had seemed to hold his life, with all its unexplored depths and strengths, in her hand.

And now———

She threw herself down on a rock that jutted from the wet grass, and gave herself up to the jealous pain that possessed her.

* * * * *

A few days more and Mr. Williams would be gone. There was some relief in that thought. That strange scene in the drawing-room—deep as all concerned had buried it in oblivious silence—had naturally made his whole visit an offence to her. In her passionate way she felt herself degraded by his very presence in the house. His eyes constantly dropt, especially in her presence and Augustina's, his evident cold shrinking from the company of women—she thought of them with disgust and anger. For she said to herself that now she understood what they meant.

Of late she had been constantly busy with the books that stood to the right of Helbeck's table. She could not keep herself away from them, although the signs of tender and familiar use they bore, were as thorns in her sore sense. Even his books were better friends to him than she! And especially had she been dipping into those "Lives of the Saints" that Helbeck read habitually day by day; of which he talked to young Williams with a minuteness of knowledge that he scarcely possessed on any other subject—knowledge that appeared in all the details of the chapel painting. And on one occasion, as she turned over the small, worn volumes of his Alban Butler, she had come upon a certain passage in the life of St. Charles Borromeo:

"Out of a most scrupulous love of purity … neither would he speak to any woman, not even to his

pious aunt, or sisters, or any nun, but in sight of at least two persons, and in as few words as possible."

The girl flung it down. Surrounded as she often was by priests—affronted by those downcast eyes of the scholastic—the passage came upon her as an insult. Her cheeks burnt. Instinctively she showed herself that evening more difficult and exacting than ever with the man who loved her, and could yet feed his mind on the virtues of St. Charles Borromeo.

* * * * *

Nevertheless, she was often puzzled by the manner and demeanour of the young Jesuit.

During his work at the chapel frescoes certain curious transformations seemed to have passed over him. Or was it merely the change of dress? While painting he wore a long holland blouse that covered the clerical coat, concealed the clumsy limbs and feet, and concentrated the eye of the spectator on the young beauty of the head. When a visitor entered he would look up for an instant flushed with work and ardour, then plunge again into what he was doing. Art had reclaimed him; Laura could almost have said the Jesuit had disappeared. And what an astonishing gift there was in those clumsy fingers! His daring delicacies of colour; his ways of using the brush, that seemed to leave no clue behind; the liquid shimmer and brilliancy of his work—Helbeck could only explain them by saying that he had once taken him as a lad of nineteen to see a loan exhibition at Manchester, and then to the gallery at Edinburgh,

"There were three artists that he fastened upon—Watteau!—I have seen him recoil from the subjects (he was already balancing whether he should become a religious) and then go back again and again to the pictures, feeding himself upon them. Then there were two or three Rembrandts, and two or three Tintorets. One Tintoret Entombment I remember—a small picture. I never could get him away from it. He told me once that it was like something painted in powdered gems and then dipped in air. I believe he got the expression from some book he was reading," said Helbeck, with the good-humoured smile of one who does not himself indulge in the fineries of language.... "When we came home I borrowed a couple of pictures for him from a friend in Lancashire, who has good things. One was a Rembrandt —'The Casting-out of Hagar'—I have his copy of it in my room now—the other was a Tintoret sketch. He worked at them for days and weeks, pondering and copying them, bit by bit, till he was almost ill with excitement and enthusiasm. But you see the result in what he does."

And Helbeck smiled upon the artist with the affectionate sympathy of an elder brother. He and Laura were standing together one morning at the west end of the chapel, while Williams, in his blouse and mounted on a high stool, was painting a dozen yards away.

"And then he gave it up!" said Laura under her breath. "Who can understand that?"

Helbeck hesitated a little. His face was crossed for a moment by the shadow of some thought that he did not communicate. Then he said, "He came—as I told you—to think that it was right and best for him to do so. An artist, darling, has to think of the Four Last Things, like anybody else!"

"The Four Last Things!" said Laura, startled. "What do you mean?"

"Death—Judgment—Heaven—and Hell."

The words fell slowly from the half-whispering voice into the quiet darkness of the chapel. Laura looked up—Helbeck's eyes, fixed upon the crucifix over the altar, seemed to receive thence a stem and secret message to which the whole man responded.

The girl moved restlessly away.

"Let us go and see what he is doing."

As they approached, Williams turned to Helbeck—he seemed not to see Miss Fountain—and said a few troubled phrases that showed him wholly dissatisfied with his morning's work. Beads of perspiration stood on his brow; his lips were pinched and feverish; his eyes unhappy. He pointed Helbeck to the figure he was engaged upon—a strange dream of St. Mary of Egypt, as a very old woman, clothed in the mantle of Zosimus—the lion who was to bury her, couchant at her feet. Helbeck looked into it; admired some points, criticised others. Williams got down from his stool, talked with a low-voiced volubility, an egotistical passion and disturbance that roused astonishment in Laura. Till then she had been acquainted only with the measured attitudes and levelled voice that the Jesuit learns from the "Regulae Modestiae" of his order. But for the first time she felt a certain sympathy with him.

Afterwards for some days the young man, so recently an invalid, could hardly be persuaded to take sufficient exercise or food. He was absorbed in his saint and in the next figure beyond her, that was already growing under his brush. St. Ursula, white robed and fair haired, was springing like a flower

from the wall; her delicate youth shone beside the age and austerity, the penitence and emaciation, of St. Mary of Egypt. Both looked towards the altar; but St. Mary with a mystic sadness that both adored and quailed; St. Ursula with the rapture, the confidence, of a bride.

The artist could not be torn from his conception; and upon Laura too the spell of the work steadily grew. She would slip into the chapel at all hours, and watch; sometimes standing a little way from the painter, a black lace scarf thrown round her bright hair, sometimes sitting motionless with a book on her knee, which she did not read. When Helbeck was there conversation arose into which she was often drawn. And out of a real wish to please Helbeck, she would silence her own resentments, and force herself to be friendly. Insensibly Williams began to talk to her; and it would sometimes happen, when Helbeck went away for a time, that the cold reserve or *mauvaise honte* of the Jesuit would melt wholly before the eagerness of the artist—when, with intervals of a brusque silence, he talked with the rapidity and force of a turbid stream on the imaginations and the memories embodied in his work. And on one occasion, when the painter was busy with the head of St. Ursula, Laura, who was talking to Helbeck a few yards away, turned suddenly and found those dark strange eyes, that as a rule evaded her, fixed steadily and intently upon her. Next day she fancied with a start of dislike that in the lines of St. Ursula's brow, and in the arrangement of the hair, there was a certain resemblance to herself. But Helbeck did not notice it, and nothing was said.

At meals, too, conversation turned now more on art than on missions. Pictures seen by the two friends years before; Helbeck's fading recollections of Florence and Rome; modern Catholic art as it was being developed in the Jesuit churches of the Continent: of these things Williams would talk, and talk eagerly. Sometimes Augustina would timidly introduce some subject of greater practical interest to the commonplace English Catholic. Mr. Williams would let it drop; and then Mrs. Fountain would sit silent and ill at ease, her head and hands twitching in a helpless bewildered way.

But in a moment came a change. After a certain Thursday when he was at work all day, the young man painted no more. Beyond St. Ursula, St. Eulalia of Saragossa, Virgin and Martyr, had been sketched in, with a strange force of line and some suggestions both of colour and symbolism that held Laura fascinated. But the sketch remained ghostlike on the wall. The high stool was removed; the blouse put away.

Thenceforward Mr. Williams—to Laura's secret anger—spent hours in Helbeck's study reading. His avoidance of her society and Mrs. Fountain's was more marked than ever. His face, which in the first days at Bannisdale had begun to recover a certain boyish bloom, became again white and drawn. The eyes were scarcely ever seen; if, by some rare chance, the heavy lids did lift, the fire and brilliance of the gaze below were startling to the bystander. But for the most part he seemed to be wrapped in a dumb sickliness and pain; his person was even less cleanly, his clothes less cared for, than before. At table he hardly talked at all; never of painting, or of any topic connected with it.

* * * * *

Once or twice Laura caught Helbeck's look fixed upon his guest in what seemed to her anxiety or perplexity. But when she carelessly asked him what might be wrong with Mr. Williams, the Squire gave a decided answer.

"He is ill—and we ought not to have allowed him to do this work. There must be complete rest till he goes."

"Has he seen his father?" asked Laura.

"No. That is still hanging over him."

"Does his father wish to see him?"

"No! But it is his duty to go."

"Why? That he may enjoy a little more martyrdom?"

Helbeck laughed and captured her hand.

"What penalty do I exact for that?"

"It doesn't deserve any," she said quickly. "I don't think it is for health he has given up his painting. I believe he is unhappy."

"It may have revived old struggles," said Helbeck, with a sigh that seemed to escape him against his will.

"Why doesn't he give it all up," she said with energy, "and be an artist? That's where his heart, his strength, lies."

Helbeck's manner changed and stiffened.

"You are entirely mistaken, dearest. His heart and his strength are in his vocation—in making himself a good Jesuit."

She shook her head obstinately, with that rising breath of excitement which the slightest touch of difference was now apt to call up.

"I don't think so!—and I have watched him. Suppose he *did* give it all up? He could, of course, at any time."

Helbeck tried to smile and change the subject. But Laura persisted. Till at last the Squire said with pain:

"Darling—I don't think you know how these things sound in Catholic ears."

"But I want to know. You see, I don't understand anything about vows. I can't imagine why that man can't walk into a studio and leave his clerical coat behind him to-morrow. To me nothing seems easier. He is a human being, and free."

Helbeck was silent, and began to put some letters in order that were lying on his table. Laura's caprice only grew stronger.

"If he were to leave the Jesuits," she said, "would you break with him?"

As Mr. Williams was safely in the park with Augustina, Laura had resumed her accustomed place in the low seat beside Helbeck's writing-table. Augustina, for decorum's sake, had her arm-chair on the further side of the fireplace, where she often dozed, knitted, and read the newspapers. But she left the betrothed a good deal alone, less from a natural feminine sympathy than because she fed herself day by day on the hope that, in spite of all, Alan would yet set himself in earnest to the task that was clearly his—the task of Laura's conversion.

Helbeck showed no more readiness to answer her second inquiry than her first. He seemed to be absorbed in reading over a business letter.

Laura's pride was roused. Her cheeks flushed, and she repeated her question, her mind filled all the time with that mingled dread and wilfulness that must have possessed poor Psyche when she raised the lamp.

"Well, no," said Helbeck dryly, without lifting his eyes from his letter—"I don't suppose that he would remain my friend, under such strange circumstances—or that he would wish it."

"So you would cast him off?"

"Why will you start such uncomfortable topics, dear?" he said, half laughing. "What has poor Williams done that you should imagine such things?"

"I want to know what *you* would do if Mr. Williams—if any priest you know were to break his vows and leave the Church, what would you do?"

"Follow the judgment of the Church," said Helbeck quietly.

"And give up your friend!"

"Friendship, darling, is a complex thing—it depends upon so much. But I am so tired of my letters! Your hat is in the hall. Won't you come out?"

He rose, and bent over her tenderly, his hand on the table. In a flash she felt all the strange dignity, the ascetic strength of his personality; it was suggested this time by the mere details of dress—by the contrast between the worn and shabby coat, and the stern force of the lips, the refined individuality of the hand. She was filled anew with the sudden sense that she knew but half of him—a sudden terror of the future.

She lay back in her chair, meeting his eyes and trying to smile. But in truth she was quivering with impatience.

"I won't move till I have my answer! Please tell me—would—would you regard him as a lost soul?"

"Dearest! I am neither Williams's judge nor anyone else's! Of course I must hold that a man who breaks the most solemn vows endangers his soul. What else do you expect of me?"

"What do you mean by 'soul'? Have I a soul?—and what do you suppose is going to happen to it?"

The words were flung out with a concentrated passion—almost an anguish—that for the moment struck him dumb. They both grew pale; he looked at her steadily, and spoke her name, in a low appealing voice. But she took no notice; she rose, and, turning away from him, she leant against the mantelpiece, speaking with a choking eagerness that forced its way.

"You were in the chapel last night—very late. I know, for I heard the door open and shut. You must be unhappy, or you wouldn't spend so much time praying. Are you unhappy about me? I know you don't want to force me; but if, in time, I don't agree with you—if it goes on all our lives—how can you help thinking that I shall be lost—lost eternally—separated from you? You would think it of Mr. Williams if he left the Church. I know you told me once about ignorance—invincible ignorance. But here there will be no ignorance. I shall have seen everything—heard everything—known everything. If living here doesn't teach one, what could? And"—she paused, then resumed with even greater emphasis—"and as far as I can see I shall reject it all—wilfully, knowingly, deliberately. What will you say? What do you say now—to yourself—when—when you pray for me? What do you really think—what do you fear—what *must* you fear? I ought to know."

Helbeck looked at her without answering for a long moment. Her agitation, his painful silence, bore pitiful testimony to the strange, insurmountable reality of those facts of the spirit that stood like rocks in the stream of their love.

At last he held out his hands to her with that half-reproachful gesture he had often used towards her. "I fear nothing!—I hope everything. You never forbade me that. Will you leave my love no mysteries, Laura—no reserve? Nothing for you to discover and explore as time goes on?"

She trembled under the mingled remonstrance and passion of his tone. But she persisted. "It's because—I feel—other things come before love. Tell me—I have a right to know. I shall never come first—quite first—shall I?"

She forced the saddest, proudest of smiles, as he took her reluctant hands.

And involuntarily her eyes travelled over the room, over the crucifix above the faldstool, the little altar to St. Joseph, the worn books upon his table. They were to her like the weapons and symbols of an enemy.

He made her no direct answer. His face was for a moment grave and set. Then he roused himself, kissed the hands he held, and resolutely began to talk of something else.

When a few minutes later he left her alone, she stood there quivering under the touch of power by which he had silenced her—under the angry sense that she was less and less able as the days went by to draw or drive him into argument. The more thorny her mood became, the more sadly did he seem to hide the treasures of the soul from her.

* * * * *

These memories, and many like them, were passing and repassing through Laura's mind as she sat listless and sad on the hillside.

When at last she shook them off, the light was failing over the western wall of mountains. She had an errand to do for Augustina in the village that lay half-way to the daffodil wood, and she sprang up, wondering whether there was still time for it before dark.

As she hurried on towards a stile that lay across the path, she saw a woman approaching on the further side.

"Polly!"

The figure addressed stood still a moment in astonishment, then ran to meet the speaker.

"Laura!—well, I'm sure!"

The two girls kissed each other. Laura looked gayly, wistfully, at her cousin.

"Polly—are you all very cross with me still?"

Polly hesitated and fenced. Laura sighed. But she looked at the stout red-faced woman with a

peculiar flutter of pleasure. The air of the wild upland—all the primitive, homely facts of the farm, seemed to come about her again. She had left Bannisdale, choked with feeling, tired with thought. Polly's broad speech and bouncing ways were welcome as a breeze in summer.

They sat down on the stile side by side. Laura gave up her errand, and they talked fast. Polly was all curiosity. When was Laura to be married, and what was she to wear?

"The plainest thing I can find," said Laura indifferently. "Unless Augustina teases me into something I don't want." Polly inquired if it would be in church. "In a Catholic church," said Laura with a shrug. "No flowers—no music. They just let you be married—that's all."

Polly's-eyes jumped with amazement. "Why, I thowt they had everything so grand!"

"Not if you will go and marry a heretic like me," said Laura. "Then they make you know your place."

"But—but Laura! yo're to be a Romanist too—for sure?" cried Polly in bewilderment.

"Do you think so?" said Laura. Her eyes sparkled. She was sitting on the edge of the stile, one small foot dangling. Polly's rustic sense was once more vaguely struck by the strange mingling in the little figure of an extreme, an exquisite delicacy with some tough, incalculable element. Miss Fountain's soft lightness seemed to offer no more resistance than a daffodil on its stalk. But approach her!—whether it was poor Hubert, or even——?

Polly looked and spoke her perplexity. She let Laura know that Miss Fountain's conversion was assumed at Browhead Farm. Through her blundering though not unkindly talk, Laura gradually perceived indeed a score of disagreeable things. Mrs. Mason and her fanatical friend, Mr. Bayley, were both persuaded—so it seemed—that Miss Fountain had set her cap at the Squire from the beginning, ready at a moment's notice to swallow the Scarlet Lady when required. And Catholic and Protestant alike were kind enough to say that she had made use of her cousin to draw on Mr. Helbeck. The neighbourhood, in fact, held her to be a calculating little minx, ripe for plots and Papistry, or anything else that might suit a daring game.

The girl gradually fell silent. Her head drooped. Her eyes looked at Polly askance and wistfully. She did not defend herself; but she showed the wound.

"Well, I'm sorry you don't understand," she said at last, while her voice trembled. "Perhaps you will some day. I don't know. Anyway, will you please tell Cousin Elizabeth that I'm not going to be a Catholic? Perhaps that will comfort her a little."

"But howiver are you goin to live wi Mr. Helbeck then?" asked Polly. Her loud surprise conveyed the image of Helbeck as it lay graven in the minds of the Browhead circle,—a sort of triple-crowned, black-browed tyrant, with all the wiles and torments of Rome in his pocket. A wife resist—defy? The Church knows how to deal with naughtiness of that kind.

Laura laughed.

"We can but try. But now then,"—she bent forward and put her hands impulsively on Polly's shoulders,—"tell me about everybody and everything. How's Daffady? how's the cow that was ill? how're the calves? how's Hubert?"

She laughed again, but there was moisture in her look. For the thousandth time, her heart told her that in this untoward marriage she was wrenching herself anew from her father and all his world.

Polly rather tossed her head at the mention of Hubert. She replied with some tartness that he was doing very well—nobody indeed could be doing better. Did Laura's eyebrows go up the very slightest trifle? If so, the sister beat down the surprise. Hubert no doubt had been upset, and a bit wild, after—well, Laura might guess what! But that was all past now, long ago. There was a friend, a musical friend, a rescuer, who had appeared, in the shape of a young organist who had come to lead the Froswick Philharmonic Society. Hubert was living with him now; and the young man, of whom all Froswick thought a wonderful deal, was looking after him, and making him write his songs. Some of them were to be sung at a festival——

Laura clapped her hands.

"I told him!" she said gayly. "If he'll only work, he'll do. And he is keeping straight?"

Her look was keen and sisterly. She wished to show that she had forgotten and forgiven. But Polly resented it.

"Why shouldn't he be keeping straight?" she asked. No doubt Laura had thought him just a ne'er do weel. But he was nothing of the sort—he was a bit wild and unruly, as young men are—"same as t' colts afoor yo break 'em." But Laura would have done much better for herself if she had stayed quietly with him that night at Braeside, and let him take her over the sands, as he wished to, instead of running away from him in that foolish way.

Polly spoke with significance—nay, with heat. Laura was first startled, then abashed.

"Do you think I made a ridiculous fuss?" she said humbly. "Perhaps I did. But if—if—" she spoke slowly, drawing patterns on the wood of the stile with her finger, "if I hadn't seen him drunk once—I suppose I shouldn't have been afraid."

"Well, you'd no call to be afraid!" cried Polly. "Hubert vowed to me, as he hadna had a drop of onything. And after all, he's a relation—an if you'd walked wi him, you'd not ha had telegrams sent aboot you to make aw th' coontry taak!"

"Telegrams!" Laura stared. "Oh, I know—Mr. Helbeck telegraphed to the station-master—but it must have come after I'd left the station."

"Aye—an t' station-master sent word back to Mr. Helbeck! Perhaps you doan't knaw onything aboot that!" exclaimed Polly triumphantly.

Laura turned rather pale.

"A telegram to Mr. Helbeck?"

Polly, surprised at so much ignorance, could not forego the sensation that it offered her. She bit her lip, but the lip would speak. So the story of the midnight telegram—as it had been told by that godly man Mr. Cawston of Braeside to that other godly man Mr. Bayley, perpetual curate of Browhead, and as by now it had gone all about the country-side—came piecemeal out.

"Oh! an at that Papist shop i' th' High Street—you remember that sickly-lukin fellow at the dance—they do say at they do taak shameful!" exclaimed Polly indignantly.

"What do they say?" said Laura in a low voice.

Polly hesitated. Then out of sheer nervousness she blundered into the harshest possible answer.

"Well, they said that Mr. Helbeck could do no different, that he did it to save his sister from knowing ——"

"Knowing what?" said Laura.

Polly declared that she wasn't just certain. "A set o' slanderin backbitin tabbies as soom o' them Catholics is!" But she believed they said that Mr. Helbeck had asked Miss Fountain to marry him out of kindness, to shut people's mouths, and keep it from his sister——

"Keep what?" said Laura. Her eyes shone in her quivering proud face.

"Why, I suppose—at you'd been carryin on wi Hubert, and walkin aboot wi him aw neet," said Polly reluctantly.

And she again insisted how much wiser it would have been if Laura had just gone quietly over the sands to Marsland. There, no doubt, she might have got a car straight away, and there might have been no talk whatever.

"Mightn't there?" said Laura. Her little chin was propped in her hand. Her gaze swept the distant water of the estuary mouth, as it lay alternately dark and shining under the storm lights of the clouds.

"An I'll juist warn yo o' yan thing, Laura," said Polly, with fresh energy. "There's soom one at Bannisdale itsel, as spreads aw maks o' tales. There's a body theer, as is noa friend o' yours."

"Oh! Mrs. Denton," said Laura languidly. "Of course."

Then she fell silent. Not a word passed the small tightened lips. The eyes were fixed on distance or vacancy.

Polly began to be frightened. She had not meant any real harm, though perhaps there had been just a touch of malice in her revelations. Laura was going to marry a Papist; that was bad. But also she was going to marry into a sphere far out of the Masons' ken; and she had made it very plain that Hubert and

the likes of Hubert were not good enough for her. Polly was scandalised on religion's account; but also a little jealous and sore, in a natural feminine way, on her own; the more so as Mr. Seaton had long since ceased to pay Sunday visits to the farm, and Polly had a sharp suspicion as to the when and why of that gentleman's disillusionment. There had been a certain temptation to let the future mistress of Bannisdale know that the neighbourhood was not all whispering humbleness towards her.

But at bottom Polly was honest and kind. So when she saw Laura sit so palely still, she repented her. She implored that Laura would not "worrit" herself about such fooleries. And then she added:

"But I wonder at Mr. Helbeck didna juist tell yo himsel aboot that telegram!"

"Do you?" said Laura. Her eyes flashed. She got down from the stile.
"Good-bye, Polly! I must be going home."

Suddenly Polly gripped her by the arm.

"Luke there!" she said in excitement. "Luke!—theer he goes! That's Teddy—Teddy Williams! I knew as I had summat to tell you—and when you spoak o' Hubert—it went oot o' my head."

Laura looked at her cousin first, in astonishment, and then at the dark figure walking on the road below—the straight white road that ran across the marsh, past the lonely forge of old Ben Williams, the wheelwright, to the foot of the tall "Scar," opposite, where it turned seaward, and so vanished in the dimness of the coast. It was the Jesuit certainly. The two girls saw him plainly in the strong storm light. He was walking slowly with bent head, and seemed to be reading. His solitary form, black against the white of the road, made the only moving thing in the wide, rain-drenched landscape.

Laura instantly guessed that he had been paying his duty visit to his home. And Polly, it appeared, had been a witness of it.

For the cottage adjoining the wheelwright's workshop and forge, where Edward Williams had been brought up, was now inhabited by his father and sister. The sister, Jenny, was an old friend of Polly Mason's, who had indeed many young memories of the scholastic himself. They had been all children or schoolmates together.

And this afternoon, while she was in the parlour with Jenny, all of a sudden—voices and clamour in the forge outside! The son, the outcast son, had quietly presented himself to his father.

"Oh, an sic a to-do! His fadther wadna let him ben. 'Naa,' he says, 'if thoo's got owt to say, thoo may say it i' th' shop. Jenny doan't want tha!' An Jenny luked oot—an I just saw Teddy turn an speak to her—beggin her like, a bit masterfu too, aw t' time—and she flounced back again—'Keep yor distance, will yer!' an slammed to the door—an fell agen it, cryin. An sic a shoutin an hollerin frae the owd man! He made a gradely noise, he did—bit never a word fra Teddy—not as yo cud hear, I'll uphowd yo! An at lasst—when Jenny an I opened t' door again—juist a cranny like—theer he was, takin hissel off—his fadther screamin afther him—an he wi his Papish coat, an his head hangin as thoo there wor a load o' peät on it—an his hands crossed—soa pious! Aye, theer he goes!—an he may goa!" cried Polly, her face flaming as it followed the Jesuit out of sight. "When a mon's treated his aan mother that gate, it's weary wark undoin it. Aye, soa 'tis, Mr. Teddy—soa 'tis!" And she raised her voice vindictively.

Laura's lips curled.

"Do you think he cares—one rap? It was his duty to go and see his father—so he went. And now he's all the more certain he's on the road to heaven—because his father abused him, and his sister turned him out. He's going to be a priest directly—and a missionary after that—and a holy martyr, too, if he gets his deserts. There's always fever, or natives, handy. What do earth-worms like mothers and sisters matter to him?"

Polly stared. Even she, as she looked, as she heard, felt that a gulf opened—that a sick soul spoke.

"Oh! an I'd clean forgot," she faltered—"as he must be stayin at
Bannisdale—as yo wad be seein him."

"I see so many of them," said Laura wearily. She took up her bag, that had been leaning against the stile. "Now, good-bye!"

Suddenly Polly's eyes brimmed with tears. She flung an arm round the slim childish creature.

"Laura, whatever did you do it for? I doan't believe as yo're a bit happy i' yor mind! Coom away!—we'se luke after you—we're your aan kith an kin!"

Laura paused in Polly's arm. Then she turned her wild face—the eyes half closed, the pale lips passionately smiling.

"I'll come, Polly, when I'm dead—or my heart's dead—not before!"

And, wrenching herself away, she ran down the path. Polly, with her clutch of Brahma eggs in her hand, that she was taking to the Bannisdale Bridge Farm, leant against the stile and cried.

## CHAPTER IV

"Alan! is it to-night you expect Father Leadham?"

"Yes," said Helbeck.

"Have you told Laura?"

"I will remind her that we expect him. It is annoying that I must leave you to entertain him to-morrow."

"Oh! we shall do very well," said Augustina rather eagerly. "Alan, have you noticed Laura, yesterday and to-day? She doesn't look strong."

"I know," said the Squire shortly. His eyes were fixed all the time on the little figure of Laura, as she sat listlessly in a sunny corner of the bowling-green, with a book on her knee.

Augustina, who had been leaning on his arm, went back to the house.
Helbeck advanced and threw himself down beside Laura.

"Little one—if you keep such pale cheeks—what am I to do?"

She looked down upon him with a languid smile.

"I am all right."

"That remark only fills up your misdoings! If I go down and get the pony carriage, will you drive with me through the park and tell me everything—*everything*—that has been troubling you the last few days?"

His voice was very low, his eyes all tenderness. He had been reproaching himself that he had so often of late avoided difficult discussions and thorny questions with her. Was she hurt, and did he deserve it?

"I will go driving with you," she said slowly.

"Very well"—he sprang up. "I will be back in twenty minutes—with the pony."

He left her, and she dreamed afresh over her book.

She was thinking of a luncheon at Whinthorpe, to which she had been taken, sorely against her will, to meet the Bishop. And the Bishop had treated her with a singular and slighting coldness. There was no blinking the fact in the least. Other people had noticed it. Helbeck had been pale with wrath and distress. As far as she could remember, she had laughed and talked a good deal.

Well, what wonder?—if they thought her just a fast ill-conducted girl, who had worked upon Mr. Helbeck's pity and softness of heart?

Suddenly she put out her hand restlessly to pluck at the hedge beside her. She had been stung by the memory of herself—under the Squire's window, in the dawn. She saw herself—helpless, and asleep, the tired truant come back to the feet of her master. When he found her so, what could he do but pity her?—be moved, perhaps beyond bounds, by the goodness of a generous nature?

Next, something stronger than this doubt touched the lips with a flying
smile—shy and lovely. But she was far from happy. Since her talk with
Polly especially, her pride was stabbed and tormented in all directions.
And her nature was of the proudest.

Where could she feel secure? In Helbeck's heart? But in the inmost shrine of that heart she felt the brooding of a majestic and exacting power that knew her not. Her jealousy—her fear—grew day by day.

And as to the rest, her imagination was full of the most feverish and fantastic shapes. Since her talk with Polly the world had seemed to her a mere host of buzzing enemies. All the persons concerned passed through her fancy with the mask and strut of caricature. The little mole on Sister Angela's nose—the slightly drooping eyelid that marred the Reverend Mother's left cheek—the nasal twang of the orphans' singing—Father Bowles pouncing on a fly—Father Leadham's stately ways—she made a mock or an offence out of them all, bitterly chattering and drawing pictures with herself, like a child with a grievance.

And then on the top of these feelings and exaggerations of the child, would return the bewildering, the ever-increasing trouble of the woman.

She sprang up.

"If I could—if I *could*! Then it would be we two together—against the rest. Else—how shall I be his wife at all?"

She ran into the study. There on the shelf beside Helbeck's table stood a little Manual of Catholic Instruction, that she knew well. She turned over the pages, till she came to the sections dealing with the reception of converts.

How often she had pored over them! Now she pored over them again, twisting her lips, knitting her white brows.

"No adult baptized Protestant ('Am I a Protestant?—I am baptized!') is considered to be a convert to the Catholic Church until he is received into the Church according to the prescribed rite ('There!—it's the broken glass on the wall.—But if one could just slip in—without fuss or noise?') … You must apply to a Catholic priest, who will judge of your dispositions, and of your knowledge of the Catholic faith. He will give you further instruction, and explain your duties, and how you have to act. When he is satisfied ('Father Leadham!—satisfied with me!'), you go to the altar or to the sacristy, or other place convenient for your reception. The priest who is with you says certain prayers appointed by the Church; you in the meantime kneel down and pray silently ('I prayed when papa died.'"—She looked up, her face trembling.—"Else?—Yes once!—that night when I went in to prayers.) 'You will then read or repeat aloud after the priest the Profession of Faith, either the Creed of Pope Pius IV'—(That's—let me see!—that's the Creed of the Council of Trent; there's a note about it in one of papa's books." She recalled it, frowning: "I often think that we of the Liberal Tradition have cause to be thankful that the Tridentine Catholics dug the gulf between them and the modern world so deep. Otherwise, now that their claws are all pared, and only the honey and fairy tales remain, there would be no chance at all for the poor rational life.")

She drew a long breath, taking a momentary pleasure in the strong words, as they passed through her memory, and then bruised by them.

"The priest will now release you from the ban and censures of the Church, and will so receive you into the True Fold. If you do not yourself say the Confiteor, you will do well to repeat in a low voice, with sorrow of heart, those words of the penitent in the Gospel: 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner!' He will then administer to you baptism under condition (*sub conditione*).… Being now baptized and received into the Church, you will go and kneel in the Confessional or other appointed place in the church to make your confession, and to receive from the priest the sacramental absolution. While receiving absolution you must renew your sorrow and hatred of sin, and your resolution to amend, making a sincere Act of Contrition."

Then, as the book was dropping from her hand, a few paragraphs further on her eyes caught the words:

"If we are not able to remember the exact number of our sins, it is enough to state the probable number to the best of our recollection and judgment, saying: 'I have committed that sin about so many times a day, a week, or a month.' Indeed, we are bound to reveal our conscience to the priest as we know it ourselves, there and then stating the things certain as certain, those doubtful as doubtful, and the probable number as probable."

She threw away the book. She crouched in her chair beside Helbeck's table, her small face buried despairingly in her hands. "I can't—I can't! I would if I could—I can't!"

Through the shiver of an invincible repulsion that held her spoke a hundred things—things inherited, things died for, things wrought out by the moral experience of generations. But she could not analyse

them. All she knew were the two words—"I can't."

* * * * *

The little pony took them merrily through the gay October woods. Autumn was at its cheerfullest. The crisp leaves under foot, the tonic earth smells in the air, the wet ivy shining in the sun, the growing lightness and strength of the trees as the gold or red leaf thinned and the free branching of the great oaks or ashes came into sight—all these belonged to the autumn which sings and vibrates, and can in a flash disperse and drive away the weeping and melancholy autumn.

Laura's bloom revived. Her hair, blown about her, glowed and shone even amid the gold of the woods. Her soft lips, her eyes called back their fire. Helbeck looked at her in a delight mingled with pain, counting the weeks silently till she became his very own. Only five now before Advent; and in the fifth the Church would give her to him, grudgingly indeed, with scant ceremony and festivity, like a mother half grieved, still with her blessing, which must content him. And beyond? The strong man—stern with himself and his own passion, all the more that the adored one was under the protection of his roof, and yielded thereby to his sight and wooing more freely than a girl in her betrothal is commonly yielded to her lover—dared hardly in her presence evoke the thrill of that thought. Instinctively he knew, through the restraints that parted them, that Laura was pure woman, a creature ripe for the subtleties and poetries of passion. Would not all difficulties find their solvent—melt in a golden air—when once they had passed into the freedom and confidence of marriage?

Meanwhile the difficulties were all plain to him—more plain, indeed, than ever. He could not flatter himself that she looked any more kindly on his faith or his friends. And his friends—or some of them—were, to say the truth, pressing him hard. Father Leadham even, his director, upon whom during the earlier stages of their correspondence on the matter Helbeck seemed to have impressed his own waiting view with success, had lately become more exacting and more peremptory. The Squire was uncomfortable at the thought of his impending visit. It was hardly wise—had better have been deferred. Laura's quick, shrinking look when it was announced had not been lost upon her lover. Father Leadham should be convinced—must be convinced—that all would be imperilled—nay, lost—by haste. Yet unconsciously Helbeck himself was wavering—was changing ground.

He had come out, indeed, determined somehow to break down the barrier he felt rising between them. But it was not easy. They talked for long of the most obvious and mundane things. There were salmon in the Greet this month, and Helbeck had been waging noble war with them in the intervals of much business, with Laura often beside him, to join in the madness of the "rushes" down stream, to watch the fine strength of her lover's wrist, to shrink from the gaffing, and to count the spoil. The shooting days at Bannisdale were almost done, since the land had dwindled to a couple of thousand acres, much of it on the moss. But there were still two or three poor coverts along the upper edge of the park, where the old Irish keeper and woodman, Tim Murphy, cherished and counted the few score pheasants that provided a little modest November sport. And Helbeck, tying the pony to a tree, went up now with Laura to walk round the woods, showing in all his comments and calculations a great deal of shrewd woodcraft and beastcraft, enough to prove at any rate that the Esau of his race—*feras consumere nati*, to borrow the emendation of Mr. Fielding—had not yet been wholly cast out by the Jacob of a mystical piety.

Laura tripped and climbed, applauded by his eye, helped by his hand. But though her colour came back, her spirits were still to seek. She was often silent, and he hardly ever spoke to her without feeling a start run through the hand he held.

His grey eye tried to read her, but in vain. At last he wooed her from the fell-side where they were scrambling. "Come down to the river and rest."

Hand in hand they descended the steep slope to that rock-seat where he had found her on the morning of Easter Sunday. The great thorn which overhung it was then in bud; now the berries which covered the tree were already reddening to winter. Before her spread the silver-river, running to lose itself in the rocky bosom of that towering scar which closed the distance, whereon, too, all the wealth of the woods on either hand converged—the woods that hid the outer country, and all that was not Bannisdale and Helbeck's.

To-day, however, Laura felt no young passion of pleasure in the beauty at her feet. She was ill at ease, and her look fled his as he glanced up to her from the turf where he had thrown himself.

"Do you like me to read your books?" she said abruptly, her question swooping hawk-like upon his and driving it off the field.

He paused—to consider, and to smile.

"I don't know. I believe you read them perversely!"

"I know what you read this morning. Do you—do you think St. Francis Borgia was a very admirable person?"

"Well, I got a good deal of edification out of him," said Helbeck quietly.

"Did you? Would you be like him if you could? Do you remember when his wife was very ill, and he was praying for her, he heard a voice—do you remember?"

"Go on," said Helbeck, nodding.

"And the voice said, 'If thou wouldst have the life of the Duchess prolonged, it shall be granted; but it is not expedient for thee'—'*thee*,' mind—not her! When he heard this, he was penetrated by a most tender love of God, and burst into tears. Then he asked God to do as He pleased with the lives of his wife and his children and himself. He gave up—I suppose he gave up—praying for her. She became much worse and died, leaving him a widower at the age of thirty-six. Afterwards—please don't interrupt!—in the space of three years, he disposed somehow of all his eight children—some of them I reckoned must be quite babies—took the vows, became a Jesuit, and went to Rome. Do you approve of all that?"

Helbeck reddened. "It was a time of hard fighting for the Church," he said gravely, after a pause, "and the Jesuits were the advance guard. In such days a man may be called by God to special acts and special sacrifices."

"So you do approve? Papa was a member of an Ethical Society at Cambridge. They used sometimes to discuss special things—whether they were right or wrong. I wonder what they would have said to St. Francis Borgia?"

Helbeck smiled.

"Mercifully, darling, the ideals of the Catholic Church do not depend upon the votes of Ethical Societies!"

He turned his handsome head towards her. His tone was perfectly gentle, but behind it she perceived the breathing of a contempt before which she first recoiled—then sprang in revolt.

"As for me," she said, panting a little, "when I finished the Life this morning in your room, I felt like Ivan in Browning's poem—do you recollect?—about the mother who threw her children one by one to the wolves, to save her wretched self? I would like to have dropped the axe on St. Francis Borgia's neck—just one—little—clean cut!—while he was saying his prayers, and enjoying his burning love, and all the rest of it!"

Helbeck was silent, nor could she see his face, which was again turned from her towards the river. The eager feverish voice went on:

"Do you know that's the kind of thing you read always—always—day after day? And it's just the same now! That girl of twenty-three, Augustina was talking of, who is going into a convent, and her mother only died last year, and there are six younger brothers and sisters, and her father says it will break his heart—*she* must have been reading about St. Francis Borgia. Perhaps she felt 'burning love' and had 'floods of tears.' But Ivan with his axe—that's the person I'd bring in, if I could!"

Still not a word from the man beside her. She hesitated a moment—felt a sob of excitement in her throat—bent forward and touched his shoulder.

"Suppose—suppose I were to be ill—dying—and the voice came, 'Let her go! She is in your way; it would be better for you she should die'—would you just let go?—see me drop, drop, drop, through all eternity, to make your soul safe?"

"Laura!" cried a strong voice. And, with a spring, Helbeck was beside her, capturing both her cold hands in one of his, a mingled tenderness and wrath flashing from him before which she shrank. But though she drew away from him—her small face so white below the broad black hat!—she was not quelled. Before he could speak, she had said in sharp separate words, hardly above a whisper:

"It is that horrible egotism of religion that poisons everything! And if—if one shared it, well and good, one might make terms with it, like a wild thing one had tamed. But outside it, and at war with it, what can one do but hate—hate—*hate*—it!"

"My God!" he said in bewilderment, "where am I to begin?"

He stared at her with a passionate amazement. Never before had she shown such forces of personality, or been able to express herself with an utterance so mature and resonant. Her stature had grown before his eyes. In the little frowning figure there was something newly, tragically fine. The man for the first time felt his match. His own hidden self rose at last to the struggle with a kind of angry joy, eager at once to conquer the woman and to pierce the sceptic.

"Listen to me, Laura!" he said, bending over her. "That was more than I can bear—that calls me out of my tent. I have tried to keep my poor self out of sight, but it has rights. You have challenged it. Will you take the consequences?"

She trembled before the pale concentration of his face and bent her head.

"I will tell you," he said in a low determined voice, "the only story that a man truly knows—the story of his own soul. You shall know—what you hate."

And, after a pause of thought, Helbeck made one of the great efforts of his life.

* * * * *

He did not fully know indeed what it was that he had undertaken, till the wave of emotion had gathered through all the inmost chambers of memory, and was bearing outward in one great tide the secret nobilities, the hidden poetries, the unconscious weaknesses, of a nature no less narrow than profound, no less full of enmities than of loves.

But gradually from hurried or broken beginnings the narrative rose to clearness and to strength.

The first impressions of a lonely childhood; the first workings of the family history upon his boyish sense, like the faint, perpetual touches of an unseen hand moulding the will and the character; the picture of his patient mother on her sofa, surrounded with her little religious books, twisted and tormented, yet always smiling; his early collisions with his morose and half-educated father—he passed from these to the days of his first Communion, the beginnings of the personal life. "But I had very little fervour then, such as many boys feel. I did not doubt—I would not have shown any disrespect to my religion for the world, mostly, I think, from family pride—but I felt no ardour, and did not pretend any. My mother sometimes shed tears over it, and was comforted by her old confessor—so she told me when she was dying—who used to say to her: 'Feeling is good, but obedience is better. He obeys;' for I did all my religious duties without difficulty. Then at thirteen I was sent to Stonyhurst. And there, after a while, God began His work in me."

He paused a moment; and when he resumed, his voice shook:

"Among the masters there was a certain Father Lewin. He took an affection for me, and I for him. He was even then a dying man, but he accomplished more, and was more severe to himself, than any man in health I ever knew. So long as he lived, he made the path of religion easy to me. He was the supernatural life before my eyes. I had only to open them and see. The only difference between us was that I began—first out of love for him, I suppose—to have a great wish to become a Jesuit; whereas he was against it—he thought there were too many special claims upon me here. Then, when I was eighteen, he died. I had seen him the day before, when there seemed to be no danger, or they concealed it from me. But in the night I was called, too late to hear him speak; he was already in his agony. The sight terrified me. I had expected something much more consoling—more beautiful. For a long time I could not shake off the impression, the misery of it."

He was silent again for a minute. He still held Laura's hands close, as though there was something in their touch that spurred him on.

"After his death I got my father's leave to go and study at Louvain. I passed there the most wretched years of my life. Father Lewin's death had thrown me into an extraordinary dejection, which seemed to have taken from me all the joy of my faith; but at Louvain I came very near to losing it altogether. It came, I think, from the reading of some French sceptical books the first year I was there; but I went through a horror and anguish. Often I used to wander for a whole day along the Scheldt, or across lonely fields where no one could see me, lost in what seemed to me a fight with devils. The most horrible blasphemies—the most subtle, the most venomous thoughts—ah! well—by God's grace, I never gave up Confession and Communion—at long intervals, indeed—but still I held to them. The old Passionist father, my director, did not understand much about me. I seemed, indeed, to have no friends. I lived shut up with my own thoughts. The only comfort and relief I got was from painting. I loved the studio where I worked, poor as my own attempts were. It seemed often to be the only thing between me and madness…. Well, the first relief came in a strange way. I was visiting one of the professors, an old Canon of the Cathedral, on a June evening. The Bishop of the See was very ill, and while I was with the Canon word came round to summon the Chapter to assist at the administration of the last Sacraments,

and to hear the sick man's Profession of Faith. The old Canon had been good to me. I don't know whether he suspected what was wrong with me. At any rate, he laid a kind hand on my arm. 'Come with me,' he said; and I went with him into the Bishop's residence. I can see the old house now—the black panelled stairs and passages, and the shadow of the great church outside.

"In the Bishop's room were gathered all the canons in their white robes; there was an altar blazing with lights, the windows were wide open to the dusk, and the cathedral bell was tolling. We all knelt, and Monseigneur received the Viaticum. He was fully vested. I could just see his venerable white head on the pillow. After the Communion one of the canons knelt by him and recited the Creed of Pope Pius IV."

Laura started. But Helbeck did not notice the sudden tremulous movement of the hands lying in his. He was sitting rigidly upright, the eyes half closed, his mind busy with the past.

"And as he recited it, the bands that held my own heart seemed to break. I had not been able to approach any clause of that creed for months without danger of blasphemy; and now—it was like a bird escaped from the nets. The snare is broken—and we are delivered! The dying man raised his voice in a last effort; he repeated the oath with which the Creed ends. The Gospels were handed to him; he kissed them with fervour. '*Sic me Deus adjuvet, et Sancta Dei Evangelia*.' 'So may God help me, and His Holy Gospels!' I joined in the words mentally, overcome with joy. Before me, as in a vision, had risen the majesty and glory of the Catholic Church; I felt her foundations once more under my feet."

He drew a long breath. Then he turned. Laura felt his eyes upon her, as though in doubt. She herself neither moved nor spoke; she was all hearing, absorbed in a passionate prescience of things more vital yet to come.

"Laura!"—his voice dropped—"I want you to know it all, to understand me through and through. I will try that there shall not be a word to offend you. That scene I have described to you was for me only the beginning of another apostasy. I had no longer the excuse of doubt. I believed and trembled. But for two years after that, I was every day on the brink of ruining my own soul—and another's. The first, the only woman I ever loved before I saw you, Laura, I loved in defiance of all law—God's or man's. If she had struggled one heartbeat less, if God had let me wander one hair's breadth further from His hand, we had both made shipwreck—hopeless, eternal shipwreck. Laura, my little Laura, am I hurting you so?"

She gave a little sob, and mutely, with shut eyes, she raised her face towards him. He stooped and very tenderly and gravely kissed her cheek.

"But God's mercy did not fail!" he said or rather murmured. "At the last moment that woman—God rest her soul!—God bless her for ever!——"

He took off his hat, and bent forward silently for a moment.

—"She died, Laura, more than ten years ago!—At the last moment she saved both herself and me. She sent for one of my old Jesuit masters at Stonyhurst, a man who had been a great friend of Father Lewin's and happened to be at that moment in Brussels. He came. He brought me her last farewell, and he asked me to go back with him that evening to join a retreat that he was holding in one of the houses of the order near Brussels. I went in a sullen state, stunned and for the moment submissive.

"But the retreat was agony. I could take part in nothing. I neglected the prescribed hours and duties; it was as though my mind could not take them in, and I soon saw that I was disturbing others.

"One evening—I was by myself in the garden at recreation hour—the father who was holding the retreat came up to me, and sternly asked me to withdraw at once. I looked at him. 'Will you give me one more day?' I said. He agreed. He seemed touched. I must have appeared to him a miserable creature.

"Next day this same father was conducting a meditation—on 'the condescension of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.' I was kneeling, half stupefied, when I heard him tell a story of the Curé d'Ars. After the procession of Corpus Christi, which was very long and fatiguing, someone pressed the Curé to take food. 'I want nothing,' he said. 'How could I be tired? I was bearing Him who bears me!' 'My brothers,' said Father Stuart, turning to the altar, 'the Lord who bore the sin of the whole world on the Cross, who opens the arms of His mercy now to each separate sinful soul, is *there*. He beseeches you by me, "Choose, My children, between the world and Me, between sin and Me, between Hell and Me. Your souls are Mine: I bought them with anguish and tears. Why will ye now hold them back from Me—wherefore will ye die?"'

"My whole being seemed to be shaken by these words. But I instantly thought of Marie. I said to myself, 'She is alone—perhaps in despair. How can I save myself, wretched tempter and coward that I

am, and leave her in remorse and grief?' And then it seemed to me as though a Voice came from the altar itself, so sweet and penetrating that it overpowered the voice of the preacher and the movements of my companions. I heard nothing in the chapel but It alone. 'She is saved!' It said—and again and again, as though in joy, 'She is saved—saved!'

"That night I crept to the foot of the crucifix in my little cell. '*Elegi, elegi: renuntio!*'—I have chosen: I renounce.' All night long those alternate words seemed to be wrung from me."

There was deep silence. Helbeck knelt on the grass beside Laura and took her hands afresh.

"Laura, since that night I have been my Lord's. It seemed to me that He had come Himself—come from His cross—to raise two souls from the depths of Hell. Marie went into a convent, and died in peace and blessedness; I came home here, to do my duty if I could—and save my soul. That seems to you a mere selfish bargain with God—an 'egotism'—that you hate. But look at the root of it. Is the world under sin—and has a God died for it? All my nature—my intellect, my heart, my will, answer 'Yes.' But if a God died, and must die—cruelly, hideously, at the hands of His creatures—to satisfy eternal justice, what must that sin be that demands the Crucifixion? Of what revolt, what ruin is not the body capable? I knew—for I had gone down into the depths. Is any chastisement too heavy, any restraint too harsh, if it keep us from the sin for which our Lord must die? And if He died, are we not His from the first moment of our birth—His first of all? Is it a selfish bargain to yield Him what He purchased at such a cost, to take care that our just debt to Him is paid—so far as our miserable humanity can pay it. All these mortifications, and penances, and self-denials that you hate so, that make the saints so odious in your eyes, spring from two great facts—Sin and the Crucifixion. But, Laura, are they *true*?"

He spoke in a low, calm voice, yet Laura knew well that his life was poured into each word. She herself did not, could not, speak. But it seemed to her strangely that some spring within her was broken—some great decision had been taken, by whom she could not tell.

He looked with alarm at her pallor and silence.

"Laura, those are the hard and awful—to us Catholics, the majestic—facts on which our religion stands. Accept them, and nothing else is really difficult. Miracles, the protection of the saints, the mysteries of the sacraments, the place that Catholics give to Our Lady, the support of an infallible Church—what so easy and natural if *these* be true?... Sin and its Divine Victim, penance, regulation of life, death, judgment—Catholic thought moves perpetually from one of these ideas to another. As to many other thoughts and beliefs, it is free to us as to other men to take or leave, to think or not to think. The Church, like a tender mother, offers to her children an innumerable variety of holy aids, consolations, encouragements. These may or may not be of faith. The Crucifix *is* the Catholic Faith. In that the Catholic sees the Love that brought a God to die, the Sin that infects his own soul. To requite that love, to purge that sin there lies the whole task of the Catholic life."

He broke off again, anxiously studying the drooping face so near to him. Then gently he put his arm round her, and drew her to him till her brow rested against his shoulder.

"Laura, does it seem very hard—very awful—to you?"

She moved imperceptibly, but she did not speak.

"It may well. The way *is* strait! But, Laura, you see it from without—I from within. Won't you take my word for the sweetness, the reward, and the mercifulness of God's dealings with our souls?" He drew a long agitated breath. "Take my own case—take our love. You remember, Laura, when you sat here on Easter Sunday? I came from Communion and I found you here. You disliked and despised my faith and me. But as you sat here, I loved you—my eyes were first opened. The night of the dance, when you went upstairs, I took my own heart and offered it. You did not love me then: how could I dream you ever would? The sacrifice was mine; I tried to yield it. But it was not His will. I made my struggle—you made yours. He drew us to each other. Then——"

He faltered, looked down upon her in doubt.

"Since then, Laura, so many strange things have happened! Who was I that I should teach anybody? I shrank from laying the smallest touch on your freedom. I thought, 'Gradually, of her own will, she will come nearer. The Truth will plead for itself.' My duty is to trust, and wait. But, Laura, what have I seen in you? Not indifference—not contempt—never! But a long storm, a trouble, a conflict, that has filled me with confusion—overthrown all my own hopes and plans. Laura, my love, my sweet, why does our Faith hurt you so much if it means nothing to you? Is there not already some tenderness"—his voice dropped—"behind the scorn? Could it torment you if—if it had not gained some footing in your heart? Laura, speak to me!"

She slowly drew away from him. Gently she shook her head. Her eyes were full of tears.

But the strange look of power—almost of triumph—on Helbeck's face remained unaltered. She shrank before it.

"Laura, you don't know yourself! But no matter! Only, will you forgive me if you feel a change in me? Till now I have shrunk from fighting you. It seemed to me that an ugly habit of words might easily grow up that would poison all our future. But now I feel in it something more than words. If you challenge, Laura, I shall meet it! If you strike, I shall return it."

He took her hands once more. His bright eye looked for—demanded an answer. Her own personality, for all its daring, wavered and fainted before the attacking force of his.

But Helbeck received no assurance of it. She showed none of that girlish yielding which would have been so natural and so delightful to her lover. Without any direct answer to his appeal or his threat, she lifted to him a look that was far from easy to read—a look of passionate sadness and of pure love. Her delicate face seemed to float towards him, and her lips breathed.

"I was not worthy that you should tell me a word. But—" It was some time before she could go on. Then she said with sudden haste, the colour rushing back into her cheeks, "It is the most sacred honour that was ever done me. I thank—thank—thank you!"

And with her eyes still fixed upon his countenance, and all those deep traces that the last half hour had left upon it, she raised his hand and pressed her soft quivering mouth upon it.

* * * * *

Never had Helbeck been filled with such a tender and hopeful joy as in the hours that followed this scene between them. Father Leadham arrived in time for dinner. Laura treated him with a gentleness, even a sweetness, that from the first moment filled the Jesuit with a secret astonishment. She was very pale; her exhaustion was evident.

But Helbeck silenced his sister; and he surrounded Laura with a devotion that had few words, that never made her conspicuous, and yet was more than she could bear.

Augustina insisted on her going to bed early. Helbeck went upstairs with her to the first landing, to light her candle.

Nothing stirred in the old house. Father Leadham and Augustina were in the drawing-room. They two stood alone among the shadows of the panelling, the solitary candle shining on her golden hair and white dress.

"I have something to say to you, Laura," said Helbeck in a disturbed voice.

She looked up.

"I can't save the Romney, dear. I've tried my very best. Will you forgive me?"

She smiled, and put her hand timidly on his shoulder.

"Ask her, rather! I know you tried. Good-night."

And then suddenly, to his astonishment, she threw both her arms round his neck, and, like a child that nestles to another in penitence or for protection, she kissed his breast passionately, repeatedly.

"Laura, this can't be borne! Look up, beloved! Why should my coat be so blessed?" he said, half laughing, yet deeply moved, as he bent above her.

She disengaged herself, and, as she mounted the stairs, she waved her hand to him. As she passed out of his sight she was a vision of gentleness. The woman had suddenly blossomed from the girl. When Helbeck descended the stairs after she had vanished, his heart beat with a happiness he had never yet known.

And she, when she reached her own room, she let her arms drop rigidly by her side. "It would be a crime—a *crime*—to marry him," she said, with a dull resolve that was beyond weeping.

* * * * *

Helbeck and Father Leadham sat long together after Augustina had retired. There was an argument between them in which the Jesuit at last won the victory. Helbeck was persuaded to a certain course

against his judgment—to some extent against his conscience.

Next morning the Squire left Bannisdale early. He was to be away two days on important business. Before he left he reluctantly told his sister that the Romney would probably be removed before his return, by the dealer to whom it had been sold. Laura did not appear at breakfast, and Helbeck left a written word of farewell, that Augustina delivered.

Meantime Father Leadham remained as the guest of the ladies. In the afternoon he joined Miss Fountain in the garden, and they walked up and down the bowling-green for some time together. Augustina, in the deep window of the drawing-room, was excitedly aware of the fact.

When the two companions came in, Father Leadham after a time rejoined Mrs. Fountain. She looked at him with eagerness. But his fine and scholarly face was more discomposed than she had ever seen it. And the few words that he said to her were more than enough.

Laura meanwhile went to her own room, and shut herself up there. Her cheeks were glowing, her eyes angry. "He promised me!" she said, as she sat down to her writing-table.

But she could not stay there. She got up and walked restlessly about the room. After half an hour's fruitless conversation, Father Leadham had been betrayed into an expression—hardly that—a shade of expression, which had set the girl's nature aflame. What it meant was, "So this—is your answer—to the chivalry of Mr. Helbeck's behaviour—to the delicacy which could go to such lengths in protecting a young lady from her own folly?" The meaning was conveyed by a look—an inflection—hardly a phrase. But Laura understood it perfectly; and when Father Leadham returned to Mrs. Fountain he guiltily knew what he had done, and, being a man in general of great tact and finesse, he hardly knew whom to blame most, himself, or the girl who had imperceptibly and yet deeply provoked him.

That evening Laura told her stepmother that she must go up to London the following day, by the early afternoon train, on some shopping business, and would stay the night with her friend Molly Friedland. Augustina fretfully acquiesced; and the evening was spent by Mrs. Fountain at any rate, in trying to console herself by much broken talk of frocks and winter fashions, while Laura gave occasional answers, and Father Leadham on a distant sofa buried himself in the "Tablet."

* * * * *

"Gone!"

The word was Laura's. She had been busy in her room, and had come hurriedly downstairs to fetch her work-bag from the drawing-room. As she crossed the threshold, she saw that the picture had been taken down. Indeed, the van containing it was just driving through the park.

White and faltering, the girl came up to the wall whence the beautiful lady had just been removed, and leant her head against it. She raised her hand to her eyes. "Good-bye," said the inner sense —"Good-bye!" And the strange link which from the first moment almost had seemed to exist between that radiant daughter of Bannisdale and herself snapped and fell away, carrying how much else with it!

* * * * *

About an hour before Laura's departure there was a loud knock at her door, and Mrs. Denton appeared. The woman was pale with rage. Mrs. Fountain, in much trepidation, had just given her notice, and the housekeeper had not been slow to guess, from what quarter the blow had fallen.

Laura turned round bewildered. But she was too late to stop the outbreak. In the course of five minutes' violent speech Mrs. Denton wiped out the grievances of six months; she hurled the gossip of a country-side on Laura's head; and in her own opinion she finally avenged the cause of the Church and of female decorum upon the little infidel adventuress that had stolen away the wits and conscience of the Squire.

Miss Fountain, after' a first impatient murmur, "I might have remembered!"—stood without a word, with eyes cast down, and a little scornful smile on her colourless lips. When at last she had shut the door on her assailant, a great quivering sigh rose from the girl's breast. Was it the last touch? But she said nothing. She brushed away a tear that had unconsciously risen, and went back to her packing.

* * * * *

"Just wait a moment!" said Miss Fountain to old Wilson, who was driving her across the bridge on her way to the station. "I want to get a bunch of those berries by the water. Take the pony up the hill. I'll join you at the top."

Old Wilson drove on. Laura climbed a stile and slipped down to the waterside.

The river, full with autumn rain, came foaming down. The leaf was falling fast. Through the woods on the further bank she could just distinguish a gable of the old house.

A moan broke from her. She stooped and buried her face in the grass—his grass.

When she returned to the road, she looked for the letter-box in the wall of the bridge, and, walking up to it, she dropped into it two letters. Then she stood a moment with bent brows. Had she made all arrangements for Augustina?

But she dared not let herself think of the morrow. She set her face to the hill—trudging steadily up the wet, solitary road. Once—twice—she turned to look. Then the high trees that arched over the top of the hill received the little form; she disappeared into their shadow.

# BOOK V

## CHAPTER I

"My dear, where are the girls?"

The speaker was Dr. Friedland, the only intimate friend Stephen Fountain had ever made at Cambridge. The person addressed was Dr. Friedland's wife.

On hearing her husband's question, that lady's gentle and benevolent countenance emerged from the folds of a newspaper. It was the "first mild day of March," and she and her husband had been enjoying an after-breakfast chat in the garden of a Cambridge villa.

"Molly is arranging the flowers; Laura has had a long letter from Mrs.
Fountain, and is now, I believe, gone to answer it."

"Then I shan't enjoy my lunch," said Dr. Friedland pensively.

He was an elderly gentleman, with a short beard and moustache turning to white, particularly black eyes, and a handsome brow. His wife had put a rug over his shoulders, and another over his knees, before she allowed him the "Times" and a cigarette. Amid the ample folds of these draperies, he had a Jove-like and benignant air.

His wife inquired what difference Miss Fountain's correspondence would or could make to her host's luncheon.

"Because she won't eat any," said the doctor, with a sigh, "and I find it infectious."

Mrs. Friedland laid down her newspaper.

"There is no doubt she is worried—about Mrs. Fountain."

"*E tutti quanti*" said the doctor, humming a tune. "My dear, it is surprising what an admiration I find myself possessed of for Sir John Pringle."

"Sir John Pringle?" said the lady, in bewilderment.

"Bozzy, my dear—the great Bozzy—amid the experiments of his youth, turned Catholic. His distracted relations deputed Sir John Pringle to deal with him. That great lawyer pointed out the worldly disadvantages of the step. Bozzy pleaded his immortal soul. Whereupon Sir John observed with warmth that anyone possessing a particle of gentlemanly spirit would sooner be damned to all eternity than give his relations so much trouble as Bozzy was giving his!"

"The application is not clear," said Mrs. Friedland.

"No," said the doctor, stretching his legs and puffing at his cigarette; "but when you speak of Laura,

and tell me she is writing to Bannisdale, I find a comfort in Sir John Pringle."

"It would be more to the purpose if Laura did!" exclaimed Mrs. Friedland.

The doctor shook his head, and fell into a reverie. Presently he asked:

"You think Mrs. Fountain is really worse?"

"Laura is sure of it. And the difficulty is, what is she to do? If she goes to Bannisdale, she exiles Mr. Helbeck. Yet, if his sister is really in danger, Mr. Helbeck naturally will desire to be at home."

"And they can't meet?"

"Under the same roof—and the old conditions? Heaven forbid!" said Mrs. Friedland.

"Risk it!" said the doctor, violently slapping his fist on the little garden table that held his box of cigarettes.

"John!"

"My dear—don't be a hypocrite! You and I know well enough what's wrong with that child."

"Perhaps." The lady's eyes filled with tears. "But you forget that by all accounts Mr. Helbeck is an altered man. From something Laura said to Molly last week, it seems that Mrs. Fountain even is now quite afraid of him—as she used to be."

"If she would only die—good lady!—her brother might go to his own place," said the doctor impatiently.

"To the Jesuits?"

The doctor nodded.

"Did he actually tell you that was his intention?"

"No. But I guessed. And that Trinity man Leadham, who went over, gave me to understand the other day what the end would probably be. But not while his sister lives."

"I should hope not!" said Mrs. Friedland.

After a pause, she turned to her husband.

"John! you know you liked him!"

"If you mean by that, my dear, that I showed a deplorable weakness in dealing with him, my conscience supports you!" said the doctor; "but I would have you remember that for a person of my quiet habits, to have a gentleman pale as death in your study, demanding his lady-love—you knowing all the time that the lady-love is upstairs—and only one elderly man between them—is an agitating situation."

"Poor Laura!—poor Mr. Helbeck!" murmured Mrs. Friedland. The agony of the man, the resolution of the girl, stood out sharply from the medley of the past.

"All very well, my dear—all very well. But you showed a pusillanimity on that occasion that I scorn to qualify. You were afraid of that child—positively afraid of her. I could have dealt with her in a twinkling, if you'd left her to me."

"What would you have said to her?" inquired Mrs. Friedland gently.

"How can there be any possible doubt what I should have said to her?" said the doctor, slapping his knee. "'My dear, you love him—*ergo*, marry him!' That first and foremost. 'And as to those other trifles, what have you to do with them? Look over them—look round them! Rise, my dear, to your proper dignity and destiny—have a right and natural pride—in the rock that bore you! You, a child of the Greater Church—of an Authority of which all other authorities are the mere caricature—why all this humiliation, these misgivings—this turmoil? Take a serener—take a loftier view!' Ah! if I could evoke Fountain for one hour!"

The doctor bent forward, his hands hanging over his knees, his lips moving without sound, under the sentences his brain was forming. This habit of silent rhetoric represented a curious compromise between a natural impetuosity of temperament, and the caution of scientific research. His wife watched

him with a loving, half-amused eye.

"And what, pray, could Mr. Fountain do, John, but make matters ten times worse?"

"Do!—who wants him to do anything? But ten years ago he might have done something. Listen to me, Jane!" He seized his wife's arm. "He makes Laura a child of Knowledge, a child of Freedom, a child of Revolution—without an ounce of training to fit her for the part. It is like an heir—flung to the gypsies. Then you put her to the test—sorely—conspicuously. And she stands fast—she does not yield—it is not in her blood, scarcely in her power, to yield. But it is a blind instinct carried through at what a cost! You might have equipped and fortified her. You did neither. You trusted everything to the passionate loyalty of the woman. And it does not fail you. But——!"

The doctor shook his head, long and slowly. Mrs. Friedland quietly replaced the rugs which had gone wandering, in the energy of these remarks.

"You see, Jane, if it's true—'ne croit qui veut'—it's still more true, 'ne doute qui veut!' To doubt—doubt wholesomely, cheerfully, fruitfully—why, my dear, there's no harder task in the world! And a woman, who thinks with her heart—who can't stand on her own feet as a man can—you remove her from all her normal shelters and supports—you expect her to fling a 'No!' in the face of half her natural friends—and then you are too indolent or too fastidious to train the poor child for her work!—Fountain took Laura out of her generation, and gave her nothing in return. Did he read with her—share his mind with her? Never! He was indolent;-she was wilful; so the thing slid. But all the time he made a partisan of her—he expected her to echo his hates and his prejudice—he stamped himself and his cause deep into her affections——

"And then, my dear, she must needs fall in love with this man, this Catholic! Catholicism at its best—worse luck! No mean or puerile type, with all its fetishisms and unreasons on its head—no!—a type sprung from the finest English blood, disciplined by heroic memories, by the persecution and hardships of the Penal Laws. What happens? Why, of course the girl's imagination goes over! Her father in her—her temperament—stand in the way of anything more. But where is she to look for self-respect, for peace of mind? She feels herself an infidel—a moral outcast. She trembles before the claims of this great visible system. Her reason refuses them—but why? She cannot tell. For Heaven's sake, why do we leave our children's minds empty like this? If you believe, my good friend, Educate! And if you doubt, still more—Educate! Educate!"

The doctor rose in his might, tossed his rugs from him, and began to pace a sheltered path, leaning on his wife's arm.

Mrs. Friedland looked at him slyly, and laughed.

"So if Laura had been learned, she might have been happy?—John!—what a paradox!"

"Not mine then!—but the Almighty's—who seems to have included a mind in this odd bundle that makes up Laura. What! You set a woman to fight for ideas, and then deny her all knowledge of what they mean. Happy! Of course she might have been happy. She might have made her Catholic respect her. He offered her terms—she might have accepted them with a free and equal mind. There would have been none, anyway, of this *moral doubt*—this bogeyfication of things she don't understand! Ah! here she comes. Now just look at her, Jane! What's your housekeeping after? She's lost half a stone this month if she's lost an ounce."

And the doctor standing still peered discontentedly through his spectacles at the advancing figure.

Laura approached slowly, with her hands behind her, looking on her way at the daffodils and tulips just opening in the garden border.

"Pater!—Molly says you and Mater are to come in. It's March and not May, you'll please to remember."

She came up to them with the airs of a daughter, put a flower in Mrs. Friedland's dress—ran for one of the discarded rugs, and draped it again round the doctor's ample shoulders. Her manner to the two elderly folk was much softer and freer than it had ever been in the days of her old acquaintance with them. A wistful gratitude played through it, revealing a new Laura—a Laura that had passed, in these five months through deep waters, and had been forced, in spite of pride, to throw herself upon the friendly and saving hands held out to her.

They on their side looked at her with a tender concern, which tried to disguise itself in chat. The doctor hooked his arm through hers, and made her examine the garden.

"Look at these Lent lilies, Miss Laura. They will be out in two days at most."

Laura bent over them, then suddenly drew herself erect. The doctor felt the stiffening of the little arm.

"I suppose you had sheets of them in the north," he said innocently, as he poked a stone away from the head of an emerging hyacinth.

"Yes—a great many." She looked absently straight before her, taking no more notice of the flowers.

"Well—and Mrs. Fountain? Are you really anxious?"

The girl hesitated.

"She is ill—quite ill. I ought to see her somehow."

"Well, my dear, go!" He looked round upon her with a cheerful decision.

"No—that isn't possible," she said quietly. "But I might stay somewhere near. She must have lost a great deal of strength since Christmas."

At Christmas and for some time afterwards, she and Mrs. Fountain had been at St. Leonard's together. In fact, it was little more than a fortnight since Laura had parted from her stepmother, who had shown a piteous unwillingness to go back alone to Bannisdale.

The garden door opened and shut; a white-capped servant came along the path. A gentleman—for Miss Fountain.

"For me?" The girl's cheek flushed involuntarily. "Why, Pater—who is it?"

For behind the servant came the gentleman—a tall and comely youth, with narrow blue eyes, a square chin, and a very conscious smile. He was well dressed in a dark serge suit, and showed a great deal of white cuff, and a conspicuous watch-chain, as he took off his hat.

"Hubert!"

Laura advanced to him, with a face of astonishment, and held out her hand.

Mason greeted her with a mixture of confusion and assurance, glancing behind her at the Friedlands all the time. "Well, I was here on some business—and I thought I'd look you up, don't you know?"

"My cousin, Hubert Mason," said Laura, turning to the old people.

Friedland lifted his wide-awake. Mrs. Friedland, whose gentle face could be all criticism, eyed him quietly, and shook hands perfunctorily. A few nothings passed on the weather and the spring. Suddenly Mason said:

"Would you take a walk with me, Miss Laura?"

After a momentary hesitation, she assented, and went into the house for her walking things. Mason hurriedly approached the doctor.

"Why, she looks—she looks as if you could blow her away!" he cried, staring into the doctor's face, while his own flushed.

"Miss Fountain's health has not been strong this winter," said the doctor gravely, his spectacled eyes travelling up and down Mason's tall figure. "You, I suppose, became acquainted with her in Westmoreland?"

"Acquainted with her!" The young man checked himself, flushed still redder, then resumed. "Well, we're cousins, you see—though of course I don't mean to say that we're her sort—you understand?"

"Miss Fountain is ready," said Mrs. Friedland.

Mason looked round, saw the little figure in the doorway, and hastily saluting the Friedlands, took his leave.

"My dear," said the doctor anxiously, laying hold on his wife's arm, "should we have asked him to lunch?"

His wife smiled.

"By no means. That's Laura's business."

"Well, but, Jane—Jane! had you realised that young man?"

"Oh dear, yes," said Mrs. Friedland. "Don't excite yourself, John."

"Laura—gone out with a young man," said the doctor, musing. "I have been waiting for that all the winter—and he's extremely good-looking, Jane."

Mrs. Friedland lost patience.

"John! I really can't talk to you, if you're as dense as that."

"Talk to me!" cried the doctor—"why, you unreasonable woman, you haven't vouchsafed me a single word!"

"Well, and why should I?" said Mrs. Friedland provokingly.

* * * * *

Half an hour passed away. Mason and Laura were sitting in the garden of Trinity.

Up till now, Laura had no very clear idea of what they had been talking about. Mason, it appeared, had been granted three days' holiday by his employers, and had made use of it to come to Cambridge and present a letter of introduction from his old teacher, Castle, the Whinthorpe organist, to a famous Cambridge musician. But, at first, he was far more anxious to discuss Laura's affairs than to explain his own; and Laura had found it no easy matter to keep him at arm's length. For nine months, Mason had brooded, gossiped, and excused himself; now, conscious of being somehow a fine fellow again, he had come boldly to play the cousin—perhaps something more. He offered now a few words of stammering apology on the subject of his letter to Laura after the announcement of her engagement. She received them in silence; and the matter dropped.

As to his moral recovery, and material prospects, his manners and appearance were enough. A fledgeling ambition, conscious of new aims and chances, revealed itself in all he said. The turbid elements in the character were settling down; the permanent lines of it, strong, vulgar, self-complacent, emerged.

Here, indeed, was a successful man in the making. Once or twice the girl's beautiful eyes opened suddenly, and then sank again. Before her rose the rocky chasm of the Greet; the sound of the water was in her ears—the boyish tones of remorse, of entreaty.

"And you know I'll make some money out of my songs before long—see if I don't! I took some of em to the Professor this morning—and, my word, didn't he like em! Why, I couldn't repeat the things he said—you'd think I was bluffing!"

Strange gift!—"settling unaware"—on this rude nature and poor intelligence! But Laura looked up eagerly. Here she softened; here was the bridge between them. And when he spoke of his new friend, the young musical apostle who had reclaimed him, there was a note which pleased her. She began to smile upon him more freely; the sadness of her little face grew sweet.

And suddenly the young man stopped and looked at her. He reddened; and she flushed too, not knowing why.

"Well, that's where 'tis," he said, moving towards her on the seat. "I'm going to get on. I told you I was, long ago, and it's come true. My salary'll be a decent figure before this year's out, and I'm certain I'll make something out of the songs. Then there's my share of the farm. Mother don't give me more than she's obliged; but it's a tidy bit sometimes. Laura!—look here!—I know there's nothing in the way now. You were a plucky girl, you were, to throw that up. I always said so—I didn't care what people thought. Well, but now—you're free—and I'm a better sort—won't you give a fellow a chance?"

Midway, his new self-confidence left him. She sat there so silent, so delicately white! He had but to put out his hand to grasp her; and he dared, not move a finger. He stared at her, breathless and open-mouthed.

But she did not take it tragically at all. After a moment, she began to laugh, and shook her head.

"Do you mean that you want me to marry you, Hubert? Oh! you'd so soon be tired of that!—You don't know anything about me, really—we shouldn't suit each other at all."

His face fell. He drew sullenly away from her, and bending forward, began to poke at the grass with his stick.

"I see how 'tis. I'm not good enough for you—and I don't suppose I ever shall be."

She looked at him with a smiling compassion.

"I'm not in love with you, Mr. Hubert—that's all."

"No—you've never got over them things that happened up at Whinthorpe," he said roughly. "I've got a bone to pick with you though. Why did you give me the slip that night?"

He looked up. But in spite of his bravado, he reddened again, deeply.

"Well—you hadn't exactly commended yourself as an escort, had you?" she said lightly. But her tone pricked.

"I hadn't had a drop of anything," he declared hotly; "and I'd have looked after you, and stopped a deal of gossip. You hurt my feelings pretty badly. I can tell you."

"Did I?—Well, as you hurt mine on the first occasion, let's cry quits."

He was silent for a little, throwing furtive glances at her from time to time. She was wonderfully thin and fragile, but wonderfully pretty, as she sat there under the cedar.

At last he said, with a grumbling note:

"I wish you wouldn't look so thin and dowie-like, as we say up at home—you've no cause to fret, I'm sure."

The temper of twenty-one gave way. Laura sat up—nay, rose.

"Will you please come and look at the sights?—or shall I go home?"

He looked up at her flashing face, and stuck to his seat.

"I say—Miss Laura—you don't know how you bowl a fellow over!"

The expression of his handsome countenance—so childish still through all its athlete's force—propitiated her. And yet she felt instinctively that his fancy for her no longer went so deep as it had once done.

Well!—she was glad; of course she was glad.

"Oh! you're not so very much to be pitied," she said; but her hand lighted a moment kindly and shyly on the young man's arm. "Now, if you wouldn't talk about these things, Hubert—do you know what I should be doing?—I should be asking you to do me a service."

His manner changed—became businesslike and mannish at once.

"Then you'll please sit down again—and tell me what it is," he said.

She obeyed. He crossed his knees, and listened.

But she had some difficulty in putting it. At last she said, looking away from him:

"Do you think, if I proposed it, your mother could bear to have me on a visit to the farm?"

"Mother!—you!" he said in astonishment. A hundred notions blazed up in his mind. What on earth did she want to be in those parts again for?

"My stepmother is very unwell," she said hurriedly. "It—well, it troubles me not to see her. But I can't go to Bannisdale. If your mother doesn't hate me now, as she did last summer—perhaps—she and Polly would take me in for a while?"

He frowned over it—taking the airs of the relative and the counsellor.

"Mother didn't say much—well—about your affair. But Polly says she's never spoken again you since. But I expect—you know what she'd be afraid of?"

He nodded sagaciously.

"I can't imagine," said Laura, instantly. But the stiffening of her slight frame betrayed her.

"Why, of course—Miss Laura—you see she'd be afraid of its coming on again."

There was silence. The broad rim of Laura's velvet hat hid her face.
Hubert began to be uncomfortable.

"I don't say as she'd have cause to," he said slowly; "but——"

Laura suddenly laughed, and Mason opened his eyes in astonishment. Such a strange little dry sound!

"Of course, if your mother were to think such things and to say them to me—every time I went to Bannisdale, I couldn't stay. But I want to see Augustina very, *very* much." Her voice wavered. "And I could easily go to her—if I were close by—when she was alone. And of course I should be no expense. Your mother knows I have my own money."

Hubert nodded. He was trying hard to read her face, but—what the deuce made girls so close? His countenance brightened however.

"All right. I'll see to it—I'll manage it—you wait."

"Ah! but stop a minute." Her smile shone out from the shadow of the hat.
"If I go there's a condition. While I'm there, you mustn't come."

The young fellow flung away from her with a passionate exclamation, and her smile dropped—lost itself in a sweet distress, unlike the old wild Laura.

"I seem to be falling out with you all the time," she said in haste—"and I don't want to a bit! But indeed—it will be much better. You see, if you were to be coming over to pay visits to me—you would think it your duty to make love to me!"

"Well—and if I did?" he said fiercely.

"It would only put off the time of our making real friends. And—and—I do care very much for papa's people."

The tears leapt to her eyes for the first time. She held out her ungloved hand.

Reluctantly, and without looking at her, he took it. The touch of it roused a tempest in him. He crushed it and threw it away from him.

"Oh! if you'd never seen that man!" he groaned.

She got up without a word, and presently they were walking through the "backs," and she was gradually taming and appeasing him. By the time they reached the street gate of King's he was again in the full tide of musical talk and boasting, quite aware besides that his good looks and his magnificent physique drew the attention of the passers-by.

"Why, they're a poor lot—these 'Varsity men!" he said once contemptuously, as they passed a group of rather weedy undergraduates—"I could throw ten of em at one go!"

And perpetually he talked of money, the cost of his lodgings, of his railway fare, the swindling ways of the south. After all, the painful habits of generations had not run to waste; the mother began to show in the son.

In the street they parted. As he was saying good-bye to her, his look suddenly changed.

"I say!—that's the girl I travelled down with yesterday! And, by Jove! she knew me!"

And with a last nod to Laura, he darted after a tall woman who had thrown him a glance from the further pavement. Laura recognised the smart and buxom daughter of a Cambridge tradesman, a young lady whose hair, shoulders, millinery, and repartees were all equally pronounced.

* * * * *

Miss Fountain smiled, and turned away. But in the act of doing so, she came to a sudden stop. A face had arrested her—she stood bewildered.

A man walking in the road came towards her.

"I see that you recognise me, Miss Fountain!"

The ambiguous voice—the dark, delicate face—the clumsy gait—she knew them all. But—she stared in utter astonishment. The man who addressed her wore a short round coat and soft hat; a new beard covered his chin; his flannel shirt was loosely tied at the throat by a silk handkerchief. And over all the same air of personal slovenliness and ill-breeding.

"You didn't expect to see me in this dress, Miss Fountain? Let me walk a few steps with you, if I may. You perhaps hadn't heard that I had left the Jesuits—and ceased indeed to be a Catholic."

Her mind whirled, as she recognised the scholastic. She saw the study at Bannisdale—and Helbeck bending over her.

"No, indeed—I had not heard," she stammered, as they walked on. "Was it long ago?"

"Only a couple of months. The crisis came in January——"

And he broke out into a flood of autobiography. Already at Bannisdale he had been in confusion of mind—the voices of art and liberty calling to him each hour more loudly—his loyalty to Helbeck, to his boyish ideals, to his Jesuit training, holding him back.

"I believe, Miss Fountain"—the colour rushed into his womanish cheek—"you overheard us that evening—you know what I owe to that admirable, that extraordinary man. May I be frank? We have both been through deep waters!"

The girl's face grew rigid. Involuntarily she put a wider space between herself and him. But he did not notice.

"It will be no news to you, Miss Fountain, that Mr. Helbeck's engagement troubled his Catholic friends. I chose to take it morbidly to heart—I ventured that—that most presumptuous attack upon him." He laughed, with an affected note that made her think him odious. "But you were soon avenged. You little know, Miss Fountain, what an influence your presence at Bannisdale had upon me. It—well! it was like a rebel army, perpetually there, to help—to support, the rebel in myself. I saw the struggle—the protest in you. My own grew fiercer. Oh! those days of painting!—and always the stabbing thought, never again! I must confess even the passionate delight this has given me—the irreligious ideas it has excited. All my religious habits lost power—I could not meditate—I was always thinking of the problem of my work. Clearly I must never touch, a brush again.—For I was very soon to take orders—then to go out to missionary work. Well, I put the painting aside—I trampled on myself—I went to see my father and sister, and rejoiced in the humiliations they put upon me. Mr. Helbeck was all kindness, but he was naturally the last person I could confide in. Then, Miss Fountain, I went back, back to the Jesuit routine ——"

He paused, looking instinctively for a glance from her. But she gave him none.

"And in three weeks it broke down under me for ever. I gave it up. I am a free man. Of the wrench I say nothing." He drew himself up with a shudder, which seemed to her theatrical. "There are sufferings one must not talk of. The Society have not been ungenerous. They actually gave me a little money. But, of course, for all my Catholic friends it is like death. They know me no more."

Then for the first time his companion turned towards him. Her eyelids lifted. Her lips framed rather than spoke the words, "Mr. Helbeck?"

"Ah! Mr. Helbeck—I am not mistaken, Miss Fountain, in thinking that I may now speak of Mr. Helbeck with more freedom?"

"My engagement with Mr. Helbeck is broken off," she said coldly. "But you were saying something of yourself?"

A momentary expression of dislike and disappointment crossed his face. He was of a soft, sensuous temperament, and had expected a good deal of sympathy from Miss Fountain.

"Mr. Helbeck has done what all of us might expect," he said, not without a betraying sharpness. "He has cast me off in the sternest way. Henceforth he knows me no more. Bannisdale is closed to me. But, indeed, the news from that quarter fills me with alarm."

Laura looked up again eagerly, involuntarily.

"Mr. Helbeck, by all accounts, grows more and more extreme—more and more solitary.—But of course your stepmother will have kept you informed. It was always to be foreseen. What was once a beautiful devotion, has become, with years—and, I suppose, opposition—a stern unbending passion—may not one say, a gloomy bigotry?"

He sighed delicately. Through the girl's stormy sense there ran a dumb rush of thoughts—"Insolent! ungrateful! He wounds the heart that loved him—and then dares to discuss—to blame!"

But before she could find something to say aloud, her companion resumed.

"But I must not complain. I was honoured by a superior man's friendship. He has withdrawn it. He has the right.—Now I must look to the future. You will, I think, be glad to hear that I am not in that destitute condition which generally awaits the Catholic deserter. My prospects indeed seem to be secured."

And with a vanity which did not escape her, he described the overtures that had been made to him by the editor of a periodical which was to represent "the new mystical school"—he spoke familiarly of great artists, and especially French ones, murdering the French names in a way that at once hurt the girl's ears, and pleased her secret spite against him—he threw in a critic or two without the Mr.—and he casually mentioned a few lords as persons on whom genius and necessity could rely.

All this in a confidential and appealing tone, which he no doubt imagined to be most suitable to women, especially young women. Laura thought it impertinent and unbecoming, and longed to be rid of him. At last the turning to the Friedlands' house appeared. She stood still, and stiffly wished him good-bye.

But he retained her hand and pressed it ardently.

"Oh! Miss Fountain—we have both suffered!"

* * * * *

The girl could hardly pacify herself enough to go in. Again and again she found a pleasure in those words of her French novel that she had repeated to Helbeck long ago: "*Imagination faussée et troublée—faussée et troublée*."

No delicacy—no modesty—no compunction! Her own poor heart flew to Bannisdale. She thought of all that the Squire had suffered in this man's cause. Outrage—popular hatred—her own protests and petulances,—all met with so unbending a dignity, so inviolable a fidelity, both to his friend and to his Church! She recalled that scarred brow—that kind and brotherly affection—that passionate sympathy which had made the heir of one of the most ancient names in England the intimate counsellor and protector of the wheelwright's son.

Popinjay!—renegade!—to come to her talking of "bigotry"—without a breath of true tenderness or natural remorse. Williams had done that which she had angrily maintained in that bygone debate with Helbeck he had every right to do. And she had nothing but condemnation. She walked up and down the shady road, her eyes blinded with tears. One more blow upon the heart that she herself had smitten so hard! Sympathy for this new pain took her back to every incident of the old—to every detail of that hideous week which had followed upon her flight.

How had she lived through it? Those letters—that distant voice in Dr. Friedland's study—her own piteous craving——

For the thousandth time, with the old dreary conviction, she said to herself that she had done right—terribly, incredibly right.

But all the while, she seemed to be sitting beside him in his study—laying her cheek upon his hand—eagerly comforting him for this last sorrow. His inexorable breach with Williams—well! it was part of his character—she would not have it otherwise. All that had angered her as imagination, was now natural and dignified as reality. Her thoughts proudly defended it. Let him be rigorous towards others if he pleased—he had been first king and master of himself.

* * * * *

Next day Molly Friedland and Laura went to London for the day. Laura was taking music lessons, as one means of driving time a little quicker; and there was shopping to be done both for the household and for themselves.

In the afternoon, as the girls were in Sloane Street together, Laura suddenly asked Molly to meet her in an hour at a friend's house, where they were to have tea. "I have something I want to do by myself." Molly asked no questions, and they parted.

A few minutes later, Laura stepped into the church of the Brompton Oratory. It was a Saturday afternoon, and Benediction was about to begin.

She drew down her thick veil, and took a seat near the door. The great heavy church was still nearly dark, save for a dim light in the sanctuary. But it was slowly filling with people, and she watched the congregation.

In front of her was a stout and fashionably dressed young man with an eyeglass and stick—evidently a stranger. He sat stolid and motionless, one knee crossed over the other, scrutinising everything that went on as though he had been at the play. Presently, a great many men began to stream in, most of them bald and grey, but some young fellows, who dropped eagerly on their knees as they entered, and rose reluctantly. Nuns in black hoods and habits would come briskly up, kneel and say a prayer, then go out again. Or sometimes they brought schools—girls, two and two—and ranged them decorously for the service. An elderly man, of the workman class, appeared with his small son, and sat in front of Laura. The child played tricks; the man drew it tenderly within his arm, and kept it quiet, while he himself told his beads. Then a girl with wild eyes and touzled hair, probably Irish, with her baby in her arms, sat down at the end of Laura's seat, stared round her for a few minutes, dropped to the altar, and went away. And all the time smartly dressed ladies came and went incessantly, knelt at side altars, crossed themselves, said a few rapid prayers, or disappeared into the mysteries of side aisles behind screens and barriers—going no doubt to confession.

There was an extraordinary life in it all. Here was no languid acceptance of a respectable habit. Something was eagerly wanted—diligently sought.

Laura looked round her, with a sigh from her inmost heart. But the vast church seemed to her ugly and inhuman. She remembered a saying of her father's as to its "vicious Roman style"—the "tomb of the Italian mind."

What matter?

Ah!—Suddenly a dim surpliced figure in the distance, and lights springing like stars in the apse. Presently the high altar, in a soft glow, shone out upon the dark church. All was still silent; the sanctuary spoke in light.

For a few minutes. Then this exquisite and magical effect broke up. The lighting spread through the church, became commonplace, showed the pompous lines of capital and cornice, the bad sculpture in the niches. A procession entered, and the service began.

Laura dropped on her knees. But she was no longer in London, in the Oratory church. She was far away, in the chapel of an old northern house, where the walls glowed with strange figures, and a dark crucifix hovered austerely above the altar. She saw the small scattered congregation; Father Bowles's grey head and blanched, weak face; Augustina in her long widow's veil; the Squire in his corner. The same words were being said there now, at this same hour. She looked at her watch, then hid her eyes again, tortured with a sick yearning.

But when she came out, twenty minutes later, her step was more alert. For a little while, she had been almost happy.

* * * * *

That night, after the returned travellers had finished their supper, the doctor was in a talking mood. He had an old friend with him a thinker and historian like himself. Both of them had lately come across "Leadham of Trinity"—the convert and Jesuit, who was now engaged upon an important Catholic memoir, and was settled for a time, within reach of Cambridge libraries.

"You knew Father Leadham in the north, Miss Laura?" asked the doctor, as the girls came into the drawing-room.

Laura started.

"I saw him two or three times," she said, as she made her way to the warm but dark corner near the fire. "Is he in Cambridge?"

The doctor nodded.

"Come to embrace us all—breathing benediction on learning and on science! There has been a Catholic Congress somewhere."—He looked at his friend. "That will show us the way!"

The friend—a small, lively-eyed, black-bearded man, just returned from some theological work in a German university—threw back his head and laughed good-humouredly.

The talk turned on Catholic learning old and new; on the assumptions and limitations of it; on the

forms taken by the most recent Catholic Apologetic; and so, like a vessel descending a great river, passed out at last, steered by Friedland, among the breakers of first principles.

As a rule the doctor talked in paradox and ellipse. He threw his sentences into air, and let them find their feet as they could.

But to-day, unconsciously, his talk took a tone that was rare with him—became prophetical, pontifical—assumed a note of unction. And often, as Molly noticed, with a slight instinctive gesture—a fatherly turning towards that golden spot made by Laura's hair among the shadows.

His friend fell silent after a while—watching Friedland with small sharp eyes. He had come there to discuss a new edition of Sidonius Apollinaris,—was himself one of the driest and acutest of investigators. All this talk for babes seemed to him the merest waste of time.

Friedland, however, with a curious feeling, let himself be carried away by it.

A little Catholic manual of Church history had fallen into his hands that morning. His fingers played with it as it lay on the table, and with the pages of a magazine beside it that contained an article by Father Leadham.

No doubt some common element in the two had roused him.——

"The Catholic war with history," he said, "is perennial! History, in fact, is the great rationalist; and the Catholic conscience is scandalised by her. And so we have these pitiful little books—" he laid his hand on the volume beside him—"which simply expunge history, or make it afresh. And we have a piece of Jesuit *apologia*, like this paper of Leadham's—so charming, in a sense, so scholarly! And yet one feels through it a cry of the soul—the Catholic arraignment of history, that she is what she is!"

"You'll find it in Newman—often," said the black-bearded man suddenly—and he ran through a list of passages, rapidly, in the student's way.

"Ah! Newman!" said Friedland with vivacity. "This morning I read over that sermon of his he delivered to the Oscott Synod, after the re-establishment of the Hierarchy—you remember it, Dalton?—What a flow and thunder in the sentences!—what an elevation in the thought! Who would not rather lament with Newman, than exult with Froude?—But here again, it is history that is the rationalist—not we poor historians!

"… Why was England lost to the Church? Because Henry was a villain?—because the Tudor bishops were slaves and poltroons? Does Leadham, or any other rational man really think so?"

The little black man nodded. He did not think it worth while to speak.

But Friedland went on enlarging, with his hand on his Molly's head—looking into her quiet eyes.

"… The fact is, the Catholic, who is in love with his Church, *cannot* let himself realise truly what the Home of the Renaissance meant: But turn your back on all the Protestant crew—even on Erasmus. Ask only those Catholic witnesses who were at the fountain-head, who saw the truth face to face. And then—ponder a little, what it was that really happened in those forty-five years of Elizabeth.…

"Can Leadham, can anyone deny that the nation rose in them to the full stature of its manhood—to a buoyant and fruitful maturity? And more—if it had not been for some profound movement of the national life,—some irresistible revolt of the common intelligence, the common conscience—does anyone suppose that the whims and violences of any trumpery king could have broken the links with Rome?—that such a life and death as More's could have fallen barren on English hearts? Never!—How shallow are all the official explanations—how deep down lies the truth!"

Out of the monologues that followed, broken often by the impatience or the eagerness of Dalton, Molly, at least, who worked much with her father, remembered fragments like the following:

"… The figure of the Church,—spouse or captive, bride or martyr,—as she has become personified in Catholic imagination, is surely among the greatest, the most ravishing, of human conceptions. It ranks with the image of 'Jahve's Servant' in the poetry of Israel. And yet behind her, as she moves through history, the modern sees the rising of something more majestic still—the free human spirit, in its contact with the infinite sources of things!—the Jerusalem which is the mother of us all—the Greater, the Diviner Church.… Into her Ursula-robe all lesser forms are gathered. But she is not only a maternal, a generative power—she is chastisement and convulsion.

"… Look back again to that great rising of the North against the South, that we call the Reformation.

—Catholicism of course is saved with the rest.—One may almost say that Newman's own type is made possible—all that touches and charms us in English Catholics has its birth, because York, Canterbury, and Salisbury are lost to the Mass.

"And abroad?—I always find a sombre fascination in the spectacle of the Tridentine reform. The Church in her stern repentance breaks all her toys, burns all her books! She shakes herself free from Guicciardini's 'herd of wretches.' She shuts her gates on the knowledge and the freedom that have rent her—and within her strengthened walls she sits, pondering on judgment to come. In so far as her submission is incomplete, she is raising new reckonings against herself every hour.—But for the moment the moralising influence of the lay intelligence has saved her—a new strength flows through her old veins.

"… And so with scholarship.—The great fabric of Gallican and Benedictine learning rises into being, under the hammer blows of a hostile research. The Catholics of Germany, says Renan, are particularly distinguished for acuteness and breadth of ideas. Why? Because of the 'perpetual contact of Protestant criticism.'—

"… More and more we shall come to see that it is the World that is the salt of the Church! She owes far more to her enemies than to any of her canonised saints. One may almost say that she lives on what the World can spare her of its virtues."

Laura, in her dark corner, had almost disappeared from sight. Molly, the soft, round-faced, spectacled Molly, turned now and then from her friend to her father. She would give Friedland sometimes a gentle restraining touch—her lips shaped themselves, as though she said, "Take care!"

And gradually Friedland fell upon things more intimate—the old topics of the relation between Catholicism and the will, Catholicism and conscience.

"… I often think we should be the better for some chair of 'The Inner Life,' at an English University!" he said presently, with a smile at Molly.—"What does the ordinary Protestant know of all those treasures of spiritual experience which Catholicism has secreted for centuries? *There* is the debt of debts that we all owe to the Catholic Church.

"Well!—Some day, no doubt, we shall all be able to make a richer use of what she has so abundantly to give.—

"At present what one sees going on in the modern world is a vast transformation of moral ideas, which for the moment holds the field. Beside the older ethical fabric—the fabric that the Church built up out of Greek and Jewish material—a new is rising. We think a hundred things unlawful that a Catholic permits; on the other hand, a hundred prohibitions of the older faith have lost their force. And at the same time, for half our race, the old terrors and eschatologies are no more. We fear evil for quite different reasons; we think of it in quite different ways. And the net result in the best moderns is at once a great elaboration of conscience—and an almost intoxicating sense of freedom.—

"Here, no doubt, it is the *personal abjection* of Catholicism, that jars upon us most—that divides it deepest from the modern spirit.—Molly!—don't frown!—Abjection is a Catholic word—essentially a Catholic temper. It means the ugliest and the loveliest things. It covers the most various types—from the nauseous hysteria of a Margaret Mary Alacoque, to the exquisite beauty of the *Imitation*…. And it derives its chief force, for good and evil, from the belief in the Mass. There again, how little the Protestant understands what he reviles! In one sense he understands it well enough. Catholicism would have disappeared long ago but for the Mass. Marvellous indestructible belief!—that brings God to Man, that satisfies the deepest emotions of the human heart!—

"What will the religion of the free mind discover to put in its place? Something, it must find. For the hold of Catholicism—or its analogues—upon the guiding forces of Christendom is irretrievably broken. And yet the needs of the soul remain the same.…

"Some compensation, no doubt, we shall reap from that added sense of power and wealth, which the change in the root ideas of life has brought with it for many people. Humanity has walked for centuries under the shadow of the Fall, with all that it involves. Now, a precisely opposite conception is slowly incorporating itself with all the forms of European thought. It is the disappearance—the rise—of a world. At the beginning of the century, Coleridge foresaw it.

"… The transformation affects the whole of personality! The mass of men who read and think, and lead straight lives to-day, are often conscious of a dignity and range their fathers never knew. The spiritual stature of civilised man has risen—like his physical stature! We walk to-day a nobler earth. We come—not as outcasts, but as sons and freemen, into the House of God.—But all the secrets and formulae of a new mystical union have to be worked out. And so long as pain and death remain,

humanity will always be at heart a mystic!"

* * * * *

Gradually, as the old man touched these more penetrating and personal matters, the head among the shadows had emerged. The beautiful eyes, so full—unconsciously full—of sad and torturing thought, rested upon the speaker. Friedland became sensitively conscious of them. The grey-haired scholar was in truth one of the most religious of men and optimists. The negations of his talk began to trouble him—in sight of this young grief and passion. He drew upon all that his heart could find to say of things fruitful and consoling. After the liberating joys of battle, he must needs follow the perennial human instinct and build anew the "Civitas Dei."

* * * * *

When Friedland and his wife were left alone, Friedland said with timidity:

"Jane, I played the preacher to-night, and preaching is foolishness. But I would willingly brace that poor child's mind a little. And it seemed to me she listened."

Mrs. Friedland laughed under her breath—the saddest laugh.

"Do you know what the child was doing this afternoon?"

"No."

"She went to the Oratory—to Benediction." Friedland looked up startled—then understood—raised his hands and let them drop despairingly.

# CHAPTER II

"Missie—are yo ben?"

The outer door of Browhead Farm was pushed inwards, and old Daffady's head and face appeared.

"Come in, Daffady—please come in!"

Miss Fountain's tone was of the friendliest. The cow-man obeyed her. He came in, holding his battered hat in his hand.

"Missie—A thowt I'd tell yo as t' rain had cleared oop—yo cud take a bit air verra weel, if yo felt to wish it."

Laura turned a pale but smiling face towards him. She had been passing through a week of illness, owing perhaps to the April bleakness of this high fell, and old Daffady was much concerned. They had made friends from the first days of her acquaintance with the farm. And during these April weeks since she had been the guest of her cousins, Daffady had shown her a hundred quaint attentions. The rugged old cow-man who now divided with Mrs. Mason the management of the farm was half amused, half scandalised, by what seemed to him the delicate uselessness of Miss Fountain. "I'm towd as doon i' Lunnon town, yo'll find scores o' this mak"—he would say to his intimate the old shepherd—"what th' Awmighty med em for, bets me. Now Miss Polly, she can sarve t' beese"—(by which the old North Countryman meant "cattle")—"and mek a hot mash for t' cawves, an cook an milk, an ivery oother soart o' thing as t' Lord give us t' wimmen for—bit Missie!—yo've nobbut to luke ut her 'ands. Nobbut what theer's soomat endearin i' these yoong flibberties—yo conno let em want for owt—bit it's the use of em worrits me above a bit."

Certainly all that old Daffady could do to supply the girl's wants was done. Whether it was a continuous supply of peat for the fire in these chilly April days; or a newspaper from the town; or a bundle of daffodils from the wood below—some signs of a fatherly mind he was always showing towards this little drone in the hive. And Laura delighted in him—racked her brains to keep him talking by the fireside.

"Well, Daffady, I'll take your advice.—I'm hungering to be out again.
But come in a bit first. When do you think the mistress will be back?"

Daffady awkwardly established himself just inside the door, looking first to see that his great nailed boots were making no unseemly marks upon the flags.

Laura was alone in the house. Mrs. Mason and Polly were gone to Whinthorpe, where they had some small sales to make. Mrs. Mason moreover was discontented with the terms under which she sold her milk; and there were inquiries to be made as to another factor, and perhaps a new bargain to be struck.

"Oh, the missis woan't be heäm till dark," said Daffady. "She's not yan to do her business i' haäste. She'll see to 't aa hersen. An she's reet there. Them as ladles their wits oot o' other foak's brains gits nobbut middlin sarved."

"You don't seem to miss Mr. Hubert very much?" said Laura, with a laughing look.

Daffady scratched his head.

"Noa—they say he's doin wonnerfu well, deän i' Froswick, an I'm juist glad on 't; for he wasna yan for work."

"Why, Daffady, they say now he's killing himself with work!"

Daffady grinned—a cautious grin.

"They'll deave yo, down i' th' town, wi their noise.—Yo'd think they were warked to deäth.—Bit, yo can see for yorsen. Why, a farmin mon mut be allus agate: in t' mornin, what wi' cawves to serve, an t' coos to feed, an t' horses to fodder, yo're fair run aff your legs. Bit down i' Whinthorpe—or Froswick ayder, fer it's noa odds—why, theer's nowt stirrin for a yoong mon. If cat's loose, that's aboot what!"

Laura's face lit up. Very few things now had power to please her but
Daffady's dialect, and Daffady's scorns.

"And so all the world is idle but you farm people?"

"A doan't say egsackly idle," said Daffady, with a good-humoured tolerance.

"But the factory-hands, Daffady?"

"O!—a little stannin an twiddlin!" said Daffady contemptuously—"I allus ses they pays em abuve a bit."

"But the miners?—come, Daffady!"

"I'm not stannin to it aw roond," said Daffady patiently—"I laid it down i' th' general."

"And all the people, who work with their heads, Daffady, like—like my papa?"

The girl smiled softly, and turned her slim neck to look at the old man. She was charmingly pretty so, among the shadows of the farm kitchen—but very touching—as the old man dimly felt. The change in her that worked so uncomfortably upon his rustic feelings went far deeper than any mere aspect of health or sickness. The spectator felt beside her a ghostly presence—that "sad sister, Pain"—stealing her youth away, smile as she might.

"I doan't knaw aboot them, Missie—nor aboot yor fadther—thoo I'll uphod tha Muster Stephen was a terr'ble cliver mon. Bit if yo doan't bring a gude yed wi yo to th' farmin yo may let it alane.—When th' owd measter here was deein, Mr. Hubert was verra down-hearted yo understan, an verra wishfa to say soomat frendly to th' owd man, noo it had coom to th' lasst of im. 'Fadther'—he ses—'dear fadther—is there nowt I could do fer tha?'—'Aye, lad'—ses th' owd un—'gie me thy yed, an tak mine—thine is gude enoof to be buried wi.' An at that he shet his mouth, and deed."

Daffady told his story with relish. His contempt for Hubert was of many years' standing. Laura lifted her eyebrows.

"That was sharp, for the last word. I don't think you should stick pins when you're dying—*dying*!"—she repeated the word with a passionate energy—"going quite away—for ever." Then, with a sudden change of tone—"Can I have the cart to-morrow, Daffady?"

Daffady, who had been piling the fire with fresh peat, paused and looked down upon her. His long, lank face, his weather-stained clothes, his great, twisted hand were all of the same colour—the colour of wintry grass and lichened rock. But his eyes were bright and blue, and a vivid streak of white hair fell across his high forehead. As the girl asked her question, the old man's air of fatherly concern became more marked.

"Mut yo goa, missie? It did yo noa gude lasst time."

"Yes, I must go. I think so—I hope so!"—She checked herself. "But I'll wrap up."

"Mrs. Fountain's nobbut sadly, I unnerstan?"

"She's rather better again. But I must go to-morrow. Daffady, Cousin Elizabeth won't forget to bring up the letters?"

"I niver knew her du sich a thing as thattens," said Daffady, with caution.

"And do you happen to know whether Mr. Bayley is coming to supper?"

"T' minister'll mebbe coom if t' weather hods up."

"Daffady—do you think—that when you don't agree with people about religion—it's right and proper to sit every night—and tear them to pieces?"

The colour had suddenly flooded her pale face—her attitude had thrown off languor.

Daffady showed embarrassment.

"Well, noa, missie—Aa doan't hod—mysen—wi personalities. Yo mun wrastle wi t' sin—an gaa saftly by t' sinner."

"Sin!" she said scornfully.

Daffady was quelled.

"I've allus thowt mysen," he said hastily, "as we'd a dëal to larn from Romanists i' soom ways. Noo, their noshun o' Purgatory—I daurna say a word for 't when t' minister's taakin, for there's noa warrant for 't i' Scriptur, as I can mek oot—bit I'll uphod yo, it's juist handy! Aa've often thowt so, i' my aan preachin. Heaven an hell are verra well for t' foak as are ower good, or ower bad; bit t' moast o' foak—are juist a mish-mash."

He shook his head slowly, and then ventured a glance at Miss Fountain to see whether he had appeased her.

Laura seemed to rouse herself with an effort from some thoughts of her own.

"Daffady—how the sun's shining! I'll go out. Daffady, you're very kind and nice to me—I wonder why?"

She laid one of the hands that seemed to the cow-man so absurd upon his arm, and smiled at him. The old man reddened and grunted. She sprang up with a laugh; and the kitchen was instantly filled by a whirlwind of barks from Fricka, who at last foresaw a walk.

* * * * *

Laura took her way up the fell. She climbed the hill above the farm, and then descended slowly upon a sheltered corner that held the old Browhead Chapel, whereof the fanatical Mr. Bayley—worse luck!—was the curate in charge.

She gave a wide berth to the vicarage, which with two or three cottages, embowered in larches and cherry-trees, lay immediately below the chapel. She descended upon the chapel from the fell, which lay wild about it and above it; she opened a little gate into the tiny churchyard, and found a sunny rock to sit on, while Fricka rushed about barking at the tits and the linnets.

Under the April sun and the light wind, the girl gave a sigh of pleasure. It was a spot she loved. The old chapel stood high on the side of a more inland valley that descended not to the sea, but to the Greet—a green open vale, made glorious at its upper end by the overpeering heads of great mountains, and falling softly through many folds and involutions to the woods of the Greet—the woods of Bannisdale.

So blithe and shining it was, on this April day! The course of the bright twisting stream was dimmed here and there by mists of fruit blossom. For the damson trees were all out, patterning the valleys,—marking the bounds of orchard and field, of stream and road. Each with its larch clump, the grey and white farms lay scattered on the pale green of the pastures; on either side of the valley the limestone pushed upward, through the grassy slopes of the fells, and made long edges and "scars" against the sky; while down by the river hummed the old mill where Laura had danced, a year before.

It was Westmoreland in its remoter, gentler aspect—Westmoreland far away from the dust of coaches

and hotels—an untouched pastoral land, enwrought with a charm and sweetness none can know but those who love and linger. Its hues and lines are all sober and very simple. In these outlying fell districts, there is no splendour of colour, no majesty of peak or precipice. The mountain-land is at its homeliest—though still wild and free as the birds that flash about its streams. The purest radiance of cool sunlight floods it on an April day; there are pale subtleties of grey and purple in the rocks, in the shadows, in the distances, on which the eye may feed perpetually; and in the woods and bents a never-ceasing pageantry of flowers.

And what beauty in the little chapel-yard itself! Below it the ground ran down steeply to the village and the river, and at its edge—out of its loose boundary wall—rose a clump of Scotch firs, drawn in a grand Italian manner upon the delicacy of the scene beyond. Close to them a huge wild cherry thrust out its white boughs, not yet in their full splendour, and through their openings the distant blues of fell and sky wavered and shimmered as the wind played with the tree. And all round, among the humble nameless graves, the silkiest, finest grass—grass that gives a kind of quality, as of long and exquisite descent, to thousands of Westmoreland fields—grass that is the natural mother of flowers, and the sister of all clear streams. Daffodils grew in it now, though the daffodil hour was waning. A little faded but still lovely, they ran dancing in and out of the graves—up to the walls of the chapel itself—a foam of blossom breaking on the grey rock of the church.

Generations ago, when the fells were roadless and these valleys hardly peopled, the monks of a great priory church on the neighbouring coast built here this little pilgrimage chapel, on the highest point of a long and desolate track connecting the inland towns with the great abbeys of the coast, and with all the western seaboard. Fields had been enclosed and farms had risen about it; but still the little church was one of the loneliest and remotest of fanes. So lonely and remote that the violent hand of Puritanism had almost passed it by, had been content at least with a rough blow or two, defacing, not destroying. Above the moth-eaten table that replaced the ancient altar there still rose a window that breathed the very *secreta* of the old faith—a window of radiant fragments, piercing the twilight of the little church with strange uncomprehended things—images that linked the humble chapel and its worshippers with the great European story, with Chartres and Amiens, with Toledo and Rome.

For here, under a roof shaken every Sunday by Mr. Bayley's thunders, there stood a golden St. Anthony, a virginal St. Margaret. And all round them, in a ruined confusion, dim sacramental scenes—that flamed into jewels as the light smote them! In one corner a priest raised the Host. His delicate gold-patterned vestments, his tonsured head, and the monstrance in his hands, tormented the curate's eyes every Sunday as he began, robed in his black Genevan gown, to read the Commandments. And in the very centre of the stone tracery, a woman lifted herself in bed to receive the Holy Oil—so pale, so eager still, after all these centuries! Her white face spoke week by week to the dalesfolk as they sat in their high pews. Many a rough countrywoman, old perhaps, and crushed by toil and child-bearing, had wondered over her, had felt a sister in her, had loved her secretly.

But the children's dreams followed St. Anthony rather—the kind, sly old man, with the belled staff, up which his pig was climbing.

Laura haunted the little place.

She could not be made to go when Mr. Bayley preached; but on week-days she would get the key from the schoolmistress, and hang over the old pews, puzzling out the window—or trying to decipher some of the other Popish fragments that the church contained. Sometimes she would sit rigid, in a dream that took all the young roundness from her face. But it was like the Oratory church, and Benediction. It brought her somehow near to Helbeck, and to Bannisdale.

To-day, however, she could not tear herself from the breeze and the sun. She sat among the daffodils, in a sort of sad delight, wondering sometimes at the veil that had dropped between her and beauty—dulling and darkening all things.

Surely Cousin Elizabeth would bring a letter from Augustina. Every day she had been expecting it. This was the beginning of the second week after Easter. All the Easter functions at Bannisdale must now be over; the opening of the new orphanage to boot; and the gathering of Catholic gentry to meet the Bishop—in that dreary, neglected house! Augustina, indeed, knew nothing of these things—except from the reports that might be brought to her by the visitors to her sick room. Bannisdale had now no hostess. Mr. Helbeck kept the house as best he could.

Was it not three weeks and more, now, that Laura had been at the farm? And only two visits to Bannisdale! For the Squire, by Augustina's wish, and against the girl's own judgment, knew nothing of her presence in the neighbourhood, and she could only see her stepmother on days when Augustina could be certain that her brother was away. During part of Passion week, all Holy week, and half Easter week, priests had been staying in the house—or the orphanage ceremony had detained the Squire. But

by now, surely, he had gone to London on some postponed business. That was what Mrs. Fountain expected. The girl hungered for her letter.

Poor Augustina! The heart malady had been developing rapidly. She was very ill, and Laura thought unhappy.

And yet, when the first shock of it was over—in spite of the bewilderment and grief she suffered in losing her companion—Mrs. Fountain had been quite willing to recognise and accept the situation which had been created by Laura's violent action. She wailed over the countermanded gowns and furnishings; but she was in truth relieved. "Now we know where we are again," she had said both to herself and Father Bowles. That strange topsy—turveydom of things was over. She was no more tormented with anxieties; and she moved again with personal ease and comfort about her old home.

Poor Alan of course felt it dreadfully. And Laura could not come to Bannisdale for a long, long time. But Mrs. Fountain could go to her—several times a year. And the Sisters were very good, and chatty. Oh no, it was best—much best!

But now—whether it came from physical weakening or no—Mrs. Fountain was always miserable, always complaining. She spoke of her brother perpetually. Yet when he was with her, she thought him hard and cold. It was evident to Laura that she feared him; that she was never at ease with him. Merely to speak of those increased austerities of his, which had marked the Lent of this year, troubled and frightened her.

Often, too, she would lie and look at Laura with an expression of dry bitterness and resentment, without speaking. It was as though she were equally angry with the passion which had changed her brother—and with Laura's strength in breaking from it.

* * * * *

Laura moved her seat a little. Between the wild cherry and the firs was a patch of deep blue distance. Those were his woods. But the house, was hidden by the hills.

"Somehow I have got to live!" she said to herself suddenly, with a violent trembling.

But how? For she bore two griefs. The grief for him, of which she never let a word pass her lips, was perhaps the strongest among the forces that were destroying her. She knew well that she had torn the heart that loved her—that she had set free a hundred dark and morbid forces in Helbeck's life.

But it was because she had realised, by the insight of a moment, the madness of what they had done, the gulf to which they were rushing—because, at one and the same instant, there had been revealed to her the fatality under which she must still resist, and he must become gradually, inevitably, her persecutor, and her tyrant!

Amid the emotion, the overwhelming impressions of his story of himself, that conviction had risen in her inmost being—a strange inexorable voice of judgment—bidding her go! In a flash, she had seen the wretched future years—the daily struggle—the aspect of violence, even of horror, that his pursuit of her, his pressure upon her will, might assume—the sharpening of all those wild forces in her own nature.

She was broken with the anguish of separation—and how she had been able to do what she had done, she did not know. But the inner voice persisted—that for the first time, amid the selfish, or passionate, or joy-seeking impulses of her youth, she had obeyed a higher law. The moral realities of the whole case closed her in. She saw no way out—no way in which, so far as her last act was concerned, she could have bettered or changed the deed. She had done it for him, first of all. He must be delivered from her. And she must have room to breathe, without making of her struggle for liberty a hideous struggle with him, and with love.

Well, but—comfort!—where was it to be had? The girl's sensuous craving nature fought like a tortured thing in the grasp laid upon it. How was it possible to go on suffering like this? She turned impatiently to one thought after another.

Beauty? Nature? Last year, yes! But now! That past physical ecstasy—in spring—in flowing water—in flowers—in light and colour—where was it gone? Let these tears—these helpless tears—make answer!

Music?—books?—the books that "make incomparable old maids"—friends?
The thought of the Friedlands made her realise that she could still love.
But after all—how little!—against how much!

Religion? All religion need not be as Alan Helbeck's. There was religion as the Friedlands understood

it—a faith convinced of God, and of a meaning for human life, trusting the "larger hope" that springs out of the daily struggle of conscience, and the garnered experience of feeling. Both in Friedland and his wife, there breathed a true spiritual dignity and peace.

But Laura was not affected by this fact in the least. She put away the suggestions of it with impatience. Her father had not been so. Now that she had lost her lover, she clung the more fiercely to her father. And there had been no anodynes for him.

… Oh if the sun—the useless sun—would only go—and Cousin Elizabeth would come back—and bring that letter! Yes, one little pale joy there was still—for a few weeks or months. The craving for the bare rooms of Bannisdale possessed her—for that shadow-happiness of entering his house as he quitted it—walking its old boards unknown to him—touching the cushions and chairs in Augustina's room that he would touch, perhaps that very same night, or on the morrow!

Till Augustina's death.—Then both for Laura and for Helbeck—an Unknown—before which the girl shut her eyes.

* * * * *

There was company that night in the farm kitchen. Mr. Bayley, the more than evangelical curate, came to tea.

He was a little man, with a small sharp anaemic face buried in red hair. It was two or three years of mission work, first in Mexico, and then at Lima as the envoy of one of the most thoroughgoing of Protestant societies, that had given him his strangely vivid notions of the place of Romanism among the world's forces. At no moment in this experience can he have had a grain of personal success. Lima, apparently, is of all towns in the universe the town where the beard of Protestantism is least worth the shaving—to quote a northern proverb. At any rate, Mr. Bayley returned to his native land at fifty with a permanent twist of brain. Hence these preposterous sermons in the fell chapel; this eager nosing out and tracking down of every scent of Popery; this fanatical satisfaction in such a kindred soul as that of Elizabeth Mason. Some mild Ritualism at Whinthorpe had given him occupation for years; and as for Bannisdale, he and the Masons between them had raised the most causeless of storms about Mr. Helbeck and his doings, from the beginning; they had kept up for years the most rancorous memory of the Williams affair; they had made the owner of the old Hall the bogey of a country-side.

Laura knew it well. She never spoke to the little red man if she could help it. What pleased her was to make Daffady talk of him—Daffady, whose contempt as a "Methody" for "paid priests" made him a sure ally.

"Why, he taaks i' church as thoo God Awmighty were on the pulpit stairs—gi-en him his worrds!" said the cow-man, with the natural distaste of all preachers for diatribes not their own; and Laura, when she wandered the fields with him, would drive him on to say more and worse.

Mr. Bayley, on the other hand, had found a new pleasure in his visits to the farm-since Miss Fountain's arrival. The young lady had escaped indeed from the evil thing—so as by fire. But she was far too pale and thin; she showed too many regrets. Moreover she was not willing to talk of Mr. Helbeck with his enemies. Indeed, she turned her back rigorously on any attempt to make her do so.

So all that was left to the two cronies was to sit night after night, talking to each other in the hot hope that Miss Fountain might be reached thereby and strengthened—that even Mrs. Fountain and that distant black brood of Bannisdale might in some indirect way be brought within the saving-power of the Gospel.

Strange fragments of this talk floated through the kitchen.—

"Oh, my dear friend!—forbidding to marry is a doctrine of *devils*!—Now Lima, as I have often told you, is a city of convents——"

There was a sudden grinding of chairs on the flagged floor. The grey head and the red approached each other; the nightly shudder began; while the girls chattered and coughed as loudly as they dared.

"No—a woan't—a conno believe 't!" Mrs. Mason would say at last, throwing herself back against her chair with very red cheeks. And Daffady would look round furtively, trying to hear.

But sometimes the curate would try to propitiate the young ladies. He made himself gentle; he raised the most delicate difficulties. He had, for instance, a very strange compassion for the Saints. "I hold it," he said—with an eye on Miss Fountain—"to be clearly demonstrable that the Invocation of Saints is, of all things, most lamentably injurious to the Saints themselves!"

"Hoo can he knaw?" said Polly to Laura, open-mouthed.

But Mrs. Mason frowned.

"A doan't hod wi Saints whativer," she said violently. "So A doan't fash mysel aboot em!"

Daffady sometimes would be drawn into these diversions, as he sat smoking on the settle. And then out of a natural slyness—perhaps on these latter occasions, from a secret sympathy for "missie"—he would often devote himself to proving the solidarity of all "church priests," Establishments, and prelatical Christians generally. Father Bowles might be in a "parlish" state; but as to all supporters of bishops and the heathenish custom of fixed prayers—whether they wore black gowns or no—"a man mut hae his doots."

Never had Daffady been so successful with his shafts as on this particular evening. Mrs. Mason grew redder and redder; her large face alternately flamed and darkened in the firelight. In the middle the girls tried to escape into the parlour. But she shouted imperiously after them.

"Polly—Laura—what art tha aboot? Coom back at yance. I'll not ha sickly foak sittin wi'oot a fire!"

They came back sheepishly. And when they were once more settled as audience, the mistress—who was by this time fanning herself tempestuously with the Whinthorpe paper—launched her last word:

"Daffady—thoo's naa call to lay doon t' law, on sic matters at aw. Mappen tha'll recolleck t' Bible—headstrong as tha art i' thy aan conceit. Bit t' Bible says 'How can he get wisdom that holdeth the plough—whose taak is o' bullocks?' Aa coom on that yestherday—an A've bin sair exercised aboot thy preachin ever sen!"

Daffady held his peace.

The clergyman departed, and Daffady went out to the cattle. Laura had not given the red-haired man her hand. She had found it necessary to carry her work upstairs, at the precise moment of his departure. But when he was safely off the premises she came down again to say good-night to her cousins.

Oh! they had not been unkind to her these last weeks. Far from it. Mrs. Mason had felt a fierce triumph—she knew—in her broken engagement. Probably at first Cousin Elizabeth had only acquiesced in Hubert's demand that Miss Fountain should be asked to stay at the farm, out of an ugly wish to see the girl's discomfiture for herself. And she had not been able to forego the joy of bullying Mr. Helbeck's late betrothed through Mr. Bayley's mouth.

Nevertheless, when this dwindled ghostly Laura appeared, and began to flit through the low-ceiled room and dark passages of the farm—carefully avoiding any talk about herself or her story—always cheerful, self-possessed, elusive—the elder woman began after a little to have strange stirrings of soul towards her. The girl's invincible silence, taken with those physical signs of a consuming pain that were beyond her concealment, worked upon a nature that, as far as all personal life and emotion were concerned, was no less strong and silent. Polly saw with astonishment that fires were lit in the parlour at odd times—that Laura might read or practise. She was amazed to watch her mother put out some little delicacy at tea or supper that Laura might be made to eat.

And yet!—after all these amenities, Mr. Bayley would still be asked to supper, and Laura would still be pelted and harried from supper-time till bed.

To-night when Laura returned, Mrs. Mason was in a muttering and stormy mood. Daffady had angered her sorely. Laura, moreover, had a letter from Bannisdale, and since it came there had been passing lights in Miss Fountain's eyes, and passing reds on her pale cheeks.

As the girl approached her cousin, Mrs. Mason turned upon her abruptly.

"Dostha want the cart to-morrow? Daffady said soomat aboot it."

"If it could be spared."

Mrs. Mason looked at her fixedly.

"If Aa was thoo," she said, "Aa'd not flutter ony more roond *that* can'le!"

Laura shrank as though her cousin had struck her. But she controlled herself.

"Do you forget my stepmother's state, Cousin Elizabeth?"

"Oh!—yo' con aw mak much o' what suits tha!" cried the mistress, as she walked fiercely to the outer door and locked it noisily from the great key-bunch hanging at her girdle.

The girl's eyes showed a look of flame. Then her head seemed to swim. She put her hand to her brow, and walked weakly across the kitchen to the door of the stairs.

"Mother!" cried Polly, in indignation; and she sprang after Laura. But Laura waved her back imperiously, and almost immediately they heard her door shut upstairs.

* * * * *

An hour later Laura was lying sleepless in her bed. It was a clear cold night—a spring frost after the rain. The moon shone through the white blind, on the old four-poster, on Laura's golden hair spread on the pillow, on the great meal-ark which barred the chimney, on the rude walls and woodwork of the room.

Her arms were thrown behind her head, supporting it. Nothing moved in the house, or the room—the only sound was the rustling of a mouse in one corner.

A door opened on a sudden. There was a step in the passage, and someone knocked at her door.

"Come in."

On the threshold stood Mrs. Mason in a cotton bedgown and petticoat, her grey locks in confusion about her massive face and piercing eyes.

She closed the door, and came to the bedside.

"Laura!—Aa've coom to ast thy pardon!"

Laura raised herself on one arm, and looked at the apparition with amazement.

"Mebbe A've doon wrang.—We shouldna quench the smoakin flax. Soa theer's my han, child—if thoo can teäk it."

The old woman held out her hand. There was an indescribable sound in her voice, as of deep waters welling up.

Laura fell back on her pillows—the whitest, fragilest creature—under the shadows of the old bed. She opened her delicate arms. "Suppose you kiss me, Cousin Elizabeth!"

The elder woman stooped clumsily. The girl linked her arms round her neck and kissed her warmly, repeatedly, feeling through all her motherless sense the satisfaction of a long hunger in the contact of the old face and ample bosom.

The reserve of both forbade anything more. Mrs. Mason tucked in the small figure—lingered a little—said, "Laura, th'art not coald—nor sick?"—and when Laura answered cheerfully, the mistress went.

The girl's eyes were wet for a while; her heart beat fast. There had been few affections in her short life—far too few. Her nature gave itself with a fatal prodigality, or not at all. And now—what was there left to give?

But she slept more peacefully for Mrs. Mason's visit—with Augustina's letter of summons under her hand.

* * * * *

The day was still young when Laura reached Bannisdale.

Never had the house looked so desolate. Dust lay on the oaken boards and tables of the hall. There was no fire on the great hearth, and the blinds in the oriel windows were still mostly drawn. But the remains of yesterday's fire were visible yet, and a dirty duster and pan adorned the Squire's chair.

The Irishwoman with a half-crippled husband, who had replaced Mrs. Denton, was clearly incompetent. Mrs. Denton at least had been orderly and clean. The girl's heart smote her with a fresh pang as she made her way upstairs.

She found Augustina no worse; and in her room there was always comfort, and even brightness. She had a good nurse; a Catholic "Sister" from London, of a kind and cheerful type, that Laura herself could not dislike; and whatever working power there was in the household was concentrated on her service.

Miss Fountain took off her things, and settled in for the day. Augustina chattered incessantly, except when her weakness threw her into long dozes, mingled often, Laura thought, with slight wandering. Her wish evidently was to be always talking of her brother; but in this she checked herself whenever she could, as though controlled by some resolution of her own, or some advice from another.

Yet in the end she said a great deal about him. She spoke of the last weeks of Lent, of the priests who had been staying in the house; of the kindness that had been shown her. That wonderful network of spiritual care and attentions—like a special system of courtesy having its own rules and etiquette—with which Catholicism surrounds the dying, had been drawn about the poor little widow. During the last few weeks Mass had been said several times in her room; Father Leadham had given her Communion every day in Easter week; on Easter Sunday the children from the orphanage had come to sing to her; that Roman palm over the bed was brought her by Alan himself. The statuette of St. Joseph, too, was his gift.

So she lay and talked through the day, cheerfully enough. She did not want to hear of Cambridge or the Friedlands, still less of the farm. Her whole interest now was centred in her own state, and in the Catholic joys and duties which it still permitted. She never spoke of her husband; Laura bitterly noted it.

But there were moments when she watched her stepdaughter, and once when the Sister had left them she laid her hand on Laura's arm and whispered:

"Oh! Laura—he has grown so much greyer—since—since October."

The girl said nothing. Augustina closed her eyes, and said with much twitching and agitation, "When—when I am gone, he will go to the Jesuits—I know he will. The place will come to our cousin, Richard Helbeck. He has plenty of money—it will be very different some day."

"Did—did Father Leadham tell you that?" said Laura, after a while.

"Yes. He admitted it. He said they had twice dissuaded him in former years. But now—when I'm gone—it'll be allowed."

Suddenly Augustina opened her eyes. "Laura! where are you?" Her little crooked face worked with tears. "I'm glad!—We ought all to be glad. I don't—I don't believe he ever has a happy moment!"

She began to weep piteously. Laura tried to console her, putting her cheek to hers, with inarticulate soothing words. But Augustina turned away from her—almost in irritation.

The girl's heart was wrung at every turn. She lingered, however, till the last minute—almost till the April dark had fallen.

When she reached the hall again, she stood a moment looking round its cold and gloom. First, with a start, she noticed a pile of torn envelopes and papers lying on a table, which had escaped her in the morning. The Squire must have thrown them down there in the early morning, just before starting on his journey. The small fact gave her a throb of strange joy—brought back the living presence. Then she noticed that the study door was open.

A temptation seized her—drove her before it. Silence and solitude possessed the house. The servants were far away in the long rambling basement. Augustina was asleep with her nurse beside her.

Laura went noiselessly across the hall. She pushed the door—she looked round his room.

No change. The books, the crucifix, the pictures, all as before. But the old walls, and wainscots, the air of the room, seemed still to hold the winter. They struck chill.

The same pile of books in daily use upon his table—a few little manuals and reprints—"The Spiritual Combat," the "Imitation," some sermons—the volume of "Acta Sanctorum" for the month.

She could not tear herself from them. Trembling, she hung over them, and her fingers blindly opened a little book which lay on the top. It fell apart at a place which had been marked—freshly marked, it seemed to her. A few lines had been scored in pencil, with a date beside them. She looked closer and read the date of the foregoing Easter Eve. And the passage with its scored lines ran thus:

"Drive far from us the crowd of evil spirits who strive to approach us; unloose the too firm hold of earthly things; *untie with Thy gentle and wounded hands the fibres of our hearts that cling so fast round human affections*; let our weary head rest on Thy bosom till the struggle is over, and our cold form falls back—dust and ashes."

She stood a moment—looking down upon the book—feeling life one throb of anguish. Then wildly she stooped and kissed the pages. Dropping on her knees too, she kissed the arm of the chair, the place where his hand would rest.

No one came—the solitude held. Gradually she got the better of her misery. She rose, replaced the book, and went.

* * * * *

The following night, very late, Laura again lay sleepless. But April was blowing and plashing outside. The high fell and the lonely farm seemed to lie in the very track of the storms, as they rushed from the south-west across the open moss to beat themselves upon the mountains.

But the moon shone sometimes, and then the girl's restlessness would remind her of the open fell-side, of pale lights upon the distant sea, of cool blasts whirling among the old thorns and junipers, and she would long to be up and away—escaped from this prison where she could not sleep.

How the wind could drop at times—to what an utter and treacherous silence! And what strange, misleading sounds the silence brought with it!

She sat up in bed. Surely someone had opened the further gate—the gate from the lane? But the wind surged in again, and she had to strain her ears. Nothing. Yes!—wheels and hoofs! a carriage of some sort approaching.

A sudden thought came to her. The dog-cart—it seemed to be such by the sound—drew up at the farm door, and a man descended. She heard the reins thrown over the horse's back, then the groping for the knocker, and at last blows loud and clear, startling the night.

Mrs. Mason's window was thrown open next, and her voice came out imperiously—"What is it?"

Laura's life seemed to hang on the answer.

"Will you please tell Miss Fountain that her stepmother is in great danger, and asks her to come at once."

She leapt from her bed, but must needs wait—turned again to stone—for the next word. It came after a pause.

"And wha's the message from?"

"Kindly tell her that Mr. Helbeck is here with the dog-cart."

The window closed. Laura slipped into her clothes, and by the time Mrs.
Mason emerged the girl was already in the passage.

"I heard," she said briefly. "Let us go down."

Mrs. Mason, pale and frowning, led the way. She undid the heavy bars and lock, and for the first time in her life stood confronted—on her own threshold—with the Papist Squire of Bannisdale.

Mr. Helbeck greeted her ceremoniously. But his black eyes, so deep-set and cavernous in his strong-boned face, did not seem to notice her. They ran past her to that small shadow in the background.

"Are you ready?" he said, addressing the shadow.

"One moment, please," said Laura. She was tying a thick veil round her hat, and struggling with the fastenings of her cloak.

Mrs. Mason looked from one to another like a baffled lioness. But to let them go without a word was beyond her. She turned to the Squire.

"Misther Helbeck!—yo'll tell me on your conscience—as it's reet and just—afther aw that's passt—'at this yoong woman should go wi yo?"

Laura shivered with rage and shame. Her fingers hastened. Mr. Helbeck showed no emotion whatever.

"Mrs. Fountain is dying," he said briefly; and again his eye—anxious, imperious—sought for the girl. She came hastily forward from the shadows of the kitchen.

Mr. Helbeck mounted the cart, and held out his hand to her.

"Have you got a shawl? The wind is very keen!" He spoke with the careful courtesy one uses to a stranger.

"Thank you—I am all right. Please let us go! Cousin Elizabeth!" Laura threw herself backwards a moment, as the cart began to move, and kissed her hand.

Mrs. Mason made no sign. She watched the cart, slowly picking its way over the rough ground of the farm-yard, till it turned the corner of the big barn and disappeared in the gusty darkness.

Then she turned housewards. She put down her guttering candle on the great oak table of the kitchen, and sank herself upon the settle.

"Soa—that's him!" she said to herself; and her peasant mind in a dull heat, like that of the peat fire beside her, went wandering back over the hatreds of twenty years.

## CHAPTER III

As the dog-cart reached the turning of the lane, Mr. Helbeck said to his companion:

"Would you kindly take the cart through? I must shut the gate."

He jumped down. Laura with some difficulty—for the high wind coming from the fell increased her general confusion of brain—passed the gate and took the pony safely down a rocky piece of road beyond.

His first act in rejoining her was to wrap the rugs which he had brought more closely about her.

"I had no idea in coming," he said—"that the wind was so keen. Now we face it."

He spoke precisely in the same voice that he might have used, say, to Polly Mason had she been confided to him for a night journey. But as he arranged the rug, his hand for an instant had brushed Laura's; and when she gave him the reins, she leant back hardly able to breathe.

With a passionate effort of will, she summoned a composure to match his own.

"When did the change come?" she asked him.

"About eight o'clock. Then it was she told me you were here. We thought at first of sending over a messenger in the morning. But finally my sister begged me to come at once."

"Is there immediate danger?" The girlish voice must needs tremble.

"I trust we shall still find her," he said gently—"but her nurses were greatly alarmed."

"And was there—much suffering?"

She pressed her hands together under the coverings that sheltered them, in a quick anguish. Oh! had she thought enough, cared enough, for Augustina!

As she spoke the horse gave a sudden swerve, as though Mr. Helbeck had pulled the rein involuntarily. They bumped over a large stone, and the Squire hastily excused himself for bad driving. Then he answered her question. As far as he or the Sister could judge there was little active suffering. But the weakness had increased rapidly that afternoon, and the breathing was much harassed.

He went on to describe exactly how he had left the poor patient, giving the details with a careful minuteness. At the same moment that he had started for Miss Fountain, old Wilson had gone to Whinthorpe for the doctor. The Reverend Mother was there; and the nurses—kind and efficient women—were doing all that could be done.

He spoke in a voice that seemed to have no colour or emphasis. One who did not know him might have thought he gave his report entirely without emotion—that his sister's coming death did not affect him.

Laura longed to ask whether Father Bowles was there, whether the Last Sacraments had been given. But she did not dare. That question seemed to belong to a world that was for ever sealed between

them. And he volunteered nothing.

They entered on a steep descent to the main road. The wind came in fierce gusts—so that Laura had to hold her hat on with both hands. The carriage lamps wavered wildly on the great junipers and hollies, the clumps of blossoming gorse, that sprinkled the mountain; sometimes in a pause of the wind, there would be a roar of water, or a rush of startled sheep. Tumult had taken possession of the fells no less than of the girl's heart.

Once she was thrown against the Squire's shoulder, and murmured a hurried "I beg your pardon." And at the same moment an image of their parting on the stairs at Bannisdale rose on the dark. She saw his tall head bending—herself kissing the breast of his coat.

At last they came out above the great prospect of moss and mountain. There was just moon enough to see it by; though night and storm held the vast open cup, across which the clouds came racing—beating up from the coast and the south-west. Ghostly light touched the river courses here and there, and showed the distant portal of the sea. Through the cloud and wind and darkness breathed a great Nature-voice, a voice of power and infinite freedom. Laura suddenly, in a dim passionate way, thought of the words "to cease upon the midnight with no pain." If life could just cease, here, in the wild dark, while, for the last time in their lives, they were once more alone together!—while in this little cart, on this lonely road, she was still his charge and care—dependent on his man's strength, delivered over to him, and him only—out of all the world.

When they reached the lower road the pony quickened his pace, and the wind was less boisterous. The silence between them, which had been natural enough in the high and deafening blasts of the fell, began to be itself a speech. The Squire broke it.

"I am glad to hear that your cousin is doing so well at Froswick," he said, with formal courtesy.

Laura made a fitting reply, and they talked a little of the chances of business, and the growth of Froswick. Then the silence closed again.

Presently, as the road passed between stone walls, with a grass strip on either side, two dark forms shot up in front of them. The pony shied violently. Had they been still travelling on the edge of the steep grass slope which had stretched below them for a mile or so after their exit from the lane, they must have upset. As it was, Laura was pitched against the railing of the dog-cart, and as she instinctively grasped it to save herself, her wrist was painfully twisted.

"You are hurt!" said Helbeck, pulling up the pony.

The first cry of pain had been beyond her control. But she would have died rather than permit another.

"It is nothing," she said, "really nothing! What was the matter?"

"A mare and her foal, as far as I can see," said Helbeck, looking behind him. "How careless of the farm people!" he added angrily.

"Oh! they must have strayed," said Laura faintly. All her will was struggling with this swimming brain—it should not overpower her.

The tinkling of a small burn could be heard beside the road. Helbeck jumped down. "Don't be afraid; the pony is really quite quiet—he'll stand."

In a second or two he was back—and just in time. Laura knew well the touch of the little horn cup he put into her cold hand. Many and many a time, in the scrambles of their summer walks, had he revived her from it.

She drank eagerly. When he mounted the carriage again, some strange instinct told her that he was not the same. She divined—she was sure of an agitation in him which at once calmed her own.

She quickly assured him that she was much better, that the pain was fast subsiding. Then she begged him to hurry on. She even forced herself to smile and talk.

"It was very ghostly, wasn't it? Daffady, our old cow-man, will never believe they were real horses. He has a story of a bogle in this road—a horse-bogle, too—that makes one creep."

"Oh! I know that story," said Helbeck. "It used to be told of several roads about here. Old Wilson once said to me, 'When Aa wor yoong, ivery field an ivery lane wor fu o' bogles!' It is strange how the old tales have died out, while a brand new one, like our own ghost story, has grown up."

Laura murmured a "Yes." Had he forgotten who was once the ghost?

Silence fell again—a silence in which each heart could almost hear the other beat. Oh! how wicked—wicked—would she be if she had come meddling with his life again, of her own free will!

Here at last was the bridge, and the Bannisdale gate. Laura shut her eyes, and reckoned up the minutes that remained. Then, as they sped up the park, she wrestled indignantly with herself. She was outraged by her own callousness towards this death in front of her. "Oh! let me think of her! Let me be good to her!" she cried, in dumb appeal to some power beyond herself. She recalled her father. She tried with all her young strength to forget the man beside her—and those piteous facts that lay between them.

* * * * *

In Augustina's room—darkness—except for one shaded light. The doors were all open, that the poor tormented lungs might breathe.

Laura went in softly, the Squire following. A nurse rose.

"She has rallied wonderfully," she said in a cheerful whisper, as she approached them, finger on lip.

"Laura!" said a sighing voice.

It came from a deep old-fashioned chair, in which sat Mrs. Fountain, propped by many pillows.

Laura went up to her, and dropping on a stool beside her, the girl tenderly caressed the wasted hand that had itself no strength to move towards her.

In the few hours since Laura had last seen her, a great change had passed over Mrs. Fountain. Her little face, usually so red, had blanched to parchment white, and the nervous twitching of the head, in the general failure of strength, had almost ceased. She lay stilled and refined under the touch of death; and the sweetness of her blue eyes had grown more conscious and more noble.

"Laura—I'm a little better. But you mustn't go again. Alan—she must stay!"

She tried to turn her head to him, appealing. The Squire came forward.

"Everything is ready for Miss Fountain, dear—if she will be good enough to stay. Nurse will provide—and we will send over for any luggage in the morning."

At those words "Miss Fountain," a slight movement passed over the sister's face.

"Laura!" she said feebly.

"Yes, Augustina—I will stay. I won't leave you again."

"Your father did wish it, didn't he?"

The mention of her father so startled Laura that the tears rushed to her eyes, and she dropped her face for a moment on Mrs. Fountain's hand. When she lifted it she was no longer conscious that Helbeck stood behind his sister's chair, looking down upon them both.

"Yes—always, dear. Do you remember what a good nurse he was?—so much better than I?"

Her face shone through the tears that bedewed it. Already the emotion of her drive—the last battles with the wind—had for the moment restored the brilliancy of eye and cheek. Even Augustina's dim sight was held by her, and by the tumbled gold of her hair as it caught the candle-light.

But the name which had given Laura a thrill of joy had roused a disturbed and troubled echo in Mrs. Fountain.

She looked miserably at her brother and asked for her beads. He put them across her hand, and then, bending over her chair, he said a "Hail Mary" and an "Our Father," in which she faintly joined.

"And Alan—will Father Leadham come to-morrow?"

"Without fail."

* * * * *

A little later Laura was in her old room with Sister Rosa. The doctor had paid his visit. But for the

moment the collapse of the afternoon had been arrested; Mrs. Fountain was in no urgent danger.

"Now then," said the nurse cheerily, when Miss Fountain had been supplied with all necessaries for sleep, "let us look at that arm, please."

Laura turned in surprise.

"Mr. Helbeck tells me you wrenched your wrist on the drive. He thought you would perhaps allow me to treat it."

Laura submitted. It was indeed nearly helpless and much swollen, though she had been hardly conscious of it since the little accident happened. The brisk, black-eyed Sister had soon put a comforting bandage round it, chattering all the time of Mrs. Fountain and the ups and downs of the illness.

"She missed you very much after you went yesterday. But now, I suppose, you will stay? It won't be long, poor lady!"

The Sister gave a little professional sigh, and Laura, of course, repeated that she must certainly stay. As the Sister broke off the cotton with which she had been stitching the bandage, she stole a curious glance at her patient. She had not frequented the orphanage in her off-time for nothing; and she was perfectly aware of the anxiety with which the Catholic friends of Bannisdale must needs view the re-entry of Miss Fountain. Sister Rosa, who spoke French readily, wondered whether it had not been after all "réculer pour mieux sauter."

After a first restless sleep of sheer fatigue, Laura found herself sitting up in bed struggling with a sense of horrible desolation. Augustina was dead—Mr. Helbeck was gone, was a Jesuit—and she herself was left alone in the old house, weeping—with no one, not a living soul, to hear. That was the impression; and it was long before she could disentangle truth from nightmare.

When she lay down again, sleep was banished. She lit a candle and waited for the dawn. There in the flickering light were the old tapestries—the princess stepping into her boat, Diana ranging through the wood. Nothing was changed in the room or its furniture. But the Laura who had fretted or dreamed there; who had written her first letter to Molly Friedland from that table; who had dressed for her lover's eye before that rickety glass; who had been angry or sullen, or madly happy there—why, the Laura who now for the second time watched the spring dawn through that diamond-paned window looked back upon her as the figures in Rossetti's strange picture meet the ghosts of their old selves—with the same sense of immeasurable, irrevocable distance. What childish follies and impertinences!—what misunderstanding of others, and misreckoning of the things that most concerned her—what blind drifting—what inevitable shipwreck!

Ah! this aching of the whole being, physical and moral,—again she asked herself, only with a wilder impatience, how long it could be borne.

The wind had fallen, but in the pause of the dawn the river spoke with the hills. The light mounted quickly. Soon the first glint of sun came through the curtains. Laura extinguished her candle, and went to let in the day. As on that first morning, she stood in the window, following with her eye the foaming curves of the Greet, or the last streaks of snow upon the hills, or the daffodil stars in the grass.

Hush!—what time was it? She ran for her watch. Nearly seven.

She wrapped a shawl about her, and went back to her post, straining to see the path on the further side of the river through the mists that still hung about it. Suddenly her head dropped upon her hands. One sob forced its way. Helbeck had passed.

* * * * *

For some three weeks, after this April night, the old house of Bannisdale was the scene of one of those dramas of life and death which depend, not upon external incident, but upon the inner realities of the heart, its inextinguishable affections, hopes, and agonies.

Helbeck and Laura were once more during this time brought into close and intimate contact by the claims of a common humanity. They were united by the common effort to soften the last journey for Augustina, by all the little tendernesses and cares that a sick room imposes, by the pities and charities, the small renascent hopes and fears of each successive day and night.

But all the while, how deeply were they divided!—how sharp was the clash between the reviving strength of passion, which could not but feed itself on the daily sight and contact of the beloved person, and those facts of character and individuality which held them separated!—facts which are always, and

in all cases, the true facts of this world.

In Helbeck the shock of Laura's October flight had worked with profound and transforming power. After those first desperate days in which he had merely sought to recover her, to break down her determination, or to understand if he could the grounds on which she had acted, a new conception of his own life and the meaning of it had taken possession of him. He fell into the profoundest humiliation and self-abasement, denouncing himself as a traitor to his faith, who out of mere self-delusion, and a lawless love of ease, had endangered his own obedience, and neglected the plain task laid upon him. That fear of proselytism, that humble dread of his own influence, which had once determined his whole attitude towards those about him, began now to seem to him mere wretched cowardice and self-will—the caprice of the servant who tries to better his master's instructions.

> But now I cast that finer sense
> And sorer shame aside;
> Such dread of sin was indolence,
> Such aim at heaven was pride.

Again and again he said to himself that if he had struck at once for the Church and for the Faith at the moment when Laura's young heart was first opened to him, when under the earliest influences of her love for him—how could he doubt that she had loved him!—her nature was still plastic, still capable of being won to God, as it were, by a *coup de main*—might not—would not—all have been well? But no!—he must needs believe that God had given her to him for ever, that there was room for all the gradual softening, the imperceptible approaches by which he had hoped to win her. It had seemed to him the process could not be too gentle, too indulgent. And meanwhile the will and mind that might have been captured at a rush had time to harden—the forces of revolt to gather.

What wonder? Oh! blind—infatuate! How could he have hoped to bring her, still untouched, within the circle of his Catholic life, into contact with its secrets and its renunciations, without recoil on her part, without risk of what had actually happened? The strict regulation of every hour, every habit, every thought, at which he aimed as a Catholic—what *could* it seem to her but a dreary and forbidding tyranny?—to her who had no clue to it, who was still left free, though she loved him, to judge his faith coldly from outside? And when at last he had begun to drop hesitation, to change his tone—then, it was too late!

*Tyranny!* She had used that word once or twice, in that first letter which had reached him on the evening of her flight, and in a subsequent one. Not of anything that had been, apparently—but of that which might be. It had wounded him to the very quick.

And yet, in truth, the course of his present thoughts—plainly interpreted—meant little else than this—that if, at the right moment, he had coerced her with success, they might both have been happy.

Later on he had seen his own self-judgment reflected in the faces, the consolations, of his few intimate friends. Father Leadham, for instance—whose letters had been his chief support during a period of dumb agony when he had felt himself more than once on the brink of some morbid trouble of brain.

"I found her adamant," said Father Leadham. "Never was I so powerless with any human soul. She would not discuss anything. She would only say that she was born in freedom—and free she would remain. All that I urged upon her implied beliefs in which she had not been brought up, which were not her father's and were not hers. Nor on closer experience had she been any more drawn to them—quite the contrary; whatever—and there, poor child! her eyes filled with tears—whatever she might feel towards those who held them. She said fiercely that you had never argued with her or persuaded her—or perhaps only once; that you had promised—this with an indignant look at me—that there should be no pressure upon her. And I could but feel sadly, dear friend, that you only, under our Blessed Lord, could have influenced her; and that you, by some deplorable mistake of judgment, had been led to feel that it was wrong to do so. And if ever, I will even venture to say, violence—spiritual violence, the violence that taketh by storm—could have been justified, it would have been in this case. Her affections were all yours; she was, but for you and her stepmother, alone in the world; and amid all her charms and gifts, a soul more starved and destitute I never met with. May our Lord and His Immaculate Mother strengthen you to bear your sorrow! For your friends, there are and must be consolations in this catastrophe. The cross that such a marriage would have laid upon you must have been heavy indeed."

Harassed by such thoughts and memories Helbeck passed through these strange, these miserable days—when he and Laura were once more under the same roof, living the same household life. Like Laura, he clung to every hour; like Laura, he found it almost more than he could bear. He suffered now with a fierceness, a moroseness, unknown to him of old. Every permitted mortification that could torment the body or humble the mind he brought into play during these weeks, and still could not

prevent himself from feeling every sound of Laura's voice and every rustle of her dress as a rough touch upon a sore.

What was in her mind all the time—behind those clear indomitable eyes? He dared not let himself think of the signs of grief that were written so plainly on her delicate face and frame. One day he found himself looking at her from a distance in a passionate bewilderment. So white—so sad! For what? What was this freedom, this atrocious freedom—that a creature so fragile, so unfit to wield it, had yet claimed so fatally? His thoughts fell back to Stephen Fountain, cursing an influence at once so intangible and so strong.

* * * * *

It was some relief that they were in no risk of *tête-à-tête* outside Augustina's sick room. One or other of the nurses was always present at meals. And on the day after Laura's arrival Father Leadham appeared and stayed for ten days.

The relations of the Jesuit towards Miss Fountain during this time were curious. It was plain to Helbeck that Father Leadham treated the girl with a new respect, and that she on her side showed herself much more at ease with him than she had used to be. It was as though they had tested each other, with the result that each had found in the other something nobler and sincerer than they had expected to find. Laura might be spiritually destitute; but it was evident that since his conversation with her, Father Leadham had realised for the first time the "charms and gifts" which might be supposed to have captured Mr. Helbeck.

So that when they met at meals, or in the invalid's room, the Jesuit showed Miss Fountain a very courteous attention. He was fresh from Cambridge; he brought her gossip of her friends and acquaintances; he said pleasant things of the Friedlands. She talked in return with an ease that astonished Helbeck and his sister. She seemed to both to have grown years older.

It was the same with all the other Catholic haunters of the house. For the first time she discovered how to get on with the Reverend Mother, even with Sister Angela—how not to find Father Bowles himself too wearisome. She moved among them with a dignity, perhaps an indifference, that changed her wholly.

Once, when she had been chatting in the friendliest way with the Reverend Mother, she paused for a moment in the passage outside Augustina's room, amazed at herself.

It was liberty, no doubt—this strange and desolate liberty in which she stood, that made the contrast. By some obscure association she fell on the words that Helbeck had once quoted to her—how differently! "My soul is escaped like a bird out of the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken, and we are delivered."

"Ah! but the bird's wings are broken and its breast pierced. What can it do with its poor freedom?" she said to herself, in a passion of tears.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, she realised the force of the saying that Catholicism is the faith to die in.

The concentration of all these Catholic minds upon the dying of Augustina, the busy fraternal help evoked by every stage of her *via dolorosa*, was indeed marvellous to see. "It is a work of art," Laura thought, with that new power of observation which had developed in her. "It is—it must be—the most wonderful thing of its sort in the world!"

For it was no mere haphazard series of feelings or kindnesses. It was an act—a function—this "good death" on which the sufferer and those who assisted her were equally bent. Something had to be done, a process to be gone through; and everyone was anxiously bent upon doing it in the right, the prescribed, way—upon omitting nothing. The physical fact, indeed, became comparatively unimportant, except as the evoking cause of certain symbolisms—nay, certain actual and direct contacts between earth and heaven, which were the distraction of death itself—which took precedence of it, and reduced it to insignificance.

When Father Leadham left, Father Bowles came to stay in the house, and Communion was given to Mrs. Fountain every day. Two or three times a week, also, Mass was said in her room. Laura assisted once or twice at these scenes—the blaze of lights and flowers in the old panelled room—the altar adorned with splendid fittings brought from the chapel below—the small, blanched face in the depths of the great tapestried bed—the priest bending over it.

On one of these occasions, in the early morning, when the candles on the altar were almost effaced by the first brilliance of a May day, Laura stole away from the darkened room where Mrs. Fountain lay soothed and sleeping, and stood for long at an open window overlooking the wild valley outside.

She was stifled by the scent of flowers and burning wax; still more, mentally oppressed. The leaping river, the wide circuit of the fells, the blowing of the May wind!—to them, in a great reaction, the girl gave back her soul, passionately resting in them. They were no longer a joy and intoxication. But the veil lifted between her and them. They became a sanctuary and refuge.

From the Martha of the old faith, so careful and troubled about many things—sins and penances, creeds and sacraments, the miraculous hauntings of words and objects, of water and wafer, of fragments of bone and stuff, of scapulars and medals, of crucifixes and indulgences—her mind turned to this Mary of a tameless and patient nature, listening and loving in the sunlight.

Only, indeed, to destroy her own fancy as soon as woven! Nature was pain and combat, too, no less than Faith. But here, at least, was no jealous lesson to be learnt; no exclusions, no conditions. Her rivers were deep and clear for all; her "generous sun" was lit for all. What she promised she gave. Without any preliminary *credo*, her colours glowed, her breezes blew for the unhappy. Oh! such a purple shadow on the fells—such a red glory of the oak twigs in front of it—such a white sparkle of the Greet, parting the valley!

What need of any other sacrament or sign than these—this beauty and bounty of the continuing world? Indeed, Friedland had once said to her, "The joy that Catholics feel in the sacrament, the plain believer in God will get day by day out of the simplest things—out of a gleam on the hills—a purple in the distance—a light on the river; still more out of any tender or heroic action."

She thought very wistfully of her old friend and his talk; but here also with a strange sense of distance, of independence. How the river dashed and raced! There had been wild nights of rain amid this May beauty, and the stream was high. Day by day, of late, she had made it her comrade. Whenever she left Augustina it was always to wander beside it, or to sit above it, cradled and lost in that full triumphant song it went uttering to the spring.

* * * * *

But there was a third person in the play, by no means so passive an actor as Laura was wont to imagine her.

There is often a marvellous education in such a tedious parting with the world as Augustina was enduring. If the physical conditions allow it, the soul of the feeblest will acquire a new dignity, and perceptions more to the point. As she lay looking at the persons who surrounded her, Augustina passed without an effort, and yet wonderfully, as it seemed to her, into a new stage of thought and desire about them. A fresh, an eager ambition sprang up in her, partly of the woman, partly of the believer. She had been blind; now she saw. She felt the power of her weakness, and she would seize it.

Meanwhile, she made a rally which astonished all the doctors. Towards the end of the second week in May she had recovered strength so far that on several occasions she was carried down the chapel passage to the garden, and placed in a sheltered corner of the beech hedge, where she could see the bright turf of the bowling-green and the distant trees of the "Wilderness."

One afternoon Helbeck came out to sit with her. He was no sooner there than she became so restless that he asked her if he should recall Sister Rosa, who had retired to a distant patch of shade.

"No—no! Alan, I want to say something. Will you raise my pillow a little?"

He did so, and she looked at him for a moment with her haunting blue eyes, without speaking. But at last she said:

"Where is Laura?"

"Indoors, I believe."

"Don't call her. I have been talking to her, Alan, about—about what she means to do."

"Did she tell you her plans?"

He spoke very calmly, holding his sister's hand.

"She doesn't seem to have any. The Friedlands have offered her a home, of course. Alan!—will you put your ear down to me?"

He stooped, and she whispered brokenly, holding him several times when he would have drawn back.

But at last he released himself. A flush had stolen over his fine and sharpened features.

"My dear sister, if it were so—what difference can it make?"

He spoke with a quick interrogation. But his glance had an intensity, it expressed a determination, which made her cry out—

"Alan—if she gave way?"

"She will *never* give way. She has more self-control; but her mind is in precisely the same bitter and envenomed state. Indeed, she has grown more fixed, more convinced. The influence of her Cambridge friends has been decisive. Every day I feel for what she has to bear and put up with—poor child!—in this house."

"It can't be for long," said Augustina with tears; and she lay for a while, pondering, and gathering force. But presently she made her brother stoop to her again.

"Alan—please listen to me! If Laura *did* become a Catholic—is there anything in the way—anything you can't undo?"

He raised himself quickly. He would have suffered these questions from no one else. The stern and irritable temper that he inherited from his father had gained fast upon the old self-control since the events of October. Even now, with Augustina, he was short.

"I shall take no vows, dear, before the time. But it would please me—it would console me—if you would put all these things out of your head. I see the will of God very plainly. Let us submit to it."

"It hurts me so—to see you suffer!" she said, looking at him piteously.

He bent over the grass, struggling for composure.

"I shall have something else to do before long," he said in a low voice, "than to consider my own happiness."

She was framing another question, when there was a sound of footsteps on the gravel behind them.

Augustina exclaimed, with the agitation of weakness, "Don't let any visitors come!" Helbeck looked a moment in astonishment, then his face cleared.

"Augustina!—it is the relic—from the Carmelite nuns. I recognise their Confessor."

Augustina clasped her hands; and Sister Rosa, obeying Helbeck's signal, came quickly over to her. Mr. Helbeck bared his head and walked over the grass to meet the strange priest, who was carrying a small leather box.

Soon there was a happy group round Augustina's couch. The Confessor who had brought this precious relic of St. John of the Cross had opened the case, and placed the small and delicate reliquary that it contained in Mrs. Fountain's hands. She lay clasping it to her breast, too weak to speak, but flushed with joy. The priest, a southern-eyed kindly man, with an astonishing flow of soft pietistic talk, sat beside her, speaking soothingly of the many marvels of cure or conversion that had been wrought by the treasure she held. He was going on to hold a retreat at a convent of the order near Froswick, and would return, he said, by Bannisdale in a week's time, to reclaim his charge. The nuns, he repeated with gentle emphasis, had never done such an honour to any sick person before. But for Mr. Helbeck's sister nothing was too much. And a novena had already been started at the convent. The nuns were praying—praying hard that the relic might do its holy work.

He was still talking when there was a step and a sound of low singing behind the beech hedge. The garden was so divided by gigantic hedges of the eighteenth century, which formed a kind of Greek cross in its centre, that many different actions or conversations might be taking place in it without knowing anything one of the other. Laura, who had been away for an hour, was not aware that Augustina was in the garden till she came through a little tunnel in the hedge, and saw the group.

The priest looked up, startled by the appearance of the young lady. Laura had marked the outburst of warm weather by the donning of a white dress and her summer hat. In one hand she held a bunch of lilac that she had been gathering for her stepmother; in the other a volume of a French life of St. Theresa that she had taken an hour before from Augustina's table. In anticipation of the great favor promised her by the Carmelite nuns, Augustina had been listening feebly from time to time to her

brother's reading from the biography of the greatest of Carmelite saints and founders.

"Laura!" said Mrs. Fountain faintly.

Helbeck's expression changed. He bent over his sister, and said in a low decided voice, "Will you give me the relic, dear? I will return it to its case."

"Oh, no, Alan," she said imploringly. "Laura, do you know what those kind dear nuns have done? They have sent me their relic. And I feel so much better already—so relieved!" Mrs. Fountain raised the little case and kissed it fervently. Then she held it out for Laura to see.

The girl bent over it in silence.

"What is it?" she said.

"It is a relic of St. John of the Cross," said the priest opposite, glancing curiously at Miss Fountain, "It once belonged to the treasury of the Cathedral of Seville, and was stolen during the great war. But it has been now formally conveyed to our community by the Archbishop and Chapter."

"Wasn't it kind of the dear nuns, Laura?" said Augustina fervently.

"I—I suppose so," said Laura, in a low embarrassed voice. Helbeck, who was watching her, saw that she could hardly restrain the shudder of repulsion that ran through her.

Her extraordinary answer threw a silence on the party. The tears started to the sick woman's eyes. The priest rose to take his leave. Mrs. Fountain asked him for an absolution and a blessing. He gave them, coldly bowed to Laura, shook hands with Sister Rosa, and took his departure, Helbeck conducting him.

"Oh, Laura!" said Mrs. Fountain reproachfully. The girl's lips were quite white. She knelt down by her stepmother and kissed her hand.

"Dear, I wouldn't have hurt you for the world! It was something I had been reading—it—it seemed to me horrible!—just for a moment. Of course I'm glad it comforts you, poor darling!—of course—of course, I am!"

Mrs. Fountain was instantly appeased—for herself.

"But Alan felt it so," she said restlessly, as she closed her eyes—"what you said. I saw his face."

It was time for the invalid to be moved, and Sister Rosa had gone for help. Laura was left for a moment kneeling by her stepmother. No one could see her; the penitence and pain in the girl's feeling showed in her pallor, her pitiful dropping lip.

Helbeck was heard returning. Laura looked up. Instinctively she rose and proudly drew herself together. Never yet had she seen that face so changed. It breathed the sternest, most concentrated anger—a storm of feeling that, in spite of the absolute silence that held it in curb, yet so communicated itself to her that her heart seemed to fail in her breast.

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A few minutes later Miss Fountain, having gathered together a few scattered possessions of the invalid, was passing through the chapel passage. A step approached from the hall, and Helbeck confronted her.

"Miss Fountain—may I ask you a kindness?"

What a tone of steel! Her shoulders straightened—her look met his in a common flash.

"Augustina is weak. Spare her discussion—the sort of discussion with which, no doubt, your Cambridge life makes you familiar. It can do nothing here, and "—he paused, only to resume unflinchingly—"the dying should not be disturbed."

Laura wavered in the dark passage like one mortally struck. His pose as the protector of his sister—the utter distance and alienation of his tone—unjust!—incredible!

"I discussed nothing," she said, breathing fast.

"You might be drawn to do so," he said coldly. "Your contempt for the practices that sustain and console Catholics is so strong that no one can mistake the difficulty you have in concealing it. But I would ask you to conceal it for her sake."

"I thank you," she said quietly, as she swept past him. "But you *are* mistaken."

She walked away from him and mounted the stairs without another word.

* * * * *

Laura sat crouched and rigid in her own room. How had it happened, this horrible thing?—this break-down of the last vestiges and relics of the old relation—this rushing in of a temper and a hostility that stunned her!

She looked at the book on her knee. Then she remembered. In the "Wilderness" she had been reading that hideous account which appears in all the longer biographies, of the mutilation of St. Theresa's body three years after her death by some relic-hunting friars from Avila. In a ruthless haste, these pious thieves had lifted the poor embalmed corpse from its resting-place at Alba; they had cut the old woman's arm from the shoulder; they had left it behind in the rifled coffin, and then hastily huddling up the body, they had fled southwards with their booty, while the poor nuns, who had loved and buried their dead "mother," who had been shut by a trick into their own choir while the awful thing was done, were still singing the office, ignorant and happy.

The girl had read the story with sickening. Then Augustina had held up to her the relic case, with that shrivelled horror inside it. A finger, was it? or a portion of one. Perhaps torn from some poor helpless one in the same way. And to such aids and helps must a human heart come in dying!

She had not been quick enough to master herself. Oh! that was wrong—very wrong. But had it deserved a stroke so cruel—so unjust?

Oh! miserable, miserable religion! Her wild nature rose against it—accused—denounced it.

That night Augustina was marvellously well. She lay with the relic case beside her in a constant happiness.

"Oh, Laura! Laura, dear!—even you must see what it has done for me!"

So she whispered, when Sister Rosa had withdrawn into the next room and she and Laura were left together.

"I am so glad," said the girl gently, "so very glad."

"You are so dreadfully pale, Laura!"

Laura said nothing. She raised the poor hand she held, and laid it softly against her cheek. Augustina looked at her wistfully. Gradually her resolution rose.

"Laura, I must say it—God tells me to say it!"

"What! dear Augustina?"

"Laura—you could save Alan!—you could alter his whole life. And you are breaking his heart!"

Laura stared at her, letting the hand slowly drop upon the bed. What was happening in this strange, strange world?

"Laura, come here!—I can't bear it. He suffers so! You don't see it, but I do. He has the look of my father when my mother died. I know that he will go to the Jesuits. They will quiet him, and pray for him—and prayer saves you. But you, Laura—*you* might save him another way—oh! I must call it a happier way." She looked up piteously to the crucifix that hung on the wall opposite. "You thought me unkind when you were engaged—I know you did. I didn't know what to think—I was so upset by it all. But, oh! how I have prayed since I came back that he might marry, and have children,—and a little happiness. He is not forty yet—and he has had a hard life. How he will be missed here, too! Who can ever take his place? Why, he has made it all! And he loves his work. Of course I see that—now—he thinks it a sin—what happened last year—your engagement. But all the same, he can't tear his heart away from you. I can't understand it. It seems to me almost terrible—to love as he loves you."

"Dear Augustina, don't—don't say such things." The girl fell on her knees beside her stepmother. Her pride was broken; her face convulsed. "Why, you don't know, dear! He has lost all love for me. He says hard things to me even. He judges me like—like a stranger." She looked at Augustina imploringly through her tears.

"Did he scold you just now about the relic? But it was *because* it was you. Nobody else could have made him angry about such a thing. Why, he would have just laughed and pitied them!—you know he

would. But you—oh, Laura, you torture him!"

Laura hid her face, shaking with the sobs she tried to control. Her heart melted within her. She thought of that marked book upon his table.

"And Laura," said the sighing thread of a voice, "how *can* you be wiser than all the Church?—all these generations? Just think, dear!—you against the Saints and the Fathers, and the holy martyrs and confessors, from our Lord's time till now! Oh! your poor father. I know. But he never came near the faith, Laura—how could he judge? It was not offered to him. That was my wicked fault. If I had been faithful I might have gained my husband. But Laura"—the voice grew so eager and sharp—"we judge no one. We must believe for ourselves the Church is the only way. But God is so merciful! But you—it *is* offered to you, Laura. And Alan's love with it. Just so little on your part—the Church is so tender, so indulgent! She does not expect a perfect faith all at once. One must just make the step blindly—*obey*—throw oneself into her arms. Father Leadham said so to me one day—-not minding what one thinks and believes—not looking at oneself—just obeying—and it will all come!"

But Laura could not speak. Little Augustina, full of a pleading, an apostolic strength, looked at her tenderly.

"He hardly sleeps, Laura. As I lie awake, I hear him moving about at all hours. I said to Father Leadham the other day—'his heart is broken. When you take him, he will be able to do what you tell him, perhaps. But—for this world—it will be like a dead man.' And Father Leadham did not deny it. He *knows* it is true."

And thus, so long as her poor strength lasted, Augustina lay and whispered—reporting all the piteous history of those winter months—things that Laura had never heard and never dreamed—a tale of grief so profound and touching that, by the time it ended, every landmark was uprooted in the girl's soul, and she was drifting on a vast tide of pity and passion, whither she knew not.

## CHAPTER IV

The next day there was no outing for Augustina. The south-west wind was again let loose upon the valley and the moss, with violent rain from the sea. In the grass the daffodils lay all faded and brown. But the bluebells were marching fast over the copses—as though they sprang in the traces of the rain.

Laura sat working beside Augustina, or reading to her, from morning till dark. Mr. Helbeck had gone into Whinthorpe as usual before breakfast, and was not expected home till the evening. Mrs. Fountain was perhaps more restless and oppressed than she had been the day before. But she would hardly admit it. She lay with the relic beside her, and took the most hopeful view possible of all her symptoms.

Miss Fountain herself that day was in singular beauty. The dark circles round her eyes did but increase their brilliance; the hot fire in Augustina's rooms made her cheeks glow; and the bright blue cotton of her dress had been specially chosen by Molly Friedland to set off the gold of her hair.

She was gay too, to Augustina's astonishment. She told stories of Daffady and the farm; she gossiped with Sister Rosa; she alternately teased and coaxed Fricka. Sister Rosa had been a little cool to her at first after the affair of the relic. But Miss Fountain was so charming this afternoon, so sweet to her stepmother, so amiable to other people, that the little nurse could not resist her.

And at regular intervals she would walk to the window, and report to
Augustina the steady rising of the river.

"It has flooded all that flat bank opposite the first seat—and of that cattle-rail, that bar—what do you call it?—just at the bend—you can only see the very top line. And such a current under the otter cliff! It's splendid, Augustina!—it's magnificent!"

And she would turn her flushed face to her stepmother in a kind of triumph.

"It will wash away the wooden bridge if it goes on," said Augustina plaintively, "and destroy all the flowers."

But Laura seemed to exult in it. If it had not been for the curb of Mrs. Fountain's weakness she could not have kept still at all as the evening drew on, and the roar of the water became continuously audible

even in this high room. And yet every now and then it might perhaps have been thought that she was troubled or annoyed by the sound—that it prevented her from hearing something else.

Mrs. Fountain did not know how to read her. Once, when they were alone, she tried to reopen the subject of the night before. But Laura would not even allow it to be approached. To-day she had the lightest, softest ways of resistance. But they were enough.

Mrs. Fountain could only sigh and yield.

Towards seven o'clock she began to fidget about her brother. "He certainly meant to be home for dinner," she said several times, with increasing peevishness.

"I am going to have dinner here!" said Laura, smiling.

"Why?" said Augustina, astonished.

"Oh! let me, dear. Mr. Helbeck is sure to be late. And Sister Rosa will look after him. Teaching Fricka has made me as hungry as that!"—and she opened her hands wide, as a child measures.

Augustina looked at her sadly, but said nothing. She remembered that the night before, too, Laura, would not go downstairs.

The little meal went gayly. Just as it was over, and while Laura was still chattering to her stepmother as she had not chattered for months, a step was heard in the passage.

"Ah! there is Alan!" cried Mrs. Fountain.

The Squire came in tired and mud-stained. Even his hair shone with rain, and his clothes were wet through.

"I must not come too near you," he said, standing beside the door.

Mrs. Fountain bade him dress, get some dinner, and come back to her. As she spoke, she saw him peering through the shadows of the room. She too looked round. Laura was gone.

"At the first sound of his step!" thought Augustina. And she wept a little, but so secretly that even Sister Rosa did not discover it. Her ambition—her poor ambition—was for herself alone. What chance had it?—alas! Never since Stephen's death surely had Augustina seen Laura shed such tears as she had shed the night before. But no words, no promises—nothing! And where, now, was any sign of it?

She drew out her beads for comfort. And so, sighing and praying, she fell asleep.

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After supper Helbeck was in the hall smoking. He was half abashed that he should find so much comfort in his pipe, and that he should dread so much the prospect of giving it up.

His thoughts, however, were black enough—black as the windy darkness outside.

A step on the stairs—at which his breath leapt. Miss Fountain, in her white evening dress, was descending.

"May I speak to you, Mr. Helbeck?"

He flung down his pipe and approached her. She stood a little above him on one of the lower steps; and instantly he felt that she came in gentleness.

An agitation he could barely control took possession of him. All day long he had been scourging himself for the incident of the night before. They had not met since. He looked at her now humbly—with a deep sadness—and waited for what she had to say.

"Shall we go into the drawing-room? Is there a light?"

"We will take one."

He lifted a lamp, and she led the way. Without another word, she opened the door into the deserted room. Nobody had entered it since the orphanage function, when some extra service had been hastily brought in to make the house habitable. The mass of the furniture was gathered into the centre of the carpet, with a few tattered sheets flung across it. The gap made by the lost Romney spoke from the wall, and the windows stood uncurtained to the night.

Laura, however, found a chair and sank into it. He put down the lamp, and stood expectant.

They were almost in their old positions. How to find strength and voice!
That room breathed memories.

When she did speak, however, her intonation was peculiarly firm and clear.

"You gave me a rebuke last night, Mr. Helbeck—and I deserved it!"

He made a sudden movement—a movement which seemed to trouble her.

"No!—don't!"—she raised her hand involuntarily—"don't please say anything to make it easier for me. I gave you great pain. You were right—oh! quite right—to express it. But you know——"

She broke off suddenly.

"You know, I can't talk—if you stand there like that! Won't you come here, and sit down"—she pointed to a chair near her—"as if we were friends still? We can be friends, can't we? We ought to be for Augustina's sake. And I very much want to discuss with you—seriously—what I have to say."

He obeyed her. He came to sit beside her, recovering his composure—bending forward that he might give her his best attention.

She paused a moment—knitting her brows.

"I thought afterwards, a long time, of what had happened. I talked, too, to Augustina. She was much distressed—she appealed to me. And I saw a great deal of force in what she said. She pointed out that it was absurd for me to judge before I knew; that I never—never—had been willing to know; that everything—even the Catholic Church"—she smiled faintly—"takes some learning. She pleaded with me—and what she said touched me very much. I do not know how long I may have to stay in your house—and with her. I would not willingly cause you pain. I would gladly *understand*, at least, more than I do—I should like to learn—to be instructed. Would—would Father Leadham, do you think, take the trouble to correspond with me—to point me out the books, for instance, that I might read?"

Helbeck's black eyes fastened themselves upon her.

"You—you would like to correspond with Father Leadham?" he repeated, in stupefaction.

She nodded. Involuntarily she began a little angry beating with her foot that he knew well. It was always the protest of her pride, when she could not prevent the tears from showing themselves.

He controlled himself. He turned his chair so as to come within an easy talking distance.

"Will you pardon me," he said quietly, "if I ask for more information?
Did you only determine on this last night?"

"I think so."

He hesitated.

"It is a serious step, Miss Fountain! You should not take it only from pity for Augustina—only from a wish to give her comfort in dying!"

She turned away her face a little. That penetrating look pierced too deeply. "Are there not many motives?" she said, rather hoarsely—"many ways? I want to give Augustina a happiness—and—and to satisfy many questions of my own. Father Leadham is bound to teach, is he not, as a priest? He could lose nothing by it."

"Certainly he is bound," said Helbeck.

He dropped his head, and stared at the carpet, thinking.

"He would recommend you some books, of course."

The same remembrance flew through both. Absently and involuntarily, Helbeck shook his head, with a sad lifting of the eyebrows. The colour rushed into Laura's cheeks.

"It must be something very simple," she said hurriedly. "Not 'Lives of the Saints,' I think, and not 'Catechisms' or 'Outlines.' Just a building up from the beginning by somebody—who found it hard, *very* hard, to believe—and yet did believe. But Father Leadham will know—of course he would know."

Helbeck was silent. It suddenly appeared to him the strangest, the most incredible conversation. He felt the rise of a mad emotion—the beating in his breast choked him.

Laura rose, and he heard her say in low and wavering tones:

"Then I will write to him to-morrow—if you think I may."

He sprang to his feet, and as she passed him the fountains of his being broke up. With a wild gesture he caught her in his arms.

"Laura!"

It was not the cry of his first love for her. It was a cry under which she shuddered. But she submitted at once. Nay, with a womanly tenderness—how unlike that old shrinking Laura—she threw her arm round his neck, she buried her little head in his breast.

"Oh, how long you were in understanding!" she said with a deep sigh. "How long!"

"Laura!—what does it mean?—my head turns!"

"It means—it means—that you shall never—never again speak to me as you did yesterday; that either you must love me or—well, I must just die!" she gave a little sharp sobbing laugh. "I have tried other things—and they can't—they can't be borne. And if you can't love me unless I am a Catholic—now, I know you wouldn't—I must just *be* a Catholic—if any power in the world can make me one. Why, Father Leadham can persuade me—he must!" She drew away from him, holding him, almost fiercely, by her two small hands. "I am nothing but an ignorant, foolish girl. And he has persuaded so many wise people—you have often told me. Oh, he must—he must persuade me!"

She hid herself again on his breast. Then she looked up, feeling the tears on his cheek.

"But you'll be very, very patient with me—won't you? Oh! I'm so dead to all those things! But if I say whatever you want me to say—if I do what is required of me—you won't ask me too many questions—you won't press me too hard? You'll trust to my being yours—to my growing into your heart? Oh! how did I ever bear the agony of tearing myself away!"

It was an ecstasy—a triumph. But it seemed to him afterwards in looking back upon it, that all through it was also an anguish! The revelation of the woman's nature, of all that had lived and burned in it since he last held her in his arms, brought with it for both of them such sharp pains of expansion, such an agony of experience and growth.

* * * * *

Very soon, however, she grew calmer. She tried to tell him what had happened to her since that black October day. But conversation was not altogether easy. She had to rush over many an hour and many a thought—dreading to remember. And again and again he could not rid himself of the image of the old Laura, or could not fathom the new. It was like stepping from the firmer ground of the moss on to the softer patches where foot and head lost themselves. He could see her as she had been, or as he had believed her to be, up to twenty-four hours before—the little enemy and alien in the house; or as she had lived beside him those four months—troubled, petulant, exacting. But this radiant, tender Laura—with this touch of feverish extravagance in her love and her humiliation—she bewildered him; or rather she roused a new response; he must learn new ways of loving her.

Once, as he was holding her hand, she looked at him timidly.

"You would have left Bannisdale, wouldn't you?"

He quickly replied that he had been in correspondence with his old Jesuit friends. But he would not dwell upon it. There was a kind of shame in the subject, that he would not have had her penetrate. A devout Catholic does not dwell for months on the prospects and secrets of the religious life to put them easily and in a moment out of his hand—even at the call of the purest and most legitimate passion. From the Counsels, the soul returns to the Precepts. The higher, supremer test is denied it. There is humbling in that—a bitter taste, not to be escaped.

Perhaps she did penetrate it. She asked him hurriedly if he regretted anything. She could so easily go away again—for ever. "I could do it—I could do it now!" she said firmly. "Since you kissed me. You could always be my friend."

He smiled, and raised her hands to his lips. "Where thou livest, dear, I will live, and where——"

She withdrew a hand, and quickly laid it on his mouth.

"No—not to-night! We have been so full of death all these weeks! Oh! how I want to tell Augustina!"

But she did not move. She could not tear herself from this comfortless room—this strange circle of melancholy light in which they sat—this beating of the rain in their ears as it dashed against the old and fragile casements.

"Oh! my dear," he said suddenly as he watched her, "I have grown so old and cross. And so poor! It has taken far more than the picture"—he pointed to the vacant space—"to carry me through this six months. My schemes have been growing—what motive had I for holding my hand? My friends have often remonstrated—the Jesuits especially. But at last I have had my way. I have far—far less to offer you than I had before."

He looked at her in a sad apology.

"I have a little money," she said shyly. "I don't believe you ever knew it before."

"Have you?" he said in astonishment.

"Just a tiny bit. I shall pay my way"—and she laughed happily. "Alan!—have you noticed—how well I have been getting on with the Sisters?—what friends Father Leadham and I made? But no!—you didn't notice anything. You saw me all *en noir—all*" she repeated with a mournful change of voice.

Then her eyelids fell, and she shivered.

"Oh! how you hurt—how you *hurt*!—last night."

He passionately soothed her, denouncing himself, asking her pardon. She gave a long sigh. She had a strange sense of having climbed a long stair out of an abyss of misery. Now she was just at the top—just within light and welcome. But the dark was so close behind—one touch! and she was thrust down to it again.

"I have only hated two people this last six months," she said at last, *à propos*, apparently, of nothing. "Your cousin, who was to have Bannisdale—and—and—Mr. Williams. I saw him at Cambridge."

There was a pause; then Helbeck said, with an agitation that she felt beneath her cheek as her little head rested on his shoulder:

"You saw Edward Williams? How did he dare to present himself to you?"

He gently withdrew himself from her, and went to stand before the hearth, drawn up to his full stern height. His dark head and striking pale features were fitly seen against the background of the old wall. As he stood there he was the embodiment of his race, of its history, its fanaticisms, its "great refusals" at once of all mean joys and all new freedoms. To a few chosen notes in the universe, tender response and exquisite vibration—to all others, deaf, hard, insensitive, as the stone of his old house.

Laura looked at him with a mingled adoration and terror. Then she hastily explained how and where she had met Williams.

"And you felt no sympathy for him?" said Helbeck, wondering.

She flushed.

"I knew what it must have been to you. And—and—he showed no sense of it."

Her tone was so simple, so poignant, that Helbeck smiled only that he might not weep. Hurriedly coming to her he kissed her soft hair.

"There were temptations of his youth," he said with difficulty, "from which the Faith rescued him. Now these same temptations have torn him from the faith. It has been all known to me from first to last. I see no hope. Let us never speak of him again."

"No," she said trembling.

He drew a long breath. Suddenly he knelt beside her.

"And you!" he said in a low voice—"you! What love—what sweetness—shall be enough for you! Oh! my Laura, when I think of what you have done to-night—of all that it means, all that it promises—I humble myself before you. I envy and bless you. Yours has been no light struggle—no small sacrifice. I can only marvel at it. Dear, the Church will draw you so softly—teach you so tenderly! You have never

known a mother. Our Lady will be your Mother. You have had few friends—they will be given to you in all times and countries—and this will you are surrendering will come back to you strengthened a thousand-fold for my support—and your own."

He looked at her with emotion. Oh! how pale she had grown under these words of benediction. There was a moment's silence—then she rose feebly.

"Now—let me go! To-morrow—will you tell Augustina? Or to-night, if she were awake, and strong enough? How can one be sure—?"

"Let us come and see."

He took her hand, and they moved a few steps across the room, when they were startled by the thunder of the storm upon the windows. They stopped involuntarily. Laura's face lit up.

"How the river roars! I love it so. Yesterday I was on the top of the otter cliff when it was coming down in a torrent! To-morrow it will be superb."

"I wish you wouldn't go there till I have had some fencing done," said Helbeck with decision. "The rain has loosened the moss and made it all slippery and unsafe. I saw some people gathering primroses there to-day, and I told Murphy to warn them off. We must put a railing——"

Laura turned her face to the hall.

"What was that?" she said, catching his arm.

A sudden cry—loud and piercing—from the stairs.

"Mr. Helbeck—Miss Fountain!"

They rushed into the hall. Sister Rosa ran towards them.

"Oh! Mr. Helbeck—come at once—Mrs. Fountain——"

* * * * *

Augustina still sat propped in her large chair by the fire.

But a nurse looked up with a scared face as they entered.

"Oh come—*come*—Mr. Helbeck! She is just going."

Laura threw herself on her knees beside her stepmother. Helbeck gave one look at his sister, then also kneeling he took her cold and helpless hand, and said in a steady voice—

"Receive thy servant, O Lord, into the place of salvation, which she hopes from Thy mercy."

The two nurses, sobbing, said the "Amen."

"Deliver, O Lord, the soul of Thy servant from all the perils of hell, from pains and all tribulations."

"Amen."

Mrs. Fountain's head fell gently back upon the cushions. The eyes withdrew themselves in the manner that only death knows, the lids dropped partially.

"Augustina—dear Augustina—give me one look!" cried Laura in despair. She wrapped her arms round her stepmother and laid her head on the poor wasted bosom.

But Helbeck possessed himself of one of the girl's hands, and with his own right he made the sign of the Cross upon his sister's brow.

"Depart, O Christian soul, from this world, in the name of God the Father Almighty, who created thee; in the name of Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, who suffered for thee; in the name of the Holy Ghost, who has been poured out upon thee; in the name of the angels and archangels; in the name of the thrones and dominations; in the name of the principalities and powers; in the name of the cherubim and seraphim; in the name of the patriarchs and prophets; in the name of the holy apostles and evangelists; in the name of the holy martyrs and confessors; in the name of the holy monks and hermits; in the name of the holy virgins, and of all the saints of God; let thy place be this day in peace, and thy abode in the Holy Sion; through Christ our Lord. Amen."

There was silence, broken only by Laura's sobs and the nurses' weeping. Helbeck alone was quite composed. He gazed at his sister, not with grief—rather with a deep, mysterious joy. When he rose, still looking down upon Augustina, he questioned the nurses in low tones.

There had been hardly any warning. Suddenly a stifled cry—a gurgling in the throat—a spasm. Sister Rosa thought she had distinguished the words "Jesus!—" "Alan—" but there had been no time for any message, any farewell. The doctors had once warned the brother that it was possible, though not likely, that the illness would end in this way.

"Father Bowles gave her Communion this morning?" said Helbeck, with a grave exactness, like one informing himself of all necessary things.

"This morning and yesterday," said Sister Rosa eagerly; "and dear Mrs.
Fountain confessed on Saturday."

Laura rose from her knees and wrung her hands.

"Oh! I can't bear it!" she said to Helbeck. "If I had been there—if we could just have told her! Oh, how strange—how *strange* it is!"

And she looked wildly about her, seized by an emotion, a misery, that Helbeck could not altogether understand. He tried to soothe her, regardless of the presence of the nurses. Laura, too, did not think of them. But when he put his arm round her, she withdrew herself in a restlessness that would not be controlled.

"How strange—*how strange*!" she repeated, as she looked down on the little blanched and stiffening face.

Helbeck stooped and kissed the brow of the dead woman.

"If I had only loved her better!" he said with emotion.

Laura stared at him. His words brought back to her a rush of memories—Augustina's old fear of him —those twelve years in which no member of the Fountain household had ever seen Mrs. Fountain's brother. So long as Augustina had been Stephen Fountain's wife, she had been no less dead for Helbeck, her only brother, than she was now.

The girl shuddered. She looked pitifully at the others.

"Please—please—leave me alone with her a little! She was my father's wife—my dear father's wife!"

And again she sank on her knees, hiding her face against the dead. The nurses hesitated, but Helbeck thought it best to let her have her way.

"We will go for half an hour," he said, stooping to her. Then, in a whisper that only she could hear —"My Laura—you are mine now—let me soon come back and comfort you!"

When they returned they found Laura sitting on a stool beside her stepmother. One hand grasped that of Augustina, while the other dropped listlessly in front of her. Her brow under its weight of curly hair hung forward. The rest of the little face almost disappeared behind the fixed and sombre intensity of the eyes.

She took no notice when they came in, and it was Helbeck alone who could rouse her. He persuaded her to go, on a promise that the nurses would soon recall her.

When all was ready she returned. Augustina was lying in a white pomp of candles and flowers; the picture of the Virgin, the statue of St. Joseph, her little praying table, were all garlanded with light; every trace of the long physical struggle had been removed; the great bed, with its meek, sleeping form and its white draperies, rose solitary amid its lights—an altar of death in the void of the great panelled room.

Laura stood opposite to Helbeck, her hands clasped, as white and motionless from head to foot as Augustina herself. Once amid the prayers and litanies he was reciting with the Sisters, he lifted his head and found that she was looking at him and not at Augustina. Her expression was so forlorn and difficult to read, that he felt a vague uneasiness. But his Catholic sense of the deep awe of what he was doing made him try to concentrate himself upon it, and when he raised his eyes again Laura was gone.

At four o'clock, in the dawn, he went himself to rest awhile, a little surprised, perhaps, that Laura had not come back to share the vigils of the night, but thankful, nevertheless, that she had been prudent enough to spare herself.

Some little time before he went, while it was yet dark, Sister Rosa had gone to lie down for a while. Her room was just beyond Laura's. As she passed Miss Fountain's door she saw that there was a light within, and for some time after the tired nurse had thrown herself on her bed, she was disturbed by sounds from the next room. Miss Fountain seemed to be walking up and down. Once or twice she broke out into sobs, then again there were periods of quiet, and once a sharp sound that might have been made by tearing a letter. But Sister Rosa did not listen long. It was natural that Miss Fountain should sorrow and watch, and the nurse's fatigue soon brought her sleep.

She had rejoined her companion, however, and Mr Helbeck had been in his room about half an hour, when the door of the death chamber opened softly, and Miss Fountain appeared.

The morning light was already full, though still rosily clear and cold, and it fell upon the strangest and haggardest figure. Miss Fountain was in a black dress, covered with a long black cloak. Her dress and cloak were bedraggled with mud and wet. Her hat and hair were both in a drenched confusion, and the wind had laid a passing flush, like a mask, upon the pallor of her face. In her arms she held some boughs of wild cherry, and a mass of wild clematis, gathered from a tree upon the house wall, for which Augustina had cherished a particular affection.

She paused just inside the door, and looked at the nurses uncertainly, like one who hardly knew what she was doing.

Sister Rosa went to her.

"They are so wet," she whispered with a troubled look, "and I went to the most sheltered places. But I should like to put them by her. She loved the cherry blossom—and this clematis."

The nurse took her into the next room, and between them they dried and shook the beautiful tufted branches. As Laura was about to take them back to the bed, Sister Rosa asked if she would not take off her wet cloak.

"Oh no!" said the girl, as though with a sudden entreaty. "No! I am going out again. It shan't touch anything."

And daintily holding it to one side, she returned with the flowers in a basket. She took them out one by one, and laid them beside Augustina, till the bed was a vision of spring, starred and wreathed from end to end, save for that waxen face and hands in the centre.

"There is no room for more," said the nurse gently, beside her.

Laura started.

"No—but——"

She looked vaguely round the walls, saw a pair of old Delft vases still empty, and said eagerly, pointing, "I will bring some for those. There is a tree—a cherry tree," the nurse remembered afterwards that she had spoken with a remarkable slowness and clearness, "just above the otter cliff. You don't know where that is. But Mr. Helbeck knows."

The nurse glanced at her, and wondered. Miss Fountain, no doubt, had been dazed a little by the sudden shock. She had learnt, however, not to interfere with the first caprices of grief, and she did not try to dissuade the girl from going.

When the flowers were all laid, Laura went round to the further side of the bed and dropped on her knees. She gazed steadily at Augustina for a little; then she turned to the faldstool beside the bed and the shelf above it, with Augustina's prayer-books, and on either side of the St. Joseph, on the wall, the portraits of Helbeck and his mother. The two nurses moved away to the window that she might be left a little to herself. They had seen enough, naturally, to make them divine a new situation, and feel towards her with a new interest and compassion.

When she rejoined them, they were alternately telling their beads and looking at the glory of the sunrise as it came marching from the distant fells over the park. The rain had ceased, but the trees and grass were steeped, and the river came down in a white flood under the pure greenish spaces, and long pearly clouds of the morning sky.

Laura gave it all one look. Then she drew her cloak round her again.

"Dear Miss Fountain," whispered Sister Rosa, entreating, "don't be long.
And when you come in, let me get you dry things, and make you some tea."

The girl made a sign of assent.

"Good-bye," she said under her breath, and she gently kissed first Sister Rosa, and then the other nurse, Sister Mary Raphael, who did not know her so well, and was a little surprised perhaps to feel the touch of the cold small lips.

They watched her close the door, and some dim anxiety made them wait at the window till they saw her emerge from the garden wall into the park. She was walking slowly with bent head. She seemed to stand for a minute or two at the first seat commanding the bend of the river; then the rough road along the Greet turned and descended. They saw her no more.

* * * * *

A little before eight o'clock, Helbeck, coming out of his room, met
Sister Rosa in the passage. She looked a little disturbed.

"Is Miss Fountain there?" asked Helbeck in the voice natural to those who keep house with death. He motioned toward his sister's room.

"I have not seen Miss Fountain since she went out between four and five o'clock," said the nurse.

"She went out for some flowers. As she did not come back to us, we thought that she was tired and had gone straight to bed. But now I have been to see. Miss Fountain is not in her room."

Helbeck stopped short.

"Not in her room! And she went out between four and five o'clock!"

"She told us she was going for some flowers to the otter cliff," said Sister Rosa, with cheeks that were rapidly blanching. "I remember her saying so very plainly. She said you would know where it was."

He stared at her, his face turning to horror. Then he was gone.

* * * * *

Laura was not far to seek. The tyrant river that she loved, had received her, had taken her life, and then had borne her on its swirl of waters straight for that little creek where, once before, it had tossed a human prey upon the beach.

There, beating against the gravelly bank, in a soft helplessness, her bright hair tangled among the drift of branch and leaf brought down by the storm, Helbeck found her.

* * * * *

He brought her home upon his breast. Those who had come to search with him followed at a distance.

He carried her through the garden, and at the chapel entrance nurses and doctors met him. Long and fruitless efforts were made before all was yielded to despair; but the river had done its work.

At last Helbeck said a hoarse word to Sister Rosa. She led the others away.

... In that long agony, Helbeck's soul parted for ever with the first fresh power to suffer. Neither life nor death could ever stab in such wise again. The half of personality—the chief forces of that Helbeck whom Laura had loved, were already dead with Laura, when, after many hours, his arms gave her back to the Sisters, and she dropped gently from his hold upon her bed of death, in a last irrevocable submission.

* * * * *

Far on in the day, Sister Rosa discovered on Laura's table a sealed letter addressed to Dr. Friedland of Cambridge. She brought it to Helbeck. He looked at it blindly, then gradually remembered the name and the facts connected with it. He wrote and sent a message to Dr. and Mrs. Friedland asking them of their kindness to come to Bannisdale.

* * * * *

The Friedlands arrived late at night. They saw the child to whom they had given their hearts lying at peace in the old tapestried room. Some of the flowers she had herself brought for Augustina had been placed about her. The nurses had exhausted themselves in the futile cares that soothe good women at such a time.

The talk throughout the household was of sudden and hopeless accident. Miss Fountain had gone for cherry blossom to the otter cliff; the cliff was unsafe after the rain; only twenty-four hours before, Mr. Helbeck had given orders on the subject to the old keeper. And the traces of a headlong fall just below a certain flowery bent where a wild cherry stood above a bank of primroses, were plainly visible.

Then, as the doctor and Mrs. Friedland entered their own room, Laura's letter was brought to them.

They shut themselves in to read it, expecting one of those letters, those unsuspicious letters of every day, which sudden death leaves behind it.

But this was what they read:

"Dear, dear friend,—Last night, nearly five hours ago, I promised for the second time to marry Mr. Helbeck, and I promised, too, that I would be a Catholic. I asked him to procure for me Catholic teaching and instruction. I could not, you see, be his wife without it. His conscience now would not permit it. And besides, last summer I saw that it could not be.

"… Then we were called to Augustina. It was she who finally persuaded me. I did not do it merely to please her. Oh! no—*no*. I have been on the brink of it for days—perhaps weeks. I have so hungered to be his again.… But it gave it sweetness that Augustina wished it so much—that I could tell her and make her happy before she died.

"Then, she was dead!—all in a moment—without a word—before we came to her almost. She had prayed so—and yet God would not leave her a moment in which to hear it. That struck me so. It was so strange, after all the pains—all the clinging to Him—and entreating. It might have been a sign, and there!—she never gave a thought to us. It seemed like an intrusion, a disturbance even to touch her. How horrible it is that death is so *lonely*! Then something was said that reminded me of my father. I had forgotten him for so long. But when they left me with her, I seemed to be holding not her hand, but his. I was back in the old life—I heard him speaking quite distinctly. 'Laura, you cannot do it—*you cannot do it*!' And he looked at me in sorrow and displeasure. I argued with him so long, but he beat me down. And the voice I seemed to hear was not his only,—it was the voice of my own life, only far stronger and crueller than I had ever known it.

"Cruel!—I hardly know what I am writing—who has been cruel! I!—only I! To open the old wounds—to make him glad for an hour—then to strike and leave him—could anything be more pitiless? Oh! my best—best beloved.… But to live a lie—upon his heart, in his arms—that would be worse. I don't know what drives me exactly—but the priests want my inmost will—want all that is I—and I know when I sit down to think quietly, that I cannot give it. I knew it last October. But to be with him, to see him, was too much. Oh! if God hears, may He forgive me—I prayed to-night that He would give me courage.

"He must always think it an accident—he will. I see it all so plainly.—But I am afraid of saying or doing something to make the others suspect.—My head is not clear. I can't remember from one moment to another.

"You understand—I must trouble him no more. And there is no other way.
This winter has proved it. Because death puts an *end*.

"This letter is for you three only, in all the world. Dear, dear Molly—I sit here like a coward—but I can't go without a sign.—You wouldn't understand me—I used to be so happy as a little child—but since Papa died—since I came here—oh! I am not angry now, not proud—no, no.—It is for love—for love.

"Good-bye—good-bye. You were all so good to me—think of me, grieve for me sometimes.—

"Your ever grateful and devoted

**"LAURA."**

Next morning early, Helbeck entered the dining-room, where Dr. Friedland was sitting. He approached the doctor with an uncertain step, like one finding his way in the dark.

"You had a letter," he said. "Is it possible that you could show it me—or any part of it? Only a few hours before her death the old relations between myself—and Miss Fountain—were renewed. We were to have been husband and wife. That gives me a certain claim."

Dr. Friedland grew pale.

"My dear sir," he said, rising to meet his host,—"that letter contained a message for my daughter

which was not intended for other eyes than hers. I have destroyed it."

And then speech failed him. The old man stood in a guilty confusion.

Helbeck lifted his deep eyes with the steady and yet muffled gaze of one who, in the silence of the heart, lets hope go. Not another word was said. The doctor found himself alone.

* * * * *

Three days later, the doctor wrote to his wife, who had gone back to Cambridge to be with Molly.

"Yesterday Mrs. Fountain was buried in the Catholic graveyard at Whinthorpe. To-day we carried Laura to a little chapel high in the hills. A. lonely yet a cheerful spot! After these days and nights of horror, there was a moment—a breath—of balm. The Westmoreland rocks and trees will be about her for ever. She lies in sight, almost, of the Bannisdale woods. Above her the mountain rises to the sky. One of those wonderful Westmoreland dogs was barking and gathering the sheep on the crag-side, while we stood there. And when it was all over I could hear the river in the valley—a gay and open stream, with little bends and shadows—not tragic like the Greet.

"Many of the country people came. I saw her cousins, the Masons; that young fellow—you remember?—with a face swollen with tears. Mr. Helbeck stood in the distance. He did not come into the chapel.

"How she loved this country! And now it holds her tenderly. It gives her its loveliest and best. Poor, poor child!

"As for Mr. Helbeck, I have hardly seen him. He seems to live a life all within. We must be as shadows to him; as men like trees walking. But I have had a few conversations with him on necessary business; I have observed his bearing under this intolerable blow. And always I have felt myself in the presence of a good and noble man. In a few months, or even weeks, they say he will have entered the Jesuit Novitiate. It gives me a deep relief to think of it.

"What a fate!—that brought them across each other, that has left him nothing but these memories, and led her, step by step, to this last bitter resource—this awful spending of her young life—this blind witness to august things!"

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