

Salem Chapel Volume 1

By
Mrs. Oliphant

*Free*editorial 

SALEM CHAPEL

CHAPTER I.

TOWARDS the west end of Grove Street, in Carlingford, on the shabby side of the street, stood a red brick building, presenting a pinched gable terminated by a curious little belfry, not intended for any bell, and looking not unlike a handle to lift up the edifice by to the public observation. This was Salem Chapel, the only Dissenting place of worship in Carlingford. It stood in a narrow strip of ground, just as the little houses which flanked it on either side stood in their gardens, except that the enclosure of the chapel was flowerless and sombre, and showed at the farther end a few sparsely-scattered tombstones—unmeaning slabs, such as the English mourner loves to inscribe his sorrow on. On either side of this little tabernacle were the humble houses—little detached boxes, each two storeys high, each fronted by a little flower-plot—clean, respectable, meagre, little habitations, which contributed most largely to the ranks of the congregation in the Chapel. The big houses opposite, which turned their backs and staircase windows to the street, took little notice of the humble Dissenting community. Twice in the winter, perhaps, the Miss Hemmings, mild evangelical women, on whom the late rector—the Low-Church rector, who reigned before the brief and exceptional incumbency of the Rev. Mr. Proctor—had bestowed much of his confidence, would cross the street, when other profitable occupations failed them, to hear a special sermon on a Sunday evening. But the Miss Hemmings were the only representatives

of anything which could, by the utmost stretch, be called Society, who ever patronised the Dissenting interest in the town of Carlingford. Nobody from Grange Lane had ever been seen so much as in Grove Street on a Sunday, far less in the chapel. Greengrocers, dealers in cheese and bacon, milkmen, with some dressmakers of inferior pretensions, and teachers of day-schools of similar humble character, formed the élite of the congregation. It is not to be supposed, however, on this account, that a prevailing aspect of shabbiness was upon this little community; on the contrary, the grim pews of Salem Chapel blushed with bright colours, and contained both dresses and faces on the summer Sundays which the Church itself could scarcely have surpassed. Nor did those unadorned walls form a centre of asceticism and gloomy religiousness in the cheerful little town. Tea-meetings were not uncommon occurrences in Salem—tea-meetings which made the little tabernacle festive, in which cakes and oranges were diffused among the pews, and funny speeches made from the little platform underneath the pulpit, which woke the unconsecrated echoes with hearty outbreaks of laughter. Then the young people had their singing-class, at which they practised hymns, and did not despise a little flirtation; and charitable societies and missionary auxiliaries diversified the congregational routine, and kept up a brisk succession of “Chapel business,” mightily like the Church business which occupied Mr. Wentworth and his Sisters of Mercy at St. Roque’s. To name the two communities, however, in the same breath, would have been accounted little short of sacrilege in Carlingford. The names which figured highest in the benevolent lists of Salem Chapel, were known to society only as appearing, in gold letters, upon the backs of those mystic tradesmen’s books, which were deposited every Monday in little heaps at every house in Grange Lane. The Dissenters, on their part, aspired to no conquests in the unattainable territory of high life, as it existed in Carlingford. They were content to keep their privileges among themselves, and to enjoy their superior preaching and purity with a compassionate complacency. While Mr. Proctor was rector, indeed, Mr. Tozer, the buttermilkman, who was senior deacon, found it difficult to refrain from an audible expression of pity for the “Church folks” who knew no better; but, as a general rule, the congregation of Salem kept by itself, gleaning new adherents by times at an “anniversary” or the coming of a new minister, but knowing and keeping “its own place” in a manner edifying to behold.

Such was the state of affairs when old Mr. Tufton declined in popularity, and impressed upon the minds of his hearers those now-established principles about the unfitness of old men for any important post, and the urgent necessity and duty incumbent upon old clergymen, old generals, old admirals, &c.—every aged functionary, indeed, except old statesmen—to resign in favour of younger men, which have been, within recent years, so much enforced upon the world. To communicate this opinion to the old minister was perhaps less

difficult to Mr. Tozer and his brethren than it might have been to men more refined and less practical; but it was an undeniable relief to the managers of the chapel when grim Paralysis came mildly in and gave the intimation in the manner least calculated to wound the sufferer's feelings. Mild but distinct was that undeniable warning. The poor old minister retired, accordingly, with a purse and a presentation, and young Arthur Vincent, fresh from Homerton, in the bloom of hope and intellectualism, a young man of the newest school, was recognised as pastor in his stead.

A greater change could not possibly have happened. When the interesting figure of the young minister went up the homely pulpit-stairs, and appeared, white-browed, white-handed, in snowy linen and glossy clerical apparel, where old Mr. Tufton, spiritual but homely, had been wont to impend over the desk and exhort his beloved brethren, it was natural that a slight rustle of expectation should run audibly through the audience. Mr. Tozer looked round him proudly to note the sensation, and see if the Miss Hemmings, sole representatives of a cold and unfeeling aristocracy, were there. The fact was, that few of the auditors were more impressed than the Miss Hemmings, who were there, and who talked all the evening after about the young minister. What a sermon it was! not much in it about the beloved brethren; nothing very stimulating, indeed, to the sentiments and affections, except in the youth and good looks of the preacher, which naturally made a more distinct impression upon the female portion of his hearers than on the stronger sex. But then what eloquence! what an amount of thought! what an honest entrance into all the difficulties of the subject! Mr. Tozer remarked afterwards that such preaching was food for men. It was too closely reasoned out, said the excellent butterman, to please women or weak-minded persons: but he did not doubt, for his part, that soon the young men of Carlingford, the hope of the country, would find their way to Salem. Under such prognostications, it was fortunate that the young minister possessed something else besides close reasoning and Homerton eloquence to propitiate the women too.

Mr. Vincent arrived at Carlingford in the beginning of winter, when society in that town was reassembling, or at least reappearing, after the temporary summer seclusion. The young man knew very little of the community which he had assumed the spiritual charge of. He was almost as particular as the Rev. Mr. Wentworth of St. Roque's about the cut of his coat and the precision of his costume, and decidedly preferred the word clergyman to the word minister, which latter was universally used by his flock; but notwithstanding these trifling predilections, Mr. Vincent, who had been brought up upon the 'Nonconformist' and the 'Eclectic Review,' was strongly impressed with the idea that the Church Establishment, though outwardly prosperous, was in reality a profoundly rotten institution; that the Nonconforming portion of the English public was the party of progress; that the eyes of the world were

turned upon the Dissenting interest; and that his own youthful eloquence and the Voluntary principle were quite enough to counterbalance all the ecclesiastical advantages on the other side, and make for himself a position of the highest influence in his new sphere. As he walked about Carlingford making acquaintance with the place, it occurred to the young man, with a thrill of not ungenerous ambition, that the time might shortly come when Salem Chapel would be all too insignificant for the Nonconformists of this hitherto torpid place. He pictured to himself how, by-and-by, those jealous doors in Grange Lane would fly open at his touch, and how the dormant minds within would awake under his influence. It was a blissful dream to the young pastor. Even the fact that Mr. Tozer was a butterman, and the other managers of the chapel equally humble in their pretensions, did not disconcert him in that flush of early confidence. All he wanted—all any man worthy of his post wanted—was a spot of standing-ground, and an opportunity of making the Truth—and himself—known. Such, at least, was the teaching of Homerton and the Dissenting organs. Young Vincent, well educated and enlightened according to his fashion, was yet so entirely unacquainted with any world but that contracted one in which he had been brought up, that he believed all this as devoutly as Mr. Wentworth believed in Anglicanism, and would have smiled with calm scorn at any sceptic who ventured to doubt. Thus it will be seen he came to Carlingford with elevated expectations—by no means prepared to circulate among his flock, and say grace at Mrs. Tozer’s “teas,” and get up soirees to amuse the congregation, as Mr. Tufton had been accustomed to do. These secondary circumstances of his charge had little share in the new minister’s thoughts. Somehow the tone of public writing has changed of late days. Scarcely a newspaper writer condescends now to address men who are not free of “society,” and learned in all its ways. The ‘Times’ and the Magazines take it for granted that all their readers dine out at splendid tables, and are used to a solemn attendant behind their chair. Young Vincent was one of those who accept the flattering implication. It is true, he saw few enough of such celestial scenes in his college-days. But now that life was opening upon him, he doubted nothing of the society that must follow; and with a swell of gratification listened when the advantages of Carlingford were discussed by some chance fellow-travellers on the railway; its pleasant parties—its nice people—Mr. Wodehouse’s capital dinners, and the charming breakfasts—such a delightful novelty!—so easy and agreeable!—of the pretty Lady Western, the young dowager. In imagination Mr. Vincent saw himself admitted to all these social pleasures; not that he cared for capital dinners more than became a young man, or had any special tendencies towards tuft-hunting, but because fancy and hope, and ignorance of the real world, made him naturally project himself into the highest sphere within his reach, in the simple conviction that such was his natural place.

With these thoughts, to be asked to Mrs. Tozer's to tea at six o'clock, was the most wonderful cold plunge for the young man. He shrugged his shoulders, smiled to himself over the note of invitation, which, however, was very prettily written by Phœbe, Mrs. Tozer's blooming daughter, on paper as pink as Lady Western's, and consented, as he could not help himself. He went out from his nice lodgings a little after six, still smiling, and persuading himself that this would be quite a pleasant study of manners, and that of course he could not do less than patronise the good homely people in their own way, whatever that might be. Mr. Vincent's rooms were in George Street, at what the Grange Lane people called the other end, in an imposing house with a large door, and iron extinguishers fixed in the railing, which had in their day quenched the links of the last century. To cross the street in his evening coat, and walk into the butter-shop, where the two white-aproned lads behind the counter stared, and a humble member of the congregation turned sharply round, and held out the hand, which had just clutched a piece of bacon, for her minister to shake, was a sufficiently trying introduction to the evening's pleasure; but when the young pastor had been ushered up-stairs, the first aspect of the company there rather took away his breath, as he emerged from the dark staircase. Tozer himself, who awaited the minister at the door, was fully habited in the overwhelming black suit and white tie, which produced so solemnising an effect every Sunday at chapel; and the other men of the party were, with a few varieties, similarly attired. But the brilliancy of the female portion of the company overpowered Mr. Vincent. Mrs. Tozer herself sat at the end of her hospitable table, with all her best china tea-service set out before her, in a gown and cap which Grange Lane could not have furnished any rivals to. The brilliant hue of the one, and the flowers and feathers of the other, would require a more elaborate description than this chronicle has space for. Nor indeed in the particular of dress did Mrs. Tozer do more than hold her own among the guests who surrounded her. It was scarcely dark, and the twilight softened down the splendours of the company, and saved the dazzled eyes of the young pastor. He felt the grandeur vaguely as he came in with a sense of reproof, seeing that he had evidently been waited for. He said grace devoutly when the tea arrived and the gas was lighted, and with dumb amaze gazed round him. Could these be the veritable womankind of Salem Chapel? Mr. Vincent saw bare shoulders and flower-wreathed heads bending over the laden tea-table. He saw pretty faces and figures not inelegant, remarkable among which was Miss Phœbe's, who had written him that pink note, and who herself was pink all over—dress, shoulders, elbows, cheeks, and all. Pink—not red—a softened youthful flush, which was by no means unbecoming to the plump full figure which had not an angle anywhere. As for the men, the lawful owners of all this feminine display, they huddled all together, indisputable cheesemongers as they were, quite transcended and extinguished by their

wives and daughters. The pastor was young and totally inexperienced. In his heart he asserted his own claim to an entirely different sphere; but, suddenly cast into this little crowd, Mr. Vincent's inclination was to join the dark group of husbands and fathers whom he knew, and who made no false pretences. He was shy of venturing upon those fine women, who surely never could be Mrs. Brown of the Devonshire Dairy, and Mrs. Pigeon, the poulterer's wife; whereas Pigeon and Brown themselves were exactly like what they always were on Sundays, if not perhaps a trifle graver and more depressed in their minds.

"Here's a nice place for you, Mr. Vincent—quite the place for you, where you can hear all the music, and see all the young ladies. For I do suppose ministers, bein' young, are like other young men," said Mrs. Tozer, drawing aside her brilliant skirts to make room for him on the sofa. "I have a son myself as is at college, and feel motherlike to those as go in the same line. Sit you down comfortable, Mr. Vincent. There ain't one here, sir, I'm proud to say, as grudges you the best seat."

"Oh, mamma, how could you think of saying such a thing!" said Phœbe, under her breath; "to be sure, Mr. Vincent never could think there was anybody anywhere that would be so wicked—and he the minister."

"Indeed, my dear," said Mrs. Pigeon, who was close by, "not to affront Mr. Vincent, as is deserving of our best respects, I've seen many and many's the minister I wouldn't have given up my seat to; and I don't misdoubt, sir, you've heard of such as well as we. There was Mr. Bailey at Parson's Green, now. He went and married a poor bit of a governess, as common a looking creature as you could see, that set herself up above the people, Mr. Vincent, and was too grand, sir, if you'll believe me, to visit the deacons' wives. Nobody cares less than me about them vain shows. What's visiting, if you know the vally of your time? Nothing but a laying up of judgment. But I wouldn't be put upon neither by a chit that got her bread out of me and my husband's hard earnins; and so I told my sister, Mrs. Tozer, as lives at Parson's Green."

"Poor thing!" said the gentler Mrs. Tozer, "it's hard lines on a minister's wife to please the congregation. Mr. Vincent here, he'll have to take a lesson. That Mrs. Bailey was pretty-looking, I must allow——"

"Sweetly pretty!" whispered Phœbe, clasping her plump pink hands.

"Pretty-looking! I don't say anything against it," continued her mother; "but it's hard upon a minister when his wife won't take no pains to please his flock. To have people turn up their noses at you ain't pleasant——"

"And them getting their livin' off you all the time," cried Mrs. Pigeon, clinching the milder speech.

"But it seems to me," said poor Vincent, "that a minister can no more be said

to get his living off you than any other man. He works hard enough generally for what little he has. And really, Mrs. Tozer, I'd rather not hear all these unfortunate particulars about one of my brethren——”

“He ain't one of the brethren now,” broke in the poulterer's wife. “He's been gone out o' Parson's Green this twelvemonths. Them stuck-up ways may do with the Church folks as can't help themselves, but they'll never do with us Dissenters. Not that we ain't as glad as can be to see you, Mr. Vincent, and I hope you'll favour my poor house another night like you're favouring Mrs. Tozer's. Mr. Tufton always said that was the beauty of Carlingford in our connection. Cheerful folks and no display. No display, you know—nothing but a hearty meetin', sorry to part, and happy to meet again. Them's our ways. And the better you know us, the better you'll like us, I'll be bound to say. We don't put it all on the surface, Mr. Vincent,” continued Mrs. Pigeon, shaking out her skirts and expanding herself on her chair, “but it's all real and solid; what we say we mean—and we don't say no more than we mean—and them's the kind of folks to trust to wherever you go.”

Poor Vincent made answer by an inarticulate murmur, whether of assent or dissent it was impossible to say; and, inwardly appalled, turned his eyes towards his deacons, who, more fortunate than himself, were standing all in a group together discussing chapel matters, and wisely leaving general conversation to the fairer portion of the company. The unlucky minister's secret looks of distress awoke the interest and sympathy of Phœbe, who sat in an interesting manner on a stool at her mother's side. “Oh, mamma,” said that young lady, too bashful to address himself directly, “I wonder if Mr. Vincent plays or sings? There are some such nice singers here. Perhaps we might have some music, if Mr. Vincent——”

“I don't perform at all,” said that victim,—“not in any way; but I am an exemplary listener. Let me take you to the piano.”

The plump Phœbe rose after many hesitations, and, with a simper and a blush and pretty air of fright, took the minister's arm. After all, even when the whole company is beneath a man's level, it is easier to play the victim under the suppliance inflicted by a pretty girl than by two mature matrons. Phœbe understood pretty well about her h's, and did not use the double negative; and when she rose up rustling from her low seat, the round, pink creature, with dimples all about her, was not an unpleasant object of contemplation. Mr. Vincent listened to her song with decorous interest. Perhaps it was just as well sung as Lucy Wodehouse, in Grange Lane, would have sung it. When Phœbe had concluded, the minister was called to the side of Mrs. Brown of the Devonshire Dairy, who had been fidgeting to secure him from the moment he approached the piano. She was fat and roundabout, good woman, and had the aspect of sitting upon the very edge of her chair. She held out to the distressed

pastor a hand covered with a rumpled white glove, which did not fit, and had never been intended to fit, and beckoned to him anxiously. With the calmness of despair Mr. Vincent obeyed the call.

“I have been looking so anxious to catch your eye, Mr. Vincent,” said Mrs. Brown; “do sit you down, now there’s a chance, and let me talk to you a minnit. Bless the girl! there’s Miss Polly Pigeon going to play, and everybody can use their freedom in talking. For my part,” said Mrs. Brown, securing the vacant chair of the performer for her captive, “that’s why I like instrumental music best. When a girl sings, why, to be sure, it’s only civil to listen—ain’t it now, Mr. Vincent? but nobody expects it of you, don’t you see, when she only plays. Now do you sit down. What I wanted to speak to you was about that poor creetur in Back Grove Street—that’s the lane right behind the chapel. She do maunder on so to see the minister. Mr. Tozer he’s been to see her, and I sent Brown, but it wasn’t a bit of use. It’s you, Mr. Vincent, she’s awanting of. If you’ll call in to-morrow, I’ll show you the place myself, as you’re a stranger; for if you’ll excuse me saying it, I am as curious as can be to hear what she’s got to say.”

“If she has got anything to say, she might prefer that it was not heard,” said Vincent, with an attempt at a smile. “Is she ill—and who is she? I have never heard of her before.”

“Well, you see, sir, she doesn’t belong rightly to Salem. She’s a stranger here, and not a joined member; and she ain’t ill either, as I can see—only something on her mind. You ministers,” said Mrs. Brown, with a look of awe, “must have a deal of secrets confided to you. Folks may stand out against religion as long as things go on straight with them, but they’re sure to want the minister as soon as they’ve got something on their mind; and a deal better to have it out, and get a little comfort, than to bottle it all up till their latter end, like old Mrs. Thompson, and let it out in their will, to drive them as was expecting different distracted. It’s a year or two since that happened. I don’t suppose you’ve heerd tell of it yet. But that’s what makes old Mrs. Christian—I dare to say you’ve seen her at chapel—so uncomfortable in her feelins. She’s never got over it, sir, and never will to her dying day.”

“Some disappointment about money?” said Mr. Vincent.

“Poor old folks! their daughter did very well for herself—and very well for them too,” said Mrs. Brown; “but it don’t make no difference in Mrs. Christian’s feelins: they’re living, like, on Mr. Brown the solicitor’s charity, you see, sir, instead of their own fortin, which makes a deal o’ difference. It would have been a fine thing for Salem too,” added Mrs. Brown, reflectively, “if they had had the old lady’s money; for Mrs. Christian was always one that liked to be first, and stanch to her chapel, and would never have been wanting when the collecting-books went round. But it wasn’t to be, Mr. Vincent—

that's the short and the long of it; and we never have had nobody in our connection worth speaking of in Carlingford but's been in trade. And a very good thing too, as I tell Brown. For if there's onething I can't abear in a chapel, it's one set setting up above the rest. But bein' all in the way of business, except just the poor folks, as is all very well in their place, and never interferes with nothing, and don't count, there's nothing but brotherly love here, which is a deal more than most ministers can say for their flocks. I've asked a few friends to tea, Mr. Vincent, on next Thursday, at six. As I haven't got no daughters just out of a boarding-school to write notes for me, will you take us in a friendly way, and just come without another invitation? All our own folks, sir, and a comfortable evening; and prayers, if you'll be so good, at the end. I don't like the new fashion," said Mrs. Brown, with a significant glance towards Mrs. Tozer, "of separatin' like heathens, when all's of one connection. We might never meet again, Mr. Vincent. In the midst of life, you know, sir. You'll not forget Thursday, at six."

"But, my dear Mrs. Brown, I am very sorry: Thursday is one of the days I have specially devoted to study," stammered forth the unhappy pastor. "What with the Wednesday meeting and the Friday committee——"

Mrs. Brown drew herself up as well as the peculiarities of her form permitted, and her roseate countenance assumed a deeper glow. "We've been in the chapel longer than Tozer," said the offended deaconess. "We've never been backward, in takin' trouble, nor spendin' our substance, nor puttin' our hands to every good work; and as for makin' a difference between one member and another, it's what we ain't been accustomed to, Mr. Vincent. I'm a plain woman, and speak my mind. Old Mr. Tufton was very particular to show no preference. He always said, it never answered in a flock to show more friendship to one nor another; and if it had been put to me, I wouldn't have said, I assure you, sir, that it was us as was to be made the first example of. If I haven't a daughter fresh out of a boarding-school, I've been a member of Salem five-and-twenty year, and had ministers in my house many's the day, and as friendly as if I were a duchess; and for charities and such things, we've never been known to fail, though I say it; and as for trouble——"

"But I spoke of my study," said the poor minister, as she paused, her indignation growing too eloquent for words: "you want me to preach on Sunday, don't you? and I must have some time, you know, to do my work."

"Sir," said Mrs. Brown, severely, "I know it for a fact that Mr. Wentworth of St. Roque's dines out five days in the week, and it don't do his sermons no injury; and when you go out to dinner, it stands to reason it's a different thing from a friendly tea."

"Ah, yes, most likely!" said Mr. Vincent, with a heavy sigh. "I'll come, since you wish it so much; but," added the unlucky young man, with a melancholy

attempt at a smile, "you must not be too kind to me. Too much of this kind of thing, you know, might have an effect——" Here he paused, inclined to laugh at his own powers of sarcasm. As chance would have it, as he pointed generally to the scene before them, the little wave of his hand seemed to Mrs. Brown to indicate the group round the piano, foremost in which was Phœbe, plump and pink, and full of dimples. The good mistress of the Devonshire Dairy gave her head a little toss.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Brown, with a sigh, "you don't know, you young men, the half of the tricks of them girls that look so innocent. But I don't deny it's a pleasant party," added the deaconess, looking round on the company in general with some complacency. "But just you come along our way on Thursday, at six, and judge for yourself if mine ain't quite as good; though I have not got no daughters, Mr. Vincent," she concluded, with severe irony, elevating her double chin and nodding her flowery head.

The subdued minister made no reply; only deeper and deeper humiliation seemed in store for him. Was it he, the first prize-man of Homerton, who was supposed to be already smitten by the pink charms of Phœbe Tozer? The unfortunate young man groaned in spirit, and, seizing a sudden opportunity, plunged into the black group of deacons, and tried to immerse himself in chapel business. But vain was the attempt. He was recaptured and led back in triumph to Mrs. Tozer's sofa. He had to listen to more singing, and accept another invitation to tea. When he got off at last, it was with a sensation of dreadful dwindlement that poor Vincent crossed the street again to his lonely abode. He knocked quite humbly at the big door, and, with a sensation of unclerical rage, wondered to himself whether the policeman who met him knew he had been out to tea. Ah, blessed Mr. Wentworth of St. Roque's! The young Nonconformist sighed as he put on his slippers, and kicked his boots into a corner of his sitting-room. Somehow he had come down in the world all at once, and without expecting it. Such was Salem Chapel and its requirements: and such was Mr. Vincent's first experience of social life in Carlingford.

CHAPTER II.

IT was with a somewhat clouded aspect that the young pastor rose from his solitary breakfast-table next morning to devote himself to the needful work of visiting his flock. The minister's breakfast, though lonely, had not been without alleviations. He had the "Carlingford Gazette" at his elbow, if that was any comfort, and he had two letters which were more interesting; one was from his mother, a minister's widow, humbly enough off, but who had brought

up her son in painful gentility, and had done much to give him that taste for good society which was to come to so little fruition in Carlingford. Mr. Vincent smiled sardonically as he read his good mother's questions about his "dear people," and her anxious inquiry whether he had found a "pleasant circle" in Salem. Remembering the dainty little household which it took her so much pains and pinching to maintain, the contrast made present affairs still more and more distasteful to her son. He could fancy her trim little figure in that traditional black silk gown which never wore out, and the whitest of caps, gazing aghast at Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Tozer. But, nevertheless, Mrs. Vincent understood all about Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Tozer, and had been very civil to such, and found them very serviceable in her day, though her son, who knew her only in that widowed cottage where she had her own way, could not have realised it. The other letter was from a Homerton chum, a young intellectual and ambitious Nonconformist like himself, whose epistle was full of confidence and hope, triumph in the cause, and its perpetual advance. "We are the priests of the poor," said the Homerton enthusiast, encouraging his friend to the sacrifices and struggles which he presumed to be already surrounding him. Mr. Vincent bundled up this letter with a sigh. Alas! there were no grand struggles or sacrifices in Carlingford. "The poor" were mostly church-goers, as he had already discovered. It was a tolerably comfortable class of the community, that dreadful "connection" of Browns, Pigeons, and Tozers. Amid their rude luxuries and commonplace plenty, life could have no heroic circumstances. The young man sighed, and did not feel so sure as he once did of the grand generalities in which his friend was still confident. If Dissenters led the van of progress generally, there was certainly an exception to be made in respect to Carlingford. And the previous evening's entertainment had depressed the young minister's expectations even of what he himself could do—a sad blow to a young man. He was less convinced that opportunity of utterance was all that was necessary to give him influence in the general community. He was not half so sure of success in opening the closed doors and sealed hearts of Grange Lane. On the whole, matters looked somewhat discouraging that particular morning, which was a morning in October, not otherwise depressing or disagreeable. He took his hat and went down-stairs with a kind of despairing determination to do his duty. There an encounter occurred which did not raise his spirits. The door was open, and his landlady, who was a member of Salem Chapel, stood there in full relief against the daylight outside, taking from the hands of Miss Phœbe Tozer a little basket, the destination of which she was volubly indicating. Mr. Vincent appearing before Phœbe had half concluded her speech, that young lady grew blushing embarrassed, and made haste to relinquish her hold of the basket. Her conscious looks filled the unwitting minister with ignorant amaze.

"Oh, to think Mr. Vincent should catch me here! What ever will he think? and

what ever will Ma say?" cried Miss Phœbe. "Oh, Mr. Vincent, Ma thought, please, you might perhaps like some jelly, and I said I would run over with it myself, as it's so near, and the servant might have made a mistake, and Ma hopes you'll enjoy it, and that you liked the party last night!"

"Mrs. Tozer is very kind," said the minister, with cloudy looks. "Some what, did you say, Miss Phœbe?"

"La! only some jelly—nothing worth mentioning—only a shape that was over supper last night, and Ma thought you wouldn't mind," cried the messenger, half alarmed by the unusual reception of her offering. Mr. Vincent turned very red, and looked at the basket as if he would like nothing better than to pitch it into the street; but prudence for once restrained the young man. He bit his lips, and bowed, and went upon his way, without waiting, as she intended he should, to escort Miss Phœbe back again to her paternal shop. Carrying his head higher than usual, and thrilling with offence and indignation, the young pastor made his way along George Street. It was a very trifling circumstance, certainly; but just when an enthusiastic companion writes to you about the advance of the glorious cause, and your own high vocation as a soldier of the Cross, and the undoubted fact that the hope of England is in you, to have a shape of jelly, left over from last night's tea-party, sent across the street with complacent kindness, for your refreshment——! It was trying. To old Mrs. Tufton, indeed, who had an invalid daughter, it might have seemed a Christian bounty; but to Arthur Vincent, five-and-twenty, a scholar and a gentleman—ah me! If he had been a Christchurch man, or even a Fellow of Trinity, the chances are he would have taken it much more graciously; for then he would have had the internal consciousness of his own dignity to support him; whereas the sting of it all was, that poor young Vincent had no special right to his own pretensions, but had come to them he could not tell how; and, in reality, had his mind been on a level with his fortunes, ought to have found the Tozers and Pigeons sufficiently congenial company. He went along George Street with troubled haste, pondering his sorrows—those sorrows which he could confide to nobody. Was he actually to live among these people for years—to have no other society—to circulate among their tea-parties, and grow accustomed to their finery, and perhaps "pay attention" to Phœbe Tozer; or, at least, suffer that young lady's attentions to him? And what would become of him at the end? To drop into a shuffling old gossip, like good old Mr. Tufton, seemed the best thing he could hope for; and who could wonder at the mild stupor of paralysis—disease not tragical, only drivelling—which was the last chapter of all?

The poor young man accordingly marched along George Street deeply disconsolate. When he met the perpetual curate of St. Roque's at the door of Masters's bookshop—where, to be sure, at that hour in the morning, it was

natural to encounter Mr. Wentworth—the young Nonconformist gazed at him with a certain wistfulness. They looked at each other, in fact, being much of an age, and not unsimilar in worldly means just at the present moment. There were various points of resemblance between them. Mr. Vincent, too, wore an Anglican coat, and assumed a high clerical aspect—sumptuary laws forbidding such presumption being clearly impracticable in England; and the Dissenter was as fully endowed with natural good looks as the young priest. How was it, then, that so vast a world of difference and separation lay between them? For one compensating moment Mr. Vincent decided that it was because of his more enlightened faith, and felt himself persecuted. But even that pretence did not serve the purpose. He began to divine faintly, and with a certain soreness, that external circumstances do stand for something, if not in the great realities of a man's career, at least in the comforts of his life. A poor widow's son, educated at Homerton, and an English squire's son, public school and university bred, cannot begin on the same level. To compensate that disadvantage requires something more than a talent for preaching. Perhaps genius would scarcely do it without the aid of time and labour. The conviction fell sadly upon poor Arthur Vincent as he went down the principal street of Carlingford in the October sunshine. He was rapidly becoming disenchanted, and neither the 'Nonconformist' nor the 'Patriot,' nor Exeter Hall itself, could set him up again.

With these feelings the young pastor pursued his way to see the poor woman who, according to Mrs. Brown's account, was so anxious to see the minister. He found this person, whose desire was at present shared by most of the female members of Salem without the intervention of the Devonshire Dairy, in a mean little house in the close lane dignified by the name of Back Grove Street. She was a thin, dark, vivacious-looking woman, with a face from which some forty years of energetic living had withdrawn all the colour and fulness which might once have rendered it agreeable, but which was, nevertheless, a remarkable face, not to be lightly passed over. Extreme thinness of outline and sharpness of line made the contrast between this educated countenance and the faces which had lately surrounded the young minister still more remarkable. It was not a profound or elevated kind of education, perhaps, but it was very different from the thin superficial lacker with which Miss Phœbe was coated. Eager dark eyes, with dark lines under them—thin eloquent lips, the upper jaw projecting slightly, the mouth closing fast and firm—a well-shaped small head, with a light black lace handkerchief fastened under the chin—no complexion or softening of tint—a dark, sallow, colourless face, thrilling with expression, energy, and thought, was that on which the young man suddenly lighted as he went in, somewhat indifferent, it must be confessed, and expecting to find nothing that could interest him. She was seated in a shabby room, only half-carpeted, up two pair of stairs, which looked out upon no more lively view

than the back of Salem Chapel itself, with its few dismal scattered graves—and was working busily at men's clothing of the coarsest kind, blue stuff which had transferred its colour to her thin fingers. Meagre as were her surroundings, however, Mr. Vincent, stumbling listlessly up the narrow bare stair of the poor lodging-house, suddenly came to himself as he stood within this humble apartment. If this was to be his penitent, the story she had to tell might be not unworthy of serious listening. He stammered forth a half apology and explanation of his errand, as he gazed surprised at so unexpected a figure, wondering within himself what intense strain and wear of life could have worn to so thin a tissue the outer garment of this keen and sharp-edged soul.

"Come in," said the stranger, "I am glad to see you. I know you, Mr. Vincent, though I can't suppose you've observed me. Take a seat. I have heard you preach ever since you came—so, knowing in a manner how your thoughts run, I've a kind of acquaintance with you: which, to be sure, isn't the same on your side. I daresay the woman at the Dairy sent you to me?"

"I understood—from Mrs. Brown certainly—that you wanted to see me," said the puzzled pastor.

"Yes, it was quite true. I have resources in myself, to be sure, as much as most people," said his new acquaintance, whom he had been directed to ask for as Mrs. Hilyard, "but still human relations are necessary; and as I don't know anybody here, I thought I'd join the Chapel. Queer set of people, rather, don't you think?" she continued, glancing up from her rapid stitching to catch Vincent's conscious eye; "they thought I was in spiritual distress, I suppose, and sent me the buttermilk. Lord bless us! if I had been, what could he have done for me, does anybody imagine? and when he didn't succeed, there came the Dairy person, who, I daresay, would have understood what I wanted had I been a cow. Now I can make out what I'm doing when I have you, Mr. Vincent. I know your line a little from your sermons. That was wonderfully clever on Sunday morning about confirmation. I belong to the Church myself by rights, and was confirmed, of course, at the proper time, like other people, but I am a person of impartial mind. That was a famous downright blow. I liked you there."

"I am glad to have your approbation," said the young minister, rather stiffly; "but excuse me—I was quite in earnest in my argument."

"Yes, yes; that was the beauty of it," said his eager interlocutor, who went on without ever raising her eyes, intent upon the rough work which he could not help observing sometimes made her scarred fingers bleed as it passed rapidly through them. "No argument is ever worth listening to if it isn't used in earnest. I've led a wandering life, and heard an infinity of sermons of late years. When there are any brains in them at all, you know, they are about the only kind of mental stimulant a poor woman in my position can come by, for

I've no time for reading lately. Down here, in these regions, where the buttermilk comes to inquire after your spiritual interests, and is a superior being," added this singular new adherent of Salem, looking full for a single moment in her visitor's eyes, with a slight movement of the muscles of her thin face, and making a significant pause, "the air's a trifle heavy. It isn't pure oxygen we breathe in Back Grove Street, by any means."

"I assure you it surprises me more than I can explain, to find," said Vincent, hesitating for a proper expression, "to find——"

"Such a person as I am in Back Grove Street," interrupted his companion, quickly; "yes—and thereby hangs a tale. But I did not send for you to tell it. I sent for you for no particular reason, but a kind of yearning to talk to somebody. I beg your pardon sincerely—but you know," she said, once more with a direct sudden glance and that half-visible movement in her face which meant mischief, "you are a minister, and are bound to have no inclinations of your own, but to give yourself up to the comfort of the poor."

"Without any irony, that is the aim I propose to myself," said Vincent; "but I fear you are disposed to take rather a satirical view of such matters. It is fashionable to talk lightly on those subjects; but I find life and its affairs sufficiently serious, I assure you——"

Here she stopped her work suddenly, and looked up at him, her dark sharp eyes lighting up her thin sallow face with an expression which it was beyond his power to fathom. The black eyelashes widened, the dark eyebrows rose, with a full gaze of the profoundest tragic sadness, on the surface of which a certain gleam of amusement seemed to hover. The worn woman looked over the dark world of her own experience, of which she was conscious in every nerve, but of which he knew nothing, and smiled at his youth out of the abysses of her own life, where volcanoes had been, and earthquakes. He perceived it dimly, without understanding how, and faltered and blushed, yet grew angry with all the self-assertion of youth.

"I don't doubt you know that as well as I do—perhaps better; but notwithstanding, I find my life leaves little room for laughter," said the young pastor, not without a slight touch of heroics.

"Mr. Vincent," said Mrs. Hilyard, with a gleam of mirth in her eye, "in inferring that I perhaps know better, you infer also that I am older than you, which is uncivil to a lady. But for my part, I don't object to laughter. Generally it's better than crying, which in a great many cases I find the only alternative. I doubt, however, much whether life, from the buttermilk's point of view, wears the same aspect. I should be inclined to say not; and I daresay your views will brighten with your company," added the aggravating woman, again resuming, with eyes fixed upon it, her laborious work.

“I perceive you see already what is likely to be my great trial in Carlingford,” said young Vincent. “I confess that the society of my office-bearers, which I suppose I must always consider myself bound to——”

“That was a very sad sigh,” said the rapid observer beside him; “but don’t confide in me, lest I should be tempted to tell somebody. I can speak my mind without prejudice to anybody; and if you agree with me, it may be a partial relief to your feelings. I shall be glad to see you when you can spare me half an hour. I can’t look at you while I talk, for that would lose me so much time, but at my age it doesn’t matter. Come and see me. It’s your business to do me good—and it’s possible I might even do some good to you.”

“Thank you. I shall certainly come,” said the minister, rising with the feeling that he had received his dismissal for to-day. She rose, too, quickly, and but for a moment, and held out her hand to him.

“Be sure you don’t betray to the dairywoman what I had on my mind, and wanted to tell you, though she is dying to know,” said his singular new acquaintance, without a smile, but with again a momentary movement in her thin cheeks. When she had shaken hands with him, she seated herself again immediately, and without a moment’s pause proceeded with her work, apparently concentrating all her faculties upon it, and neither hearing nor seeing more of her visitor, though he still stood within two steps of her, overshadowing the table. The young man turned and left the room with involuntary quietness, as if he had been dismissed from the presence of a princess. He went straight down-stairs without ever pausing, and hastened through the narrow back-street with still the impulse communicated by that dismissal upon him. When he drew breath, it was with a curious mixture of feelings. Who she was or what she was—how she came there, working at those “slops” till the colour came off upon her hands, and her poor thin fingers bled—she so strangely superior to her surroundings, yet not despising or quarrelling with them, or even complaining of them, so far as he could make out—infinately perplexed the inexperienced minister. He came away excited and bewildered from the interview, which had turned out so different from his expectations. Whether she had done him good, was extremely doubtful; but she had changed the current of his thoughts, which was in its way an immediate benefit. Marvelling over such a mysterious apparition, and not so sure as in the morning that nothing out of the most vulgar routine ever could occur in Carlingford, Mr. Vincent turned with meditative steps towards the little house at the extreme end of Grove Street, where his predecessor still lingered. A visit to old Mr. Tufton was a periodical once a-week duty, to be performed with the utmost regularity. Tozer and Pigeon had agreed that it would be the making of the young minister to draw thus from the experience of the old one. Whether Mr. Vincent agreed with them, may be apprehended

from the scene which follows.

CHAPTER III.

MR. TUFTON'S house was at the extremity of Grove Street—at the extremity, consequently, in that direction, of Carlingford, lying parallel with the end of Grange Lane, and within distant view of St. Roque's. It was a little old-fashioned house, with a small garden in front and a large garden behind, in which the family cabbages, much less prosperous since the old minister became unable to tend them, flourished. The room into which Mr. Vincent, as an intimate of the house, was shown, was a low parlour with two small windows, overshadowed outside by ivy, and inside by two large geraniums, expanded upon a Jacob's ladder of props, which were the pride of Mrs. Tufton's heart, and made it almost impossible to see anything clearly within, even at the height of day. Some prints, of which one represented Mr. Tufton himself, and the rest other ministers of "the connection," in mahogany frames, hung upon the green walls. The furniture, though it was not unduly abundant, filled up the tiny apartment, so that quite a dislocation and rearrangement of everything was necessary before a chair could be got for the visitor, and he got into it. Though it was rather warm for October out of doors, a fire, large for the size of the room, was burning in the fireplace, on either side of which was an easy-chair and an invalid. The one fronting the light, and consequently fronting the visitor, was Adelaide Tufton, the old minister's daughter, who had been confined to that chair longer than Phœbe Tozer could remember; and who, during that long seclusion, had knitted, as all Salem Chapel believed, without intermission, nobody having ever yet succeeded in discovering where the mysterious results of her labour went to. She was knitting now, reclining back in the cushioned chair which had been made for her, and was her shell and habitation. A very pale, emaciated, eager-looking woman, not much above thirty, but looking, after half a lifetime spent in that chair, any age that imagination might suggest; a creature altogether separated from the world—separated from life, it would be more proper to say—for nobody more interested in the world and other people's share of it than Adelaide Tufton existed in Carlingford. She had light-blue eyes, rather prominent, which lightened without giving much expression to her perfectly colourless face. Her very hair was pale, and lay in braids of a clayey yellow, too listless and dull to be called brown, upon the thin temples, over which the thin white skin seemed to be strained like an over-tight bandage. Somehow, however, people who were used to seeing her, were not so sorry as they might have been for Adelaide Tufton. No one could exactly say why; but she somehow appeared, in the opinion of Salem Chapel, to indemnify herself for her privations, and

was treated, if without much sympathy, at least without that ostentatious pity which is so galling to the helpless. Few people could afford to be sorry for so quick-sighted and all-remembering an observer; and the consequence was, that Adelaide, almost without knowing it, had managed to neutralise her own disabilities, and to be acknowledged as an equal in the general conflict, which she could enter only with her sharp tongue and her quick eye.

It was Mr. Tufton himself who sat opposite—his large expanse of face, with the white hair which had been apostrophised as venerable at so many Salem tea-parties, and which Vincent himself had offered homage to, looming dimly through the green shade of the geraniums, as he sat with his back to the window. He had a green shade over his eyes besides, and his head moved with a slight palsied tremor, which was now the only remnant of that “visitation” which had saved his feelings, and dismissed more benignly than Tozer and his brother deacons the old pastor from his old pulpit. He sat very contentedly doing nothing, with his large feet in large loose slippers, and his elbows supported on the arms of his chair. By the evidence of Mrs. Tufton’s spectacles, and the newspaper lying on the table, it was apparent that she had been reading the ‘Carlingford Gazette’ to her helpless companions; and that humble journal, which young Vincent had kicked to the other end of his room before coming out, had made the morning pass very pleasantly to the three secluded inmates of Siloam Cottage, which was the name of the old minister’s humble home. Mr. Tufton said “‘umble ‘ome,” and so did his wife. They came from storied Islington, both of them, and were of highly respectable connections, not to say that Mrs. Tufton had a little property as well; and, acting in laudable opposition to the general practice of poor ministers’ wives, had brought many dividends and few children to the limited but comfortable fireside. Mr. Vincent could not deny that it was comfortable in its way, and quite satisfied its owners, as he sat down in the shade of the geraniums in front of the fire, between Adelaide Tufton and her father; but, oh heavens! to think of such a home as all that, after Homerton and high Nonconformist hopes, could come to himself! The idea, however, was one which did not occur to the young minister. He sat down compassionately, seeing no analogy whatever between his own position and theirs; scarcely even seeing the superficial contrast, which might have struck anybody, between his active youth and their helplessness and suffering. He was neither hard-hearted nor unsympathetic, but somehow the easy moral of that contrast never occurred to him. Adelaide Tufton’s bloodless countenance conveyed an idea of age to Arthur Vincent; her father was really old. The young man saw no grounds on which to form any comparison. It was natural enough for the old man and ailing woman to be as they were, just as it was natural for him, in the height of his early manhood, to rejoice in his strength and youth.

“So there was a party at Mr. Tozer’s last night—and you were there, Mr.

Vincent,” said old Mrs. Tufton, a cheerful active old lady, with pink ribbons in her cap, which asserted their superiority over the doubtful light and the green shade of the geraniums. “Who did you have? The Browns and the Pigeons, and—everybody else, of course. Now tell me, did Mrs. Tozer make tea herself, or did she leave it to Phœbe?”

“As well as I can remember, she did it herself,” said the young pastor.

“Exactly what I told you, mamma,” said Adelaide, from her chair. “Mrs. Tozer doesn’t mean Phœbe to make tea this many a year. I daresay she wants her to marry somebody, the little flirting thing. I suppose she wore her pink, Mr. Vincent—and Mrs. Brown that dreadful red-and-green silk of hers; and didn’t they send you over a shape of jelly this morning? Ha, ha! I told you so, mamma; that was why it never came to me.”

“Pray let me send it to you,” cried Vincent, eagerly.

The offer was not rejected, though coquetted with for a few minutes. Then Mr. Tufton broke in, in solemn bass.

“Adelaide, we shouldn’t talk, my dear, of pinks and green silks. Providence has laid you aside, my love, from temptations; and you remember how often I used to say in early days, No doubt it was a blessing, Jemima, coming when it did, to wean our girl from the world; she might have been as fond of dress as other girls, and brought us to ruin, but for her misfortune. Everything is for the best.”

“Oh, bother!” said Adelaide, sharply—“I don’t complain, and never did; but everybody else finds my misfortune, as they call it, very easy to be borne, Mr. Vincent—even papa, you see. There is a reason for everything, to be sure; but how things that are hard and disagreeable are always to be called for the best, I can’t conceive. However, let us return to Phœbe Tozer’s pink dress. Weren’t you rather stunned with all their grandeur? You did not think we could do as much in Salem, did you? Now tell me, who has Mrs. Brown taken in hand to do good to now? I am sure she sent you to somebody; and you’ve been to see somebody this morning,” added the quick-witted invalid, “who has turned out different from your expectations. Tell me all about it, please.”

“Dear Adelaide does love to hear what’s going on. It is almost the only pleasure she has—and we oughtn’t to grudge it, ought we?” said Adelaide’s mother.

“Stuff!” muttered Adelaide, in a perfectly audible aside. “Now I think of it, I’ll tell you who you’ve been to see. That woman in Back Grove Street—there! What do you think of that for a production of Salem, Mr. Vincent? But she does not really belong to Carlingford. She married somebody who turned out badly, and now she’s in hiding that he mayn’t find her; though most likely, if all be true, he does not want to find her. That’s her history. I never pretend to

tell more than I know. Who she was to begin with, or who he is, or whether Hilyard may be her real name, or why she lives there and comes to Salem Chapel, I can't tell; but that's the bones of her story, you know. If I were a clever romancer like some people, I could have made it all perfect for you, but I prefer the truth. Clever and queer, isn't she? So I have guessed by what people say."

"Indeed, you seem to know a great deal more about her than I do," said the astonished pastor.

"I daresay," assented Adelaide, calmly. "I have never seen her, however, though I can form an idea of what she must be like, all the same. I put things together, you see; and it is astonishing the number of scraps of news I get. I shake them well down, and then the broken pieces come together; and I never forget anything, Mr. Vincent," she continued, pausing for a moment to give him a distinct look out of the pale-blue eyes, which for the moment seemed to take a vindictive feline gleam. "She's rather above the Browns and the Tozers, you understand. Somehow or other, she's mixed up with Lady Western, whom they call the Young Dowager, you know. I have not made that out yet, though I partly guess. My lady goes to see her up two pairs of stairs in Back Grove Street. I hope it does her ladyship good to see how the rest of the world manage to live and get on."

"I am afraid, Adelaide, my dear," said Mr. Tufton, in his bass tones, "that my young brother will not think this very improving conversation. Dear Tozer was speaking to me yesterday about the sermon to the children. I always preached them a sermon to themselves about this time of the year. My plan has been to take the congregation in classes; the young men—ah, and they're specially important, are the young men! Dear Tozer suggested that some popular lectures now would not come amiss. After a long pastorate like mine," said the good man, blandly, unconscious that dear Tozer had already begun to suggest a severance of that tie before gentle sickness did it for him, "a congregation may be supposed to be a little unsettled,—without any offence to you, my dear brother. If I could appear myself and show my respect to your ministry, it would have a good effect, no doubt; but I am laid aside, laid aside, brother Vincent! I can only help you with my prayers."

"But dear, dear Mr. Tufton!" cried his wife, "bless you, the chapel is twice as full as it was six months ago—and natural too, with a nice young man."

"My dear!" said the old minister in reproof. "Yes, quite natural—curiosity about a stranger; but my young brother must not be elated; nor discouraged when they drop off. A young pastor's start in life is attended by many trials. There is always a little excitement at first, and an appearance of seats letting and the ladies very polite to you. Take it easily, my dear brother! Don't expect too much. In a year or two—by-and-by, when things settle down—then you

can see how it's going to be."

"But don't you think it possible that things may never settle down, but continue rising up instead?" said Mr. Vincent, making a little venture in the inspiration of the moment.

Mr. Tufton shook his head and raised his large hands slowly, with a deprecating regretful motion, to hold them over the fire. "Alas! he's got the fever already," said the old minister. "My dear young brother, you shall have my experience to refer to always. You're always welcome to my advice. Dear Tozer said to me just yesterday, 'You point out the pitfalls to him, Mr. Tufton, and give him your advice, and I'll take care that he shan't go wrong outside,' says dear Tozer. Ah, an invaluable man!"

"But a little disposed to interfere, I think," said Vincent, with an irrestrainable inclination to show his profound disrelish of all the advice which was about to be given him.

Mr. Tufton raised his heavy forefinger and shook it slowly. "No—no. Be careful, my dear brother. You must keep well with your deacons. You must not take up prejudices against them. Dear Tozer is a man of a thousand—a man of a thousand! Dear Tozer, if you listen to him, will keep you out of trouble. The trouble he takes and the money he spends for Salem Chapel is, mark my words, unknown—and," added the old pastor, awfully syllabbling the long word in his solemn bass, "in-con-ceiv-able."

"He is a bore and an ass for all that," said the daring invalid opposite, with perfect equanimity, as if uttering the most patent and apparent of truths. "Don't you give in to him, Mr. Vincent. A pretty business you will have with them all," she continued, dropping her knitting-needles and lifting her pale-blue eyes, with their sudden green gleam, to the face of the new-comer with a rapid perception of his character, which, having no sympathy in it, but rather a certain mischievous and pleased satisfaction in his probable discomfiture, gave anything but comfort to the object of her observation. "You are something new for them to pet and badger. I wonder how long they'll be of killing Mr. Vincent. Papa's tough; but you remember, mamma, they finished off the other man before us in two years."

"Oh, hush, Adelaide, hush! you'll frighten Mr. Vincent," cried the kind little mother, with uneasy looks: "when he comes to see us and cheer us up—as I am sure is very kind of him—it is a shame to put all sorts of things in his head, as papa and you do. Never mind Adelaide, Mr. Vincent, dear. Do your duty, and never fear anybody; that's always been my maxim, and I've always found it answer. Not going away, are you? Dear, dear! and we've had no wise talk at all, and never once asked for your poor dear mother—quite well, I hope?—and Miss Susan? You should have them come and see you, and cheer you up. Well,

good morning, if you must go; don't be long before you come again."

"And, my dear young brother, don't take up any prejudices," interposed Mr. Tufton, in tremulous bass, as he pressed Vincent's half-reluctant fingers in that large soft flabby ministerial hand. Adelaide added nothing to these valedictions; but when she too had received his leave-taking, and he had emerged from the shadow of the geraniums, the observer paused once more in her knitting. "This one will not hold out two years," said Adelaide, calmly, to herself, no one else paying any attention; and she returned to her work with the zest of a spectator at the commencement of an exciting drama. She did double work all the afternoon under the influence of this refreshing stimulant. It was quite a new interest in her life.

Meanwhile young Vincent left the green gates of Siloam Cottage with no very comfortable feelings—with feelings, indeed, the reverse of comfortable, yet conscious of a certain swell and elevation in his mind at the same moment. It was for him to show the entire community of Carlingford the difference between his reign and the old regime. It was for him to change the face of affairs—to reduce Tozer into his due place of subordination, and to bring in an influx of new life, intelligence, and enlightenment over the prostrate butterman. The very sordidness and contraction of the little world into which he had just received so distinct a view, promoted the revulsion of feeling which now cheered him. The aspiring young man could as soon have consented to lose his individuality altogether as to acknowledge the most distant possibility of accepting Tozer as his guide, philosopher, and friend. He went back again through Grove Street, heated and hastened on his way by those impatient thoughts. When he came as far as Salem, he could not but pause to look at it with its pinched gable and mean little belfry, innocent of a bell. The day was overclouded, and no clearness of atmosphere relieved the aspect of the shabby chapel, with its black railing, and locked gates, and dank flowerless grass inside. To see anything venerable or sacred in the aspect of such a place, required an amount of illusion and glamour which the young minister could not summon into his eyes. It was not the centre of light in a dark place, the simple tribune from which the people's preacher should proclaim, to the awe and conviction of the multitude, that Gospel once preached to the poor, of which he flattered himself he should be the truest messenger in Carlingford. Such had been the young man's dreams in Homerton—dreams mingled, it is true, with personal ambition, but full notwithstanding of generous enthusiasm. No—nothing of the kind. Only Salem Chapel, with so many pews let, and so many still to be disposed of, and Tozer a guardian angel at the door. Mr. Vincent was so far left to himself as to give vent to an impatient exclamation as he turned away. But still matters were not hopeless. He himself was a very different man from Mr. Tufton. Kindred spirits there must surely be in Carlingford to answer to the call of his. Another

day might dawn for the Nonconformists, who were not aware of their own dignity. With this thought he retraced his steps a little, and, with an impulse which he did not explain to himself, threaded his way up a narrow lane and emerged into Back Grove Street, about the spot where he had lately paid his pastoral visit, and made so unexpected an acquaintance. This woman—or should he not say lady?—was a kind of first-fruits of his mission. The young man looked up with a certain wistful interest at the house in which she lived. She was neither young nor fair, it is true, but she interested the youthful Nonconformist, who was not too old for impulses of chivalry, and who could not forget her poor fingers scarred with her rough work. He had no other motive for passing the house but that of sympathy and compassion for the forlorn brave creature who was so unlike her surroundings; and no throbbing pulse or trembling nerve forewarned Arthur Vincent of the approach of fate.

At that moment, however, fate was approaching in the shape of a handsome carriage, which made quite an exaggeration of echo in this narrow back-street, which rang back every jingle of the harness and dint of the hoofs from every court and opening. It drew up before Mrs. Hilyard's door—at the door of the house, at least, in which Mrs. Hilyard was a humble lodger; and while Vincent slowly approached, a brilliant vision suddenly appeared before him, rustling forth upon the crowded pavement, where the dirty children stood still to gape at her. A woman—a lady—a beautiful dazzling creature, resplendent in the sweetest English roses, the most delicate bewildering bloom. Though it was but for a moment, the bewildered young minister had time to note the dainty foot, the daintier hand, the smiling sunshiny eyes, the air of conscious supremacy, which was half command and half entreaty—an ineffable combination. That vision descended out of the heavenly chariot upon the mean pavement just as Mr. Vincent came up; and at the same moment a ragged boy, struck speechless, like the young minister, by the apparition, planted himself full in her way with open mouth and staring eyes, too much overpowered by sudden admiration to perceive that he stopped the path. Scarcely aware what he was doing, as much beauty-struck as his victim, Vincent, with a certain unconscious fury, seized the boy by the collar, and swung him impatiently off the pavement, with a feeling of positive resentment against the imp, whose rags were actually touching those sacred splendid draperies. The lady made a momentary pause, turned half round, smiled with a gracious inclination of her head, and entered at the open door, leaving the young pastor in an incomprehensible ecstasy, with his hat off, and all his pulses beating loud in his ears, riveted, as the romancers say, to the pavement. When the door shut he came to himself, stared wildly into the face of the next passenger who came along the narrow street, and then, becoming aware that he still stood uncovered, grew violently red, put on his hat, and went off at a great pace. But what was the use of going off? The deed was done. The world on the other

side of these prancing horses was a different world from that on this side. Those other matters, of which he had been thinking so hotly, had suddenly faded into a background and accessories to the one triumphant figure which occupied all the scene. He scarcely asked himself who was that beautiful vision? The fact of her existence was at the moment too overpowering for any secondary inquiries. He had seen her—and lo! the universe was changed. The air tingled softly with the sound of prancing horses and rolling wheels, the air breathed an irresistible soft perfume, which could nevermore die out of it, the air rustled with the silken thrill of those womanly robes. There she had enthroned herself—not in his startled heart, but in the palpitating world, which formed in a moment's time into one great background and framework for that beatific form.

What the poor young man had done to be suddenly assailed and carried off his feet by this wonderful and unexpected apparition, we are unable to say. He seemed to have done nothing to provoke it: approaching quietly as any man might do, pondering grave thoughts of Salem Chapel, and how he was to make his post tenable, to be transfixed all at once and unawares by that fairy lance, was a spite of fortune which nobody could have predicted. But the thing was done. He went home to hide his stricken head, as was natural; tried to read, tried to think of a popular series of lectures, tried to lay plans for his campaign and heroic desperate attempts to resuscitate the shopkeeping Dissenterism of Carlingford into a lofty Nonconformist ideal. But vain were the efforts. Wherever he lifted his eyes, was not She there, all-conquering and glorious? when he did not lift his eyes, was not she everywhere Lady Paramount of the conscious world? Womankind in general, which had never, so to speak, entered his thoughts before, had produced much trouble to poor Arthur Vincent since his arrival in Carlingford. But Phœbe Tozer, pink and blooming—Mrs. Hilyard, sharp and strange—Adelaide Tufton, pale spectator of a life with which she had nothing to do—died off like shadows, and left no sign of their presence. Who was She?

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER the remarkable encounter which had thus happened to the young minister, life went on with him in the dullest routine for some days. Thursday came, and he had to go to Mrs. Brown's tea-party, where, in the drawing-room up-stairs, over the Devonshire Dairy, after tea, and music, and the diversions of the evening, he conducted prayers to the great secret satisfaction of the hostess, who felt that the superior piety of her entertainment entirely made up for any little advantage in point of gentility which Mrs. Tozer, with a grown-

up daughter fresh from a boarding-school, might have over her. On Friday evening there was the singing-class at the chapel, which Mr. Vincent was expected to look in upon, and from which he had the privilege of walking home with Miss Tozer. When he arrived with his blooming charge at the private door, the existence of which he had not hitherto been aware of, Tozer himself appeared, to invite the young pastor to enter. This time it was the butterman's unadorned domestic hearth to which Mr. Vincent was introduced. This happy privacy was in a little parlour, which, being on the same floor with the butter-shop, naturally was not without a reminiscence of the near vicinity of all those hams and cheeses—a room nearly blocked up by the large family-table, at which, to the disgust of Phœbe, the apprentices sat at meal-times along with the family. One little boy, distinguished out of doors by a red worsted comforter, was, besides Phœbe, the only member of the family itself now at home; the others being two sons, one in Australia, and the other studying for a minister, as Mrs. Tozer had already informed her pastor, with motherly pride. Mrs. Tozer sat in an easy-chair by the fire darning stockings on this October night; her husband, opposite to her, had been looking over his greasy books, one of which lay open upon a little writing-desk, where a bundle of smaller ones in red leather, with "Tozer, Cheesemonger," stamped on them in gilt letters, lay waiting Phœbe's arrival to be made up. The Benjamin of the house sat half-way down the long table with his slate working at his lessons. The margin of space round this long table scarcely counted in the aspect of the room. There was space enough for chairs to be set round it, and that was all: the table with its red-and-blue cover and the faces appearing above it, constituted the entire scene. Mr. Vincent stood uneasily at a corner when he was brought into the apartment, and distinctly placed himself at table, as if at a meal, when he sat down.

"Do you now take off your greatcoat, and make yourself comfortable," said Mrs. Tozer; "there's a bit of supper coming presently. This is just what I like, is this. A party is very well in its way, Mr. Vincent, sir; but when a gen'leman comes in familiar, and takes us just as we are, that's what I like. We never can be took wrong of an evening, Tozer and me; there's always a bit of something comfortable for supper; and after the shop's shut in them long evenings, time's free. Phœbe, make haste and take off your things. What a colour you've got, to be sure, with the night air! I declare, Pa, somebody must have been saying something to her, or she'd never look so bright."

"I daresay there's more things than music gets talked of at the singing," said Tozer, thus appealed to. "But she'd do a deal better if she'd try to improve her mind than take notice what the young fellows says."

"Oh, Pa, the idea! and before Mr. Vincent too," cried Phoebe—"to think I should ever dream of listening to anything that anybody might choose to say!"

Vincent, to whom the eyes of the whole family turned, grinned a feeble smile, but, groaning in his mind, was totally unequal to the effort of saying anything. After a moment's pause of half-disappointed expectation, Phœbe disappeared to take off her bonnet; and Mrs. Tozer, bestirring herself, cleared away the desk and books, and went into the kitchen to inquire into the supper. The minister and the deacon were accordingly left alone.

"Three more pews applied for this week—fifteen sittings in all," said Mr. Tozer; "that's what I call satisfactory, that is. We mustn't let the steam go down—not on no account. You keep well at them of Sundays, Mr. Vincent, and trust to the managers, sir, to keep 'em up to their dooty. Me and Mr. Tufton was consulting the other day. He says as we oughtn't to spare you, and you oughtn't to spare yourself. There hasn't been such a opening not in our connection for fifteen year. We all look to you to go into it, Mr. Vincent. If all goes as I expect, and you keep up as you're doing, I see no reason why we shouldn't be able to put another fifty to the salary next year."

"Oh!" said poor Vincent, with a miserable face. He had been rather pleased to hear about the "opening," but this matter-of-fact encouragement and stimulus threw him back into dismay and disgust.

"Yes," said the deacon, "though I wouldn't advise you, as a young man settin' out in life, to calculate upon it, yet we all think it more than likely; but if you was to ask my advice, I'd say to give it 'em a little more plain—meaning the Church folks. It's expected of a new man. I'd touch 'em up in the State-Church line, Mr. Vincent, if I was you. Give us a coorse upon the anomalies, and that sort of thing—the bishops in their palaces, and the fisherman as was the start of it all; there's a deal to be done in that way. It always tells; and my opinion is as you might secure the most part of the young men and thinkers, and them as can see what's what, if you lay it on pretty strong. Not," added the deacon, remembering in time to add that necessary salve to the conscience—"not as I would have you neglect what's more important; but, after all, what is more important, Mr. Vincent, than freedom of opinion and choosing your own religious teacher? You can't put gospel truth in a man's mind till you've freed him out of them bonds. It stands to reason—as long as he believes just what he's told, and has it all made out for him the very words he's to pray, there may be feelin', sir, but there can't be no spiritual understandin' in that man."

"Well, one can't deny that there have been enlightened men in the Church of England," said the young Nonconformist, with lofty candour. "The inconsistencies of the human mind are wonderful; and it is coming to be pretty clearly understood in the intellectual world, that a man may show the most penetrating genius, and even the widest liberality, and yet be led a willing slave in the bonds of religious rite and ceremony. One cannot understand it, it

is true; but in our clearer atmosphere we are bound to exercise Christian charity. Great as the advantages are on our side of the question, I would not willingly hurt the feelings of a sincere Churchman, who, for anything I know, may be the best of men."

Mr. Tozer paused with a "humph!" of uncertainty; rather dazzled with the fine language, but doubtful of the sentiment. At length light seemed to dawn upon the excellent butterman. "Bless my soul! that's a new view," said Tozer; "that's taking the superior line over them! My impression is as that would tell beautiful. Eh! it's famous, that is! I've heard a many gentlemen attacking the Church, like, from down below, and giving it her about her money and her greatness, and all that; but our clearer atmosphere—there's the point! I always knew as you was a clever young man, Mr. Vincent, and expected a deal from you; but that's a new view, that is!"

"Oh, Pa, dear! don't be always talking about chapel business," said Miss Phœbe, coming in. "I am sure Mr. Vincent is sick to death of Salem. I am sure his heart is in some other place now; and if you bore him always about the chapel, he'll never, never take to Carlingford. Oh, Mr. Vincent, I am sure you know it is quite true!"

"Indeed," said the young minister, with a sudden recollection, "I can vouch for my heart being in Carlingford, and nowhere else;" and as he spoke his colour rose. Phœbe clapped her hands with a little semblance of confusion.

"Oh, la!" cried that young lady, "that is quite as good as a confession that you have lost it, Mr. Vincent. Oh, I am so interested! I wonder who it can be!"

"Hush, child; I daresay we shall know before long," said Mrs. Tozer, who had also rejoined the domestic party; "and don't you colour up or look ashamed, Mr. Vincent. Take my word, it's the very best a young minister can do. To be sure, where there's a quantity of young ladies in a congregation, it sometimes makes a little dispeace; but there ain't to say many to choose from in Salem."

"La, mamma, how can you think it's a lady in Salem?" cried Phœbe, in a flutter of consciousness.

"Oh, you curious thing!" cried Mrs. Tozer: "she'll never rest, Mr. Vincent, till she's found it all out. She always was, from a child, a dreadful one for finding out a secret. But don't you trouble yourself; it's the very best thing a young minister can do."

Poor Vincent made a hasty effort to exculpate himself from the soft impeachment, but with no effect. Smiles, innuendoes, a succession of questions asked by Phœbe, who retired, whenever she had made her remark, with conscious looks and pink blushes, perpetually renewed this delightful subject. The unlucky young man retired upon Tozer. In desperation he laid himself open to the less troublesome infliction of the butterman's advice. In

the mean time the table was spread, and supper appeared in most substantial and savoury shape; the only drawback being, that whenever the door was opened, the odours of bacon and cheese from the shop came in like a musty shadow of the boiled ham and hot sausages within.

“I am very partial to your style, Mr. Vincent,” said the deacon; “there’s just one thing I’d like to observe, sir, if you’ll excuse me. I’d give ’em a coorse; there’s nothing takes like a coorse in our connection. Whether it’s on a chapter or a book of Scripture, or on a perticklar doctrine, I’d make a pint of giving ’em a coorse if it was me. There was Mr. Bailey, of Parson’s Green, as was so popular before he married—he had a historical coorse in the evenings, and a coorse upon the eighth of Romans in the morning; and it was astonishing to see how they took. I walked over many and many’s the summer evening myself, he kep’ up the interest so. There ain’t a cleverer man in our body, nor wasn’t a better liked as he was then.”

“And now I understand he’s gone away—what was the reason?” asked Mr. Vincent.

Tozer shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. “All along of the women: they didn’t like his wife; and my own opinion is, he fell off dreadful. Last time I heard him, I made up my mind I’d never go back again—me that was such an admirer of his; and the managers found the chapel was falling off, and a deputation waited on him; and, to be sure, he saw it his duty to go.”

“And, oh, she was so sweetly pretty!” cried Miss Phœbe: “but pray, pray, Mr. Vincent, don’t look so pale. If you marry a pretty lady, we’ll all be so kind to her! We shan’t grudge her our minister; we shall——”

Here Miss Phœbe paused, overcome by her emotions.

“I do declare there never was such a child,” said Mrs. Tozer: “it’s none of your business, Phœbe. She’s a great deal too feelin’, Mr. Vincent. But I don’t approve, for my part, of a minister marrying a lady as is too grand for her place, whatever Phœbe may say. It’s her that should teach suchlike as us humility and simple ways; and a fine lady isn’t no way suitable. Not to discourage you, Mr. Vincent, I haven’t a doubt, for my part, that you’ll make a nice choice.”

“I have not the least intention of trying the experiment,” said poor Vincent, with a faint smile; then, turning to his deacon, he plunged into the first subject that occurred to him. “Do you know a Mrs. Hilyard in Back Grove Street?” asked the young minister. “I went to see her the other day. Who is she, or where does she belong to, can you tell me?—and which of your great ladies in Carlingford is it,” he added, with a little catching of his breath after a momentary pause, “who visits that poor lady? I saw a carriage at her door.”

“Meaning the poor woman at the back of the chapel?” said Tozer—“I don’t

know nothing of her, except that I visited there, sir, as you might do, in the way of dooty. Ah! I fear she's in the gall of bitterness, Mr. Vincent; she didn't take my 'umble advice, sir, not as a Christian ought. But she comes to the chapel regular enough; and you may be the means of putting better thoughts into her mind; and as for our great ladies in Carlingford," continued Mr. Tozer, with the air of an authority, "never a one of them, I give you my word, would go out of her way a-visiting to one of the chapel folks. They're a deal too bigoted for that, especially them at St. Roque's."

"Oh, Pa, how can you say so," cried Phœbe, "when it's very well known the ladies go everywhere, where the people are very, very poor? but then Mr. Vincent said a poor lady. Was it a nice carriage? The Miss Wodehouses always walk, and so does Mrs. Glen, and all the Strangeways. Oh, I know, it was the young Dowager—that pretty, pretty lady, you know, mamma, that gives the grand parties, and lives in Grange Lane. I saw her carriage going up the lane by the chapel once. Oh, Mr. Vincent, wasn't she very, very pretty, with blue eyes and brown hair?"

"I could not tell you what kind of eyes and hair they were," said Mr. Vincent, trying hard to speak indifferently, and quite succeeding so far as Phœbe Tozer was concerned; for who could venture to associate the minister of Salem, even as a victim, with the bright eyes of Lady Western? "I thought it strange to see her there, whoever she was."

"Oh, how insensible you are!" murmured Phœbe, across the table. Perhaps, considering all things, it was not strange that Phœbe should imagine her own pink bloom to have dimmed the young pastor's appreciation of other beauty.

"But it was Mrs. Hilyard I inquired about, and not this Lady—Lady what, Miss Phœbe?" asked the reverend hypocrite; "I don't profess to be learned in titles, but hers is surely a strange one. I thought dowager was another word for an old woman."

"She's a beautiful young creature," broke in the butlerman. "I mayn't approve of such goings-on, but I can't shut my eyes. She deals with me regular, and I can tell you the shop looks like a different place when them eyes of hers are in it. She's out of our line, and she's out of your line, Mr. Vincent," added Tozer, apologetically, coming down from his sudden enthusiasm, "or I mightn't say as much as I do say, for she's gay, and always a-giving parties, and spending her life in company, as I don't approve of; but to look in her face, you couldn't say a word against her—nor I couldn't. She might lead a man out of his wits, and I wouldn't not to say blame him. If the angels are nicer to look at, it's a wonder to me!" Having reached to this pitch of admiration, the alarmed butlerman came to a sudden pause, looked round him somewhat dismayed, wiped his forehead, rubbed his hands, and evidently felt that he had committed himself, and was at the mercy of his audience. Little did the guilty Tozer

imagine that never before—not when giving counsel upon chapel business in the height of wisdom, or complimenting the sermon as only a chapel-manager, feeling in his heart that the seats were letting, could—had he spoken so much to the purpose in young Vincent’s hearing, or won so much sympathy from the minister. As for the female part of the company, they were at first too much amazed for speech. “Upon my word, Papa!” burst from the lips of the half-laughing, half-angry Phœbe. Mrs. Tozer, who had been cutting bread with a large knife, hewed at her great loaf in silence, and not till that occupation was over divulged her sentiments.

“Some bread, Mr. Vincent?” said at last that injured woman: “that’s how it is with all you men. Niver a one, however you may have been brought up, nor whatever pious ways you may have been used to, can stand out against a pretty face. Thank goodness, we know better. Beauty’s but skin-deep, Mr. Vincent; and, for my part, I can’t see the difference between one pair o’ eyes and another. I daresay I see as well out of mine as Lady Western does out o’ hers, though Tozer goes on about ’em. It’s a mercy for the world, women ain’t carried away so; and to hear a man as is the father of a family, and ought to set an example, a-talking like this in his own house! What is the minister to think, Tozer? and Phœbe, a girl as is as likely to take up notions about her looks as most? It’s what I didn’t expect from you.”

“La, mamma! as if there was any likeness between Lady Western and me!” cried Phœbe, lifting a not-unexpectant face across the table. But Mr. Vincent was not equal to the occasion. In that locale, and under these circumstances, a tolerable breadth of compliment would not have shocked anybody’s feelings; but the pastor neglected his opportunities. He sat silent, and made no reply to Phœbe’s look. He even at this moment, if truth must be told, devoted himself to the well-filled plate which Mrs. Tozer’s hospitality had set before him. He would fain have made a diversion in poor Tozer’s favour had anything occurred to him in the thrill of sudden excitement which Tozer’s declaration had surprised him into. As it was, tingling with anxiety to hear more of that unknown enchantress, whose presence made sunshine even in the buttermilk shop, no indifferent words would find their way to Vincent’s lips. So he bestowed his attentions instead upon the comfortable supper to which everybody around him, quite unexcited by this little interlude, was doing full justice, and, not venturing to ask, listened with a palpitating heart.

“You see, Mr. Vincent,” resumed Mrs. Tozer, “that title of ‘the young Dowager’ has been given to Lady Western by them as is her chief friends in Carlingford. Such little things comes to our knowledge as they mightn’t come to other folks in our situation, by us serving the best families. There’s but two families in Grange Lane as don’t deal with Tozer, and one of them’s a new-comer as knows no better, and the other a stingy old bachelor, as we wouldn’t

go across the road to get his custom. A well-kept house must have its butter, and its cheese, and its ham regular; but when there's but a man and a maid, and them nigh as bilious as the master, and picking bits of cheese as one never heard the name of, and as has to be sent to town for, or to the Italian shop, it stands to reason neither me nor Tozer cares for a customer like that."

"Oh, Ma, what does Mr. Vincent care about the customers?" cried Phœbe, in despair.

"He might, then, before all's done," said the deaconess. "We couldn't be as good friends to the chapel, nor as serviceable, nor as well thought on in our connection, if it wasn't for the customers. So you see, sir, Lady Western, she's a young lady not a deal older than my Phœbe, but by reason of having married an old man, she has a step-son twice as old as herself, and he's married; and so this gay pretty creature here, she's the Dowager Lady Western. I've seen her with young Lady Western, her step-daughter-in-law, and young Lady Western was a deal older, and more serious-looking, and knew twenty times more of life than the Dowager—and you may be sure she don't lose the opportunity to laugh at it neither—and so that's how the name arose."

"Thank you for the explanation; and I suppose, of course, she lives in Grange Lane," said the pastor, still bending with devotion over his plate.

"Dear, dear, you don't eat nothink, Mr. Vincent," cried his benevolent hostess; "that comes of study, as I'm always a-telling Tozer. A deal better, says I, to root the minister out, and get him to move about for the good of his health, than to put him up to sermons and coorses, when we're all as pleased as Punch to start with. She lives in Grange Lane, to be sure, as they most all do as is anything in Carlingford. Fashion's all—but I like a bit of stir and life myself, and couldn't a-bear them close walls. But it would be news in Salem that we was spending our precious time a-talking over a lady like Lady Western; and as for the woman at the back of the chapel, don't you be led away to go to everybody as Mrs. Brown sends you to, Mr. Vincent. She's a good soul, but she's always a-picking up somebody. Tozer's been called up at twelve o'clock, when we were all a-bed, to see somebody as was dying; and there was no dying about it, but only Mrs. Brown's way. My son, being at his eddication for a minister, makes me feel mother-like to a young pastor, Mr. Vincent. I'd be grateful to anybody as would give my boy warning when it comes to be his time."

"I almost wonder," said Vincent, with a little natural impatience, "that you did not struggle on with Mr. Tufton for a little longer, till your son's education was finished."

Mrs. Tozer held up her head with gratified pride. "He'll be two years before he's ready, and there's never no telling what may happen in that time," said the

pleased mother, forgetting how little favourable to her guest was any anticipated contingency. The words were very innocently spoken, but they had their effect upon Vincent. He made haste to extricate himself from the urgent hospitality which surrounded him. He was deafer than ever to Miss Phœbe's remarks, and listened with a little impatience to Tozer's wisdom. As soon as he could manage it, he left them, with abundant material for his thoughts. "There's never no telling what may happen in that time," rang in his ears as he crossed George Street to his lodging, and the young minister could scarcely check the disgust and impatience which were rising in his mind. In all the pride of his young intellect, to be advised by Tozer—to have warning stories told him of that unfortunate brother in Parson's Green, whose pretty wife made herself obnoxious to the deacons' wives—to have the support afforded by the buttermilk to the chapel thrown in his face with such an undisguised claim upon his gratitude—oh heaven, was this what Homerton was to come to? Perhaps he had been brought here, in all the young flush of his hopes, only to have the life crushed out of him by those remorseless chapel-managers, and room made over his tarnished fame and mortified expectations—over his body, as the young man said to himself in unconscious heroics—for young Tozer's triumphant entrance. On the whole, it was not to be supposed that to see himself at the mercy of such a limited and jealous coterie—people proud of their liberality to the chapel, and altogether unable to comprehend the feelings of a sensitive and cultivated mind—could be an agreeable prospect to the young man. Their very approbation chafed him; and if he went beyond their level, or exceeded their narrow limit, what mercy was he to expect, what justice, what measure of comprehension? He went home with a bitterness of disgust in his mind far more intense and tragical than appeared to be at all necessary in the circumstances, and which only the fact that this was his first beginning in real life, and that his imagination had never contemplated the prominent position of the butter-shop and the Devonshire Dairy, in what he fondly called his new sphere, could have justified. Perhaps no new sphere ever came up to the expectations of the neophyte; but to come, if not with too much gospel, yet with an intellectual Christian mission, an evangelist of refined nonconformity, an apostle of thought and religious opinion, and to sink suddenly into "coorses" of sermons and statistics of seat-letting in Salem—into tea-parties of deacons' wives, and singing-classes—into the complacent society of those good people who were conscious of doing so much for the chapel and supporting the minister—that was a downfall not to be lightly thought of. Salem itself, and the new pulpit, which had a short time ago represented to poor Vincent that tribune from which he was to influence the world, that point of vantage which was all a true man needed for the making of his career, dwindled into a miserable scene of trade before his disenchanted eyes—a preaching shop, where his success was to be measured by the seat-

letting, and his soul decanted out into periodical issue under the seal of Tozer & Co. Such, alas! were the indignant thoughts with which, the old Adam rising bitter and strong within him, the young Nonconformist hastened home.

And She was Lady Western—the gayest and brightest and highest luminary in all the society of Carlingford. As well love the moon, who no longer descends to Endymion, as lift presumptuous eyes to that sweeter planet which was as much out of reach of the Dissenting minister. Poor fellow! his room did not receive a very cheerful inmate when he shut the door upon the world and sat down with his thoughts.

CHAPTER V.

IT was about this time, when Mr. Vincent was deeply cast down about his prospects, and saw little comfort before or around him, and when, consequently, an interest apart from himself, and which could detach his thoughts from Salem and its leading members, was of importance, that his mother's letters began to grow specially interesting. Vincent could not quite explain how it was, but unquestionably those female epistles had expanded all at once; and instead of the limited household atmosphere hitherto breathing in them—an atmosphere confined by the strait cottage walls, shutting in the little picture which the absent son knew so well, and in which usually no figure appeared but those of his pretty sister Susan, and their little servant, and a feminine neighbour or two—instead of those strict household limits, the world, as we have said, had expanded round the widow's pen; the cottage walls or windows seemed to have opened out to disclose the universe beyond: life itself, and words the symbols of life, seemed quickened and running in a fuller current; and the only apparent reason for all this revolution was that one new acquaintance had interrupted Mrs. Vincent's seclusion,—one only visitor, who, from an unexpected call, recorded with some wonderment a month or two before, had gained possession of the house apparently, and was perpetually referred to—by Susan, in her gradually shortening letters, with a certain timidity and reluctance to pronounce his name; by the mother with growing frequency and confidence. Vincent, a little jealous of this new influence, had out of the depths of his own depression written with some impatience to ask who this Mr. Fordham was, and how he had managed to establish himself so confidentially in the cottage, when his mother's letter astounded him with the following piece of news:—

“MY DEAREST BOY,—Mr. Fordham is, or at least will be—or, if I must be cautious, as your poor dear papa always warned me I should—wishes very much, and I hope will succeed in being—your brother, my own Arthur. This is

sudden news, but you know, and I have often told you, that a crisis always does seem to arrive suddenly; however much you may have been looking for it, or making up your mind to it, it does come like a blow at the time; and no doubt there is something in human nature to account for it, if I was a philosopher, like your dear papa and you. Yes, my dear boy, that is how it is. Of course, I have known for some time past that he must have had a motive—no mother could long remain ignorant of that; and I can't say but what, liking Mr. Fordham so much, and seeing him every way so unexceptionable, except, perhaps, in the way of means, which we know nothing about, and which I have always thought a secondary consideration to character, as I always brought up my children to think, I was very much pleased. For you know, my dear boy, life is uncertain with the strongest; and I am becoming an old woman, and you will marry no doubt, and what is to become of Susan unless she does the same? So I confess I was pleased to see Mr. Fordham's inclinations showing themselves. And now, dear Arthur, I've given them my blessing, and they are as happy as ever they can be, and nothing is wanting to Susan's joy but your sympathy. I need not suggest to my dear boy to write a few words to his sister to make her feel that he shares our happiness; for Providence has blessed me in affectionate children, and I can trust the instincts of my Arthur's heart; and oh! my dear son, how thankful I ought to be, and how deeply I ought to feel God's blessings! He has been a father to the fatherless, and the strength of the widow. To think that before old age comes upon me, and while I am still able to enjoy the sight of your prosperity, I should have the happiness of seeing you comfortably settled, and in the way to do your Master's work, and make yourself a good position, and Susan so happily provided for, and instead of losing her, a new son to love—indeed, I am overpowered, and can scarcely hold up my head under my blessings.

“Write immediately, my dearest boy, that we may have the comfort of your concurrence and sympathy, and I am always, with much love,

“My Arthur's loving mother,

“E. S. VINCENT.

“P. S.—Mr. Fordham's account of his circumstances seems quite satisfactory. He is not in any profession, but has enough, he says, to live on very comfortably, and is to give me more particulars afterwards; which, indeed, I am ashamed to think he could imagine necessary, as it looks like want of trust, and as if Susan's happiness was not the first thing with us—but indeed I must learn to be prudent and self-interested for your sakes.”

It was with no such joyful feelings as his mother's that Vincent read this letter. Perhaps it was the jealousy with which he had heard of this unknown Mr. Fordham suddenly jumping into the friendship of the cottage, which made him contemplate with a most glum and suspicious aspect the stranger's promotion

into the love of Susan, and the motherly regard of Mrs. Vincent. Hang the fellow! who was he? the young minister murmured over his spoiled breakfast: and there appeared to him in a halo of sweet memories, as he had never seen them in reality, the simple graces of his pretty sister, who was as much above the region of the Phœbe Tozers as that ineffable beauty herself who had seized with a glance the vacant throne of poor Arthur Vincent's heart. There was nothing ineffable about Susan—but her brother had seen no man even in Homerton whom he would willingly see master of her affections; and he was equally startled, dissatisfied, and alarmed by this information. Perhaps his mother's unworldliness was excessive. He imagined that he would have exacted more positive information about the fortunes of a stranger who had suddenly appeared without any special business there, who had no profession, and who might disappear lightly as he came, breaking poor Susan's heart. Mr. Vincent forgot entirely the natural process by which, doubtless, his mother's affections had been wooed and won as well as Susan's. To him it was a stranger who had crept into the house, and gained ascendancy there. Half in concern for Susan, half in jealousy for Susan's brother eclipsed, but believing himself to be entirely actuated by the former sentiment, the young minister wrote his mother a hurried, anxious, not too good-tempered note, begging her to think how important a matter this was, and not to come to too rapid a conclusion; and after he had thus relieved his feelings, went out to his day's work in a more than usually uncomfortable frame of mind. Mrs. Vincent congratulated herself upon her son's happy settlement, as well as upon her daughter's engagement. What if Mr. Fordham should turn out as unsatisfactory as Salem Chapel? His day's work was a round of visits, which were not very particularly to Mr. Vincent's mind. It was the day for his weekly call upon Mr. Tufton and various other members of the congregation not more attractive; and at Siloam Cottage he was reminded of Mrs. Hilyard, whom he had not seen again. Here at least was something to be found different from the ordinary level. He went up to Back Grove Street, not without a vague expectation in his mind, wondering if that singular stranger would look as unlike the rest of his flock to-day as she had done on the former occasion. But when Vincent emerged into the narrow street, what was that unexpected object which threw the young man into such sudden agitation? His step quickened unconsciously into the rapid silent stride of excitement. He was at the shabby door before any of the onlookers had so much as perceived him in the street. For once more the narrow pavement owned a little tattered crowd gazing at the pawing horses, the big footman, the heavenly chariot; and doubtless the celestial visitor must be within.

Mr. Vincent did not pause to think whether he ought to disturb the interview which, no doubt, was going on up-stairs. He left himself no time to consider punctilios, or even to think what was right in the matter. He went up with that

swell of excitement somehow winging his feet and making his footsteps light. How sweet that low murmur of conversation within as he reached the door? Another moment, and Mrs. Hilyard herself opened it, looking out with some surprise, her dark thin head, in its black lace kerchief, standing out against the bit of shabby drab-coloured wall visible through the opening of the door. A look of surprise for one moment, then a gleam of something like mirth lighted in the dark eyes, and the thin lines about her mouth moved, though no smile came. "It is you, Mr. Vincent?—come in," she said. "I should not have admitted any other visitor, but you shall come in, as you are my ghostly adviser. Sit down. My dear, this gentleman is my minister and spiritual guide."

And She, sitting there in all her splendour, casting extraordinary lights of beauty round her upon the mean apartment, perfuming the air and making it musical with that rustle of woman's robes which had never been out of poor Vincent's ears since he saw her first;—She lifted her lovely face, smiled, and bowed her beautiful head to the young man, who could have liked to go down on his knees, not to ask anything, but simply to worship. As he dared not do that, he sat down awkwardly upon the chair Mrs. Hilyard pointed to, and said, with embarrassment, that he feared he had chosen a wrong time for his visit, and would return again—but nevertheless did not move from where he was.

"No, indeed; I am very glad to see you. My visitors are not so many, nowadays, that I can afford to turn one from the door because another chooses to come the same day. My dear, you understand Mr. Vincent has had the goodness to take charge of my spiritual affairs," said the mistress of the room, sitting down, in her dark poor dress, beside her beautiful visitor, and laying her thin hands, still marked with traces of the coarse blue colour which rubbed off her work, and of the scars of the needle, upon the table where that work lay. "Thank heaven that's a luxury the poorest of us needs not deny herself. I liked your sermon last Sunday, Mr. Vincent. That about the fashion of treating serious things with levity, was meant for me. Oh, I didn't dislike it, thank you! One is pleased to think one's self of so much consequence. There are more ways of keeping up one's amour propre than your way, my lady. Now, don't you mean to go? You see I cannot possibly unburden my mind to Mr. Vincent while you are here."

"Did you ever hear anything so rude?" said the beauty, turning graciously to the young minister. "You call me a great lady, and all sorts of things, Rachel; but I never could be as rude as you are, and as you always were as long as I remember."

"My dear, the height of good-breeding is to be perfectly ill-bred when one pleases," said Mrs. Hilyard, taking her work upon her knee and putting on her thimble: "but though you are wonderfully pretty, you never had the makings of a thorough fine lady in you. You can't help trying to please everybody—

which, indeed, if there were no women in the world,” added that sharp observer, with a sudden glance at Vincent, who saw the thin lines again move about her mouth, “you might easily do without giving yourself much trouble. Mr. Vincent, if this lady won’t leave us, might I trouble you to talk? For two strains of thought, carried on at the same moment, now that I’m out of society, are too exhausting for me.”

With which speech she gravely pinned her work to her knee, threaded her needle with a long thread of blue cotton, and began her work with the utmost composure, leaving her two visitors in the awkward tête-à-tête position which the presence of a third person, entirely absorbed in her own employment, with eyes and face abstracted, naturally produces. Never in his life had Vincent been so anxious to appear to advantage—never had he been so totally deprived of the use of his faculties. His eager looks, his changing colour, perhaps interceded for him with the beautiful stranger, who was not ignorant of those signs of subjugation which she saw so often.

“I think it was you that were so good as to clear the way for me the last time I was here,” she said, with the sweetest grace, raising those lovely eyes, which put even Tozer beside himself, to the unfortunate pastor’s face. “I remember fancying you must be a stranger here, as I had not seen you anywhere in society. Those wonderful little wretches never seem to come to any harm. They always appear to me to be scrambling among the horses’ feet. Fancy, Rachel, one of those boys who flourish in the back streets, with such rags—oh, such rags!—you could not possibly make them, if you were to try, with scissors—such perfection must come of itself;—had just pushed in before me, and I don’t know what I should have done, if Mr. —— (I beg your pardon)—if you had not cleared the way.”

“Mr. Vincent,” said Mrs. Hilyard breaking in upon Vincent’s deprecation. “I am glad to hear you had somebody to help you in such a delicate distress. We poor women can’t afford to be so squeamish. What! are you going away? My dear, be sure you say down-stairs that you brought that poor creature some tea and sugar, and how grateful she was. That explains everything, you know, and does my lady credit at the same time. Good-bye. Well, I’ll kiss you if you insist upon it; but what can Mr. Vincent think to see such an operation performed between us? There! my love, you can make the men do what you like, but you know of old you never could conquer me.”

“Then you will refuse over and over again—and you don’t mind what I say—and you know he’s in Lonsdale, and why he’s there, and all about him——”

“Hush,” said the dark woman, looking all the darker as she stood in that bright creature’s shadow. “I know, and always will know, wherever he goes, and that he is after evil wherever he goes; and I refuse, and always will refuse—and my darling pretty Alice,” she cried, suddenly going up with rapid vehemence

to the beautiful young woman beside her, and kissing once more the delicate rose-cheek to which her own made so great a contrast, "I don't mind in the least what you say."

"Ah, Rachel, I don't understand you," said Lady Western, looking at her wistfully.

"You never did, my dear; but don't forget to mention about the tea and sugar as you go down-stairs," said Mrs. Hilyard, subsiding immediately, not without the usual gleam in her eyes and movement of her mouth, "else it might be supposed you came to have your fortune told, or something like that; and I wish your ladyship bon voyage, and no encounter with ragged boys in your way. Mr. Vincent," she continued, with great gravity, standing in the middle of the room, when Vincent, trembling with excitement, afraid, with the embarrassing timidity of inferior position, to offer his services, yet chafing in his heart to be obliged to stay, reluctantly closed the door, which he had opened for Lady Western's exit, "tell me why a young man of your spirit loses such an opportunity of conducting the greatest beauty in Carlingford to her carriage? Suppose she should come across another ragged boy, and faint on the stairs?"

"I should have been only too happy; but as I am not so fortunate as to know Lady Western," said the young minister, hesitating, "I feared to presume——"

With an entirely changed aspect his strange companion interrupted him. "Lady Western could not think that any man whom she met in my house presumed in offering her a common civility," said Mrs. Hilyard, with the air of a duchess, and an imperious gleam out of her dark eyes. Then she recollected herself, gave her startled visitor a comical look, and dropped into her chair, before which that coarsest of poor needlewoman's work was lying. "My house! it does look like a place to inspire respect, to be sure," she continued, with a hearty perception of the ludicrous, which Vincent was much too preoccupied to notice. "What fools we all are! but, my dear Mr. Vincent, you are too modest. My Lady Western could not frown upon anybody who honoured her with such a rapt observation. Don't fall in love with her, I beg of you. If she were merely a flirt, I shouldn't mind, but out of her very goodness she's dangerous. She can't bear to give pain to anybody, which of course implies that she gives double and treble pain when the time comes. There! I've warned you; for of course you'll meet again."

"Small chance of that," said Vincent, who had been compelling himself to remain quiet, and restraining his impulse, now that the vision had departed, to rush away out of the impoverished place. "Small chance of that," he repeated, drawing a long breath, as he listened with intent ears to the roll of the carriage which carried Her away; "society in Carlingford has no room for a poor Dissenting minister."

“All the better for him,” said Mrs. Hilyard, regarding him with curious looks, and discerning with female acuteness the haze of excitement and incipient passion which surrounded him. “Society’s all very well for people who have been brought up in it; but for a young recluse like you, that don’t know the world, it’s murder. Don’t look affronted. The reason is, you expect too much—twenty times more than anybody ever finds. But you don’t attend to my philosophy. Thinking of your sermon, Mr. Vincent? And how is our friend the butterman? I trust life begins to look more cheerful to you under his advice.”

“Life?” said the preoccupied minister, who was gazing at the spot where that lovely apparition had been; “I find it change its aspects perpetually. You spoke of Lonsdale just now, did you not? Is it possible that you know that little place? My mother and sister live there.”

“I am much interested to know that you have a mother and sister,” said the poor needlewoman before him, looking up with calm, fine-lady impertinence in his face. “But you did not hear me speak of Lonsdale; it was her ladyship who mentioned it. As for me, I interest myself in what is going on close by, Mr. Vincent. I am quite absorbed in the chapel; I want to know how you get on, and all about it. I took that you said on Sunday about levity deeply to heart. I entertain a fond hope that you will see me improve under your ministrations, even though I may never come up to the butterman’s standard. Some people have too high an ideal. If you are as much of an optimist as your respected deacon, I fear it will be ages before I can manage to make you approve of me.”

Vincent’s wandering thoughts were recalled a little by this attack. “I hope,” he said, rousing himself, “that you don’t think me so inexperienced as not to know that you are laughing at me? But indeed I should be glad to believe that the services at the chapel might sometimes perhaps be some comfort to you,” added the young pastor, assuming the dignity of his office. He met his penitent’s eyes at the moment, and faltered, moon-struck as he was, wondering if she saw through and through him, and knew that he was neither thinking of consolation nor of clerical duties, but only of those lingering echoes which, to any ears but his own, were out of hearing. There was little reason to doubt the acute perceptions of that half-amused, half-malicious glance.

“Comfort!” she cried; “what a very strange suggestion to make! Why, all the old churches in all the old ages have offered comfort. I thought you new people had something better to give us; enlightenment,” she said, with a gleam of secret mockery, throwing the word like a stone—“religious freedom, private judgment. Depend upon it, that is the rôle expected from you by the butterman. Comfort! one has that in Rome.”

“You never can have that but in conjunction with truth, and truth is not to be found in Rome,” said Vincent, pricking up his ears at so familiar a challenge.

“We’ll not argue, though you do commit yourself by an assertion,” said Mrs. Hilyard; “but oh, you innocent young man, where is the comfort to come from? Comfort will not let your seats and fill your chapel, even granting that you knew how to communicate it. I prefer to be instructed, for my part. You are just at the age, and in the circumstances, to do that.”

“I fear you still speak in jest,” said the minister, with some doubt, yet a little gratification; “but I shall be only too happy to have been the means of throwing any light to you upon the doctrines of our faith.”

For a moment the dark eyes gleamed with something like laughter. But there was nothing ill-natured in the amusement with which his strange new friend contemplated the young pastor in the depressions and confidences of his youth. She answered with a mock gravity which, at that moment, he was by no means clear-sighted enough to see through.

“Yes,” she said, demurely, “be sure you take advantage of your opportunities, and instruct us as long as you have any faith in instruction. Leave consolation to another time: but you don’t attend to me, Mr. Vincent; come another day: come on Monday, when I shall be able to criticise your sermons, and we shall have no Lady Western to put us out. These beauties are confusing, don’t you think? Only, I entreat you, whatever you do, don’t fall in love with her; and now, since I know you wish it, you may go away.”

Vincent stammered a faint protest as he accepted his dismissal, but rose promptly, glad to be released. Another thought, however, seemed to strike Mrs. Hilyard as she shook hands with him.

“Do your mother and sister in Lonsdale keep a school?” she said. “Nay, pray don’t look affronted. Clergymen’s widows and daughters very often do in the Church. I meant no impertinence in this case. They don’t? well, that is all I wanted to know. I daresay they are not likely to be in the way of dangerous strangers. Good-bye; and you must come again on Monday, when I shall be alone.”

“But—dangerous strangers—may I ask you to explain?” said Vincent, with a little alarm, instinctively recurring to his threatened brother-in-law, and the news which had disturbed his composure that morning before he came out.

“I can’t explain; and you would not be any the wiser,” said Mrs. Hilyard, peremptorily. “Now, good morning. I am glad they don’t keep a school; because, you know,” she added, looking full into his eyes, as if defying him to make any meaning out of her words, “it is very tiresome, tedious work, and wears poor ladies out. There!—good-bye; next day you come I shall be very glad to see you, and we’ll have no fine ladies to put us out.”

Vincent had no resource but to let himself out of the shabby little room which this strange woman inhabited as if it had been a palace. The momentary alarm

roused by her last words, and the state of half offence, half interest, into which, notwithstanding his pre-occupation, she had managed to rouse him, died away, however, as he re-entered the poor little street, which was now a road in Fairyland instead of a lane in Carlingford, to his rapt eyes. Golden traces of those celestial wheels surely lingered still upon the way, they still went rolling and echoing over the poor young minister's heart, which he voluntarily threw down before that heavenly car of Juggernaut. Every other impression faded out of his mind, and the infatuated young man made no effort of resistance, but hugged the enchanted chain. He had seen Her—spoken with Her—henceforward was of her acquaintance. He cast reason to the winds, and probability, and every convention of life. Did anybody suppose that all the world leagued against him could prevent him from seeing her again? He went home with an unspeakable elation, longing, and excitement, and at the same time with a vain floating idea in his mind that, thus inspired, no height of eloquence was impossible to him, and that triumph of every kind was inevitable. He went home, and got his writing-desk, and plunged into his lecture, nothing doubting that he could transfer to his work that glorious tumult of his thoughts; and, with his paper before him, wrote three words, and sat three hours staring into the roseate air, and dreaming dreams as wild as any Arabian tale. Such was the first effort of that chance encounter, in which the personages were not Lady Western and the poor Dissenting minister, but Beauty and Love, perennial hero and heroine of the romance that never ends.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was only two days after this eventful meeting that Vincent, idling and meditative as was natural in such a condition of mind, strayed into Masters's shop to buy some books. It would have been difficult for him to have explained why he went there, except, perhaps, because it was the last place in the world which his masters at the chapel would have advised him to enter. For there was another bookseller in the town, an evangelical man, patronised by Mr. Bury, the whilom rector, where all the Tract Society's publications were to be had, not to speak of a general range of literature quite wide enough for the minister of Salem. Masters's was a branch of the London Master's, and, as might be supposed, was equally amazed and indignant at the intrusion of a Dissenter among its consecrated book-shelves. He was allowed to turn over all the varieties of the 'Christian Year' on a side-table before any of the attendants condescended to notice his presence; and it proved so difficult to find the books he wanted, and so much more difficult to find anybody who would take the trouble of looking for them, that the young Nonconformist, who was sufficiently ready to take offence, began to get hot and impatient, and had all

but strode out of the shop, with a new mortification to record to the disadvantage of Carlingford. But just as he began to get very angry, the door swung softly open, and a voice became audible, lingering, talking to somebody before entering. Vincent stopped speaking, and stared in the shopman's astonished face when these tones came to his ear. He fell back instantly upon the side-table and the 'Christian Year,' forgetting his own business, and what he had been saying—forgetting everything except that She was there, and that in another moment they would stand again within the same walls. He bent over the much-multiplied volume with a beating heart, poising in one hand a tiny miniature copy just made to slip within the pocket of an Anglican waistcoat, and in the other the big red-leaved and morocco-bound edition, as if weighing their respective merits—put beside himself, in fact, if the truth must be told, oblivious of his errand, his position—of everything but the fact that She was at the door. She came in with a sweet flutter and rustle of sound, a perfumed air entering with her, as the unsuspected enthusiast thought, and began to lavish smiles, for which he would have given half his life, upon the people of the place, who flew to serve her. She had her tablets in her hand, with a list of what she wanted, and held up a dainty forefinger as she stood reading the items. As one thing after another was mentioned, Masters and his men darted off in search of it. There were fortunately enough to give each of them a separate errand, and the principal ranged his shining wares upon the counter before her, and bathed in her smiles, while all his satellites kept close at hand, listening with all their ears for another commission. Blessed Masters! happy shopmen! that one who looked so blank when Vincent stopped short at the sound of her voice and stared at him, had forgotten all about Vincent. She was there; and if a little impromptu litany would have pleased her ladyship, it is probable that it could have been got up on the spot after the best models, and that even the Nonconformist would have waived his objections to liturgical worship and led the responses. But Masters's establishment offered practical homage—only the poor Dissenting minister, divided between eagerness and fear, stood silent, flushed with excitement, turning wistful looks upon her, waiting till perhaps she might turn round and see him, and letting fall out of his trembling fingers those unregarded editions of the Anglican lyre.

“And two copies of the 'Christian Year,'” said Lady Western, suddenly. “Oh, thank you so much! but I know they are all on the side-table, and I shall go and look at them. Not the very smallest copy, Mr. Masters, and not that solemn one with the red edges; something pretty, with a little ornament and gilding: they are for two little protégées of mine. Oh, here is exactly what I want! another one like this, please. How very obliging all your people are,” said her ladyship, benignly, as the nearest man dashed off headlong to bring what she wanted—“but I think it is universal in Carlingford; and indeed the manners of our country people in general have improved very much of late. Don't you

think so? oh, there can't be a question about it!"

"I beg your ladyship's pardon, I am sure; but perhaps, my lady, it is not safe to judge the general question from your ladyship's point of view," said the polite bookseller, with a bow.

"Oh, pray don't say so; I should be wretched if I thought you took more trouble for me than for other people," said the young Dowager, with a sweetness which filled Vincent's heart with jealous pangs. She was close by his side—so close that those sacred robes rustled in his very ear, and her shawl brushed his sleeve. The poor young man took off his hat in a kind of ecstasy. If she did not notice him, what did it matter?—silent adoration, speechless homage, could not affront a queen.

And it was happily very far from affronting Lady Western. She turned round with a little curiosity, and looked up in his face. "Oh, Mr.—Mr. Vincent," cried the beautiful creature, brightening in recognition. "How do you do? I suppose you are a resident in Carlingford now, are not you? Pardon me, that I did not see you when I came in. How very, very good it is of you to go and see my—my friend! Did you ever see anything so dreadful as the place where she lives? and isn't she an extraordinary creature? Thank you, Mr. Masters; that's exactly what I want. I do believe she might have been Lord Chancellor, or something, if she had not been a woman," said the enchantress, once more lifting her lovely eyes with an expression of awe to Vincent's face.

"She seems a very remarkable person," said Vincent. "To see her where she is, makes one feel how insignificant are the circumstances of life."

"Really! now, how do you make out that?" said Lady Western; "for, to tell the truth, I think, when I see her, oh, how important they are! and that I'd a great deal rather die than live so. But you clever people take such strange views of things. Now tell me how you make that out?"

"Nay," said Vincent, lowering his voice with a delicious sense of having a subject to be confidential upon, "you know what conditions of existence all her surroundings imply; yet the most ignorant could not doubt for a moment her perfect superiority to them—a superiority so perfect," he added, with a sudden insight which puzzled even himself, "that it is not necessary to assert it."

"Oh, to be sure," said Lady Western, colouring a little, and with a momentary hauteur, "of course a Russell—I mean a gentlewoman—must always look the same to a certain extent; but, alas! I am only a very commonplace little woman," continued the beauty, brightening into those smiles which perhaps might be distributed too liberally, but which intoxicated for the moment every man on whom they fell. "I think those circumstances which you speak of so disrespectfully are everything! I have not a great soul to triumph over them. I

should break down, or they would overcome me—oh, you need not shake your head! I know I am right so far as I myself am concerned.”

“Indeed I cannot think so,” said the intoxicated young man; “you would make any circumstances—”

“What?”

But the bewildered youth made no direct reply. He only gazed at her, grew very red, and said, suddenly, “I beg your pardon,” stepping back in confusion, like the guilty man he was. The lady blushed, too, as her inquiring eyes met that unexpected response. Used as she was to adoration, she felt the silent force of the compliment withheld—it was a thousand times sweeter in its delicate suggestiveness and reserve of incense than any effusion of words. They were both a little confused for the moment, poor Vincent’s momentary betrayal of himself having somehow suddenly dissipated the array of circumstances which surrounded and separated two persons so far apart from each other in every conventional aspect. The first to regain her place and composure was of course Lady Western, who made him a pretty playful curtsy, and broke into a low, sweet ring of laughter.

“Now I shall never know whether you meant to be complimentary or contemptuous,” cried the young Dowager, “which is hard upon a creature with such a love of approbation as our friend says I have. However, I forgive you, if you meant to be very cutting, for her sake. It is so very kind of you to go to see her, and I am sure she enjoys your visits. Thank you, Mr. Masters, that is all. Have you got the two copies of the ‘Christian Year’? Put them into the carriage, please. Mr. Vincent, I am going to have the last of my summer-parties next Thursday—twelve o’clock; will you come?—only a cup of coffee, you know, or tea if you prefer it, and talkau discretion. I shall be happy to see you, and I have some nice friends, and one or two good pictures; so there you have an account of all the attractions my house can boast of. Do come: it will be my last party this season, and I rather want it to be a great success,” said the syren, looking up with her sweet eyes.

Vincent could not tell what answer he made in his rapture; but the next thing he was properly conscious of was the light touch of her hand upon his arm as he led her to her carriage, some sudden courageous impulse having prompted him to secure for himself that momentary blessedness. He walked forth in a dream, conducting that heavenly vision: and there, outside, stood the celestial chariot with those pawing horses, and the children standing round with open mouth to watch the lovely lady’s progress. It was he who put her in with such pride and humbleness as perhaps only a generous but inexperienced young man, suddenly surprised into passion, could be capable of—ready to kiss the hem of her garment, or do any other preposterous act of homage—and just as apt to blaze up into violent self-assertion should any man attempt to humble

him who had been thus honoured. While he stood watching the carriage out of sight, Masters himself came out to tell the young Nonconformist, whose presence that dignified tradesman had been loftily unconscious of a few minutes before, that they had found the book he wanted; and Vincent, thrilling in every pulse with the unlooked-for blessedness which had befallen him, was not sorry, when he dropped out of the clouds at the bookseller's accost, to re-enter that place where this enchantment still hovered, by way of calming himself down ere he returned to those prose regions which were his own lawful habitation. He saw vaguely the books that were placed on the counter before him—heard vaguely the polite purling of Masters's voice, all-solicitous to make up for the momentary incivility with which he had treated a friend of Lady Western's—and was conscious of taking out his purse and paying something for the volume, which he carried away with him. But the book might have been Sanscrit for anything Mr. Vincent cared—and he would have paid any fabulous price for it with the meekest resignation. His attempt to appear moderately interested, and to conduct this common transaction as if he had all his wits about him, was sufficient occupation just at this moment. His head was turned. There should have been roses blossoming all along the bare pavement of George Street to account for the sweet gleams of light which warmed the entire atmosphere as he traversed that commonplace way. Not only the interview just passed, but the meeting to come, bewildered him with an intoxicating delight. Here, then, was the society he had dreamed of, opening its perfumed doors to receive him. From Mrs. Tozer's supper-table to the bowery gates of Grange Lane was a jump which, ten days ago, would of itself have made the young minister giddy with satisfaction and pleasure. Now these calm emotions had ceased to move him; for not society, but a sweeter syren, had thrown chains of gold round the unsuspecting Nonconformist. With Her, Back Grove Street was Paradise. Where her habitation was, or what he should see there, was indifferent to Vincent. He was again to meet Herself.

CHAPTER VII.

THE days which intervened between this meeting and Lady Western's party were spent in a way which the managers of Salem would have been far from approving of. Mr. Vincent, indeed, was rapt out of himself, out of his work, out of all the ordinary regions of life and thought. When he sat down to his sermons, his pen hung idly in his hand, and his mind, wilfully cheating itself by that semblance of study, went off into long delicious reveries, indescribable, intangible—a secret sweet intoxication which forbade labour, yet nourished thought. Though he sometimes did not write a word in an hour, so deep was the aspect of studiousness displayed by the young pastor at his

writing-desk, and so entire the silence he maintained in his room, shut up in that world of dreams which nobody knew anything of, that his landlady, who was one of his hearers, communicated the fact to Tozer, and expatiated everywhere upon the extreme devotion to study displayed by the new minister. Old Mr. Tufton, who had been in the habit of putting together the disjointed palaver which he called a sermon on the Saturday morning, shook his head over the information, and doubted that his young brother was resorting more to carnal than to spiritual means of filling his chapel; but the members of Salem generally heard the rumour with pride, and felt a certain distinction accrue to themselves from the possibility that their pastor might ruin his health by over-study. It was a new sensation in Salem; and the news, as it was whispered about, certainly came to the ears of a few of those young men and thinkers, principally poor lawyers' clerks and drapers' assistants, whom Tozer was so anxious to reach, and drew two or three doubtful, genteel hearers to the chapel, where Mr. Vincent's sermon, though no better than usual, and in reality dashed off at the last moment in sheer desperation, when necessity momentarily thrust the dreams away, was listened to with a certain awe and devout attention, solely due to the toil it was reported to have cost. The young minister himself came out of the pulpit remorseful and ashamed, feeling that he had neglected his duty, and thoroughly disgusted with the superficial production, just lighted up with a few fiery sentences of that eloquence which belongs to excitement and passion, which he had just delivered. But Tozer and all the deacons buzzed approbation. They were penetrated with the conviction that he had worked hard at his sermon, and given them his best, and were not to be undeceived by the quality of the work itself, which was a secondary matter. More deeply disgusted and contemptuous than ever was the young pastor at the end of that Sunday—disgusted with himself to have done his work so poorly—contemptuous of those who were pleased with it—his heart swelling with mortified pride to think that what he thought so unworthy of him was more appreciated than his best efforts. For he did not know the report that had gone abroad; he did not know that, while brooding over his own rising passion, and absorbed in dreams with which Salem had nothing to do, the little world around him was complacently giving him credit for a purpose of wearing himself out in its behalf. The sermons so hastily written, thrust into a corner by the overpowering enchantment of those reveries, were not the only sin he had to charge against himself. He could not bring himself to bear the irksome society that surrounded him, in the state of elevation and excitement he was in. Tozer was unendurable, and Phœbe to be avoided at all costs. He did not even pay his promised visit to Mrs. Hilyard, nor go to Siloam Cottage as usual. In short, he spent the days in a kind of dream, avoiding all his duties, paying no visits, doing no pastoral work, neglecting the very sermon over which his landlady saw him hanging so many silent hours, without knowing

that all the vacant atmosphere between him and that blank sheet of paper, in which she saw nothing, was peopled with fairy visitants and unreal scenes to the dreamy eyes of her lodger. Such were the first effects of Circe's cup upon the young minister. He indulged himself consciously, with apologetic self-remonstrances, as Thursday approached. After that day, life was to go on as usual. No—not as usual—with a loftier aim and a higher inspiration; but the season of dreams was to be over when he had real admittance into that Eden garden, where the woman of all women wandered among her flowers. He thought what he was to say to her on that eventful day—how he should charm her into interest in his difficulties, and beautify his office, and the barren spot in which he exercised it, with her sympathy. He imagined himself possessed of her ear, certain of a place by her side, a special guest of her own election. He was not vain, nor deeply persuaded of his own importance; yet all this seemed only natural to his excited imagination. He saw himself by her side in that garden of beatitudes, disclosing to her all that was in his heart; instinctively he recalled all that the poets have said of woman the consoler—woman the inspirer. When he had gained that priceless sympathy, what glorious amends he should make for the few days' indolence to which he now gave way! Thus in his inexperience he went on, preparing for himself, as any one a little wiser could have seen at a glance, one of the bitterest disappointments of early life.

Thursday came, a day of days—such a day as people reckon by, months after; a soft and bright autumnal morning, breathing like spring. As Vincent issued from his own door and took his way along George Street to Grange Lane, he saw the curate of St. Roque's walking before him in the same direction; but Mr. Wentworth himself was not more orthodoxly clerical in every detail of his costume than was the young Nonconformist, who was going, not to Lady Western's breakfast-party, but into the Bower of Bliss, the fool's paradise of his youth. Mr. Wentworth, it is true, was to see Lucy Wodehouse there, and was a true lover; but he walked without excitement to the green gate which concealed from him no enchanted world of delights, but only a familiar garden, with every turn of which he was perfectly acquainted, and which, even when Lucy was by his side, contained nothing ineffable or ecstatic. It was, to tell the truth, an autumnal garden, bright enough still with scarlet gleams of geranium and verbena, with a lawn of velvet smoothness, and no great diminution as yet in the shade of the acacias and lime-trees, and everything in the most perfect order in the trim shrubberies, through the skilful mazes of which some bright groups were already wandering, when Vincent passed through to the sunny open door. At the open windows within he could see other figures in a pleasant flutter of gay colour and light drapery, as he advanced breathless to take his own place in that unknown world. He heard his own name announced, and went in, with a chill of momentary doubt upon his high expectations, into the airy sunshiny room, with its gay, brilliant, rustling

crowd, the ladies all bright and fresh in their pretty morning-dresses, and the din of talk and laughter confusing his unaccustomed ears. For a moment the stranger stood embarrassed, looking round him, eagerly investigating the crowd for that one face, which was not only the sole face of woman in the world so far as he was concerned, but in reality the only face he knew in the gay party, where everybody except himself knew everybody else. Then he saw her, and his doubts were over. When she perceived him, she made a few steps forward to meet him and held out her hand.

“I am so glad to see you—how kind of you to come!” said Lady Western; “and such a beautiful day—just what I wanted for my last fête. Have you seen my friend again since I saw you, Mr. Vincent—quite well, I hope? Now, do have some coffee.—How do you do, Mr. Wentworth? You have been here full five minutes, and you have never paid your respects to me. Even under the circumstances, you know, one cannot overlook such neglect.”

“I am too deeply flattered that your ladyship should have observed my entrance to be able to make any defence,” said the curate of St. Roque’s, who could speak to her as to any ordinary woman; “but as for circumstances——”

“Oh dear, yes, we all know,” cried Lady Western, with her sweet laugh. “Was it you, Mr. Vincent, who were saying that circumstances were everything in life?—oh, no, I beg your pardon, quite the reverse. I remember it struck me as odd and clever. Now, I daresay, you two could quite settle that question. I am such an ignoramus. So kind of you to come!”

Vincent was about to protest his delight in coming, and to deprecate the imputation of kindness, but ere he had spoken three words, he suddenly came to a stop, perceiving that not only Lady Western’s attention but her ear was lost, and that already another candidate for her favour had possession of the field. He stepped back into the gay assembly, disturbing one group, the members of which all turned to look at him with well-bred curiosity. He stood quite alone and silent for some time, waiting if, perhaps, he could catch the eye of Lady Western. But she was surrounded, swept away, carried off even from his neighbourhood, while he stood gazing. And here was he left, out of the sunshine of her presence in the midst of Carlingford society, knowing nobody, while every face smiled and every tongue was busy but his own: talk au discretion! such there certainly was—but Vincent had never in his life felt so preposterously alone, so dismally silent, so shut up in himself. If he had come to woo society, doubtless he could have plucked up a spirit, and made a little effort for his object. But he had come to see Her, flattering himself with vain dreams of securing her to himself—of wandering by her side through those garden-paths, of keeping near her whenever she moved—and the dream had intoxicated him more deeply than even he himself was aware of. Now he woke to his sober wits with a chill of mortification and disappointment not to

be expressed. He stood silent, following her with his eyes as she glided about from one corner to the other of the crowded room. He had neither eyes nor ears for anything else. Beautiful as she had always been, she was lovelier than ever to-day, with her fair head uncovered and unadorned, her beautiful hair glancing in the gleams of sunshine, her tiny hands ungloved. Poor Vincent drew near a window, when it dawned upon his troubled perception that he was standing amidst all those chattering, laughing people, a silent statue of disappointment and dismay, and from that little refuge watched her as she made her progress. And, alas! Lady Western assured everybody that they were “so kind” to come—she distributed her smiles, her kind words, everywhere. She beamed upon the old men and the young, the handsome and the stupid, with equal sweetness. After a while, as he stood watching, Vincent began to melt in his heart. She was hostess—she had the party’s pleasure to think of, not her own. If he could but help her, bring himself to her notice again in some other way! Vincent made another step out of his window, and looked out eagerly with shy scrutiny. Nobody wanted his help. They stared at him, and whispered questions who he was. When he at length nerved himself to speak to his next neighbour, he met with a courteous response and no more. Society was not cruel, or repulsive, or severely exclusive, but simply did not know him, could not make out who he was, and was busy talking that conversation of a limited sphere full of personal allusions into which no stranger could enter. Instead of the ineffable hour he expected, an embarrassing, unbearable tedium was the lot of the poor Dissenting minister by himself among the beauty, wit, and fashion of Carlingford. He would have stolen away but for the forlorn hope that things might mend—that Lady Western might return, and that the sunshine he had dreamed of would yet fall upon him. But no such happiness came to the unfortunate young minister. After a while, a perfectly undistinguished middle-aged individual charitably engaged Mr. Vincent in conversation; and as they talked, and while the young man’s eager wistful eyes followed into every new combination of the little crowd that one fair figure which had bewitched him, it became apparent that the company was flowing forth into the garden. At last Vincent stopped short in the languid answer he was making to his respectable interlocutor with a sudden start and access of impatience. The brilliant room had suddenly clouded over. She had joined her guests outside. With bitterness, and a sharp pang at his heart, Vincent looked round and wondered to find himself in the house, in the company, from which she had gone. What business had he there? No link of connection existed between him and this little world of unknown people except herself. She had brought him here; she alone knew even so much of him as his name. He had not an inch of ground to stand on in the little alien assembly when she was not there. He broke off his conversation with his unknown sympathiser abruptly, and rushed out, meaning to leave the place. But somehow, fascinated still, in a

hundred different moods a minute, when he got outside, he too lingered about the paths, where he continually met with groups and stray couples who stared at him, and wondered again, sometimes not inaudibly, who he was. He met her at last under the shadow of the lime-trees with a train of girls about her, and a following of eager male attendants. When he came forward lonely to make his farewell, with a look in which he meant to unite a certain indignation and reproach with still chivalrous devotion, the unconscious beauty met him with unabated sweetness, held out her hand as before, and smiled the most radiant of smiles.

“Are you going to leave us already?” she said, in a tone which half persuaded the unlucky youth to stay till the last moment, and swallow all his mortifications. “So sorry you must go away so soon! and I wanted to show you my pictures too. Another time, I hope, we may have better fortune. When you come to me again, you must really be at leisure, and have no other engagements. Good-bye! It was so kind of you to come, and I am so sorry you can’t stay!”

In another minute the green door had opened and closed, the fairy vision was gone, and poor Vincent stood in Grange Lane between the two blank lines of garden-wall, come back to the common daylight after a week’s vain wandering in the enchanted grounds, half stupefied, half maddened by the disappointment and downfall. He made a momentary pause at the door, gulped down the big indignant sigh that rose in his throat, and, with a quickened step and a heightened colour, retraced his steps along a road which no longer gleamed with any rosy reflections, but was harder, more real, more matter-of-fact than ever it had looked before. What a fool he had been, to be led into such a false position!—to be cheated of his peace, and seduced from his duty, and intoxicated into such absurdities of hope, all by the gleam of a bright eye, and the sound of a sweet voice! He who had never known the weakness before, to cover himself with ridicule, and compromise his dignity so entirely for the sake of the first beautiful woman who smiled upon him! Poor Vincent! He hurried to his rooms thrilling with projects, schemes, and sudden vindictive ambition. That fair creature should learn that the young Nonconformist was worthy of her notice. Those self-engrossed simperers should yet be startled out of their follies by the new fame rising up amongst them. Who was he, did they ask? One day they should know.

That the young man should despise himself for this outbreak of injured feeling, as soon as he had cooled down, was inevitable; but it took some considerable time to cool down; and in the mean time his resolution rose and swelled into that heroic region which youth always attains so easily. He thought himself disenchanted for ever. That night, in bitter earnest, he burned the midnight oil—that night his pen flew over the paper with outbreaks,

sometimes indignant, sometimes pathetic, on subjects as remote as possible from Lady Western's breakfast-party; and with a sudden revulsion he bethought himself of Salem and its oligarchy, which just now prophesied so much good of their new minister. He accepted Salem with all the heat of passion at that moment. His be the task to raise it and its pastor into a common fame!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE events above narrated were all prefatory of the great success accomplished by Mr. Vincent in Carlingford. Indeed, the date of the young minister's fame—fame which, as everybody acquainted with that town must be aware, was widely diffused beyond Carlingford itself, and even reached the metropolis, and gladdened his Alma Mater at Homerton—might almost be fixed by a reference to Lady Western's housekeeping book, if she kept any, and the date of her last summer-party. That event threw the young Nonconformist into just the state of mind which was wanted to quicken all the prejudices of his education, and give individual force to all the hereditary limits of thought in which he had been born. An attempt on the part of the Government to repeal the Toleration Act, or reinstate the Test, could scarcely have produced a more permanent and rapid effect than Lady Western's neglect, and the total ignorance of Mr. Vincent displayed by polite society in Carlingford. No shame to him. It was precisely the same thing in private life which the other would have been in public. Repeal of the Toleration Act, or reenactment of the Test, are things totally impossible; and when persecution is not to be apprehended or hoped for, where but in the wrongs of a privileged class can the true zest of dissidence be found? Mr. Vincent, who had received his dissenting principles as matters of doctrine, took up the familiar instruments now with a rush of private feeling. He was not conscious of the power of that sentiment of injury and indignation which possessed him. He believed in his heart that he was but returning, after a temporary hallucination, to the true duties of his post; but the fact was, that this wound in the tenderest point—this general slight and indifference—pricked him forward in all that force of personal complaint which gives warmth and piquancy to a public grievance. The young man said nothing of Lady Western even to his dearest friend—tried not to think of her except by way of imagining how she should one day hear of him, and know his name when it possessed a distinction which neither the perpetual curate of St. Roque's, nor any other figure in that local world, dared hope for. But with fiery zeal he flew to the question of Church and State, and set forth the wrongs which Christianity sustained from endowment, and the heinous evils of rich livings, episcopal palaces, and

spiritual lords. It was no mean or ungenerous argument which the young Nonconformist pursued in his fervour of youth and wounded self-regard. It was the natural cry of a man who had entered life at disadvantage, and chafed, without knowing it, at all the phalanx of orders and classes above him, standing close in order to prevent his entrance. With eloquent fervour he expatiated upon the kingdom that was not of this world. If these words were true, what had the Church to do with worldly possessions, rank, dignities, power? Was his Grace of Lambeth more like Paul the tentmaker than his Holiness of Rome? Mr. Vincent went into the whole matter with genuine conviction, and confidence in his own statements. He believed and had been trained in it. In his heart he was persuaded that he himself, oft disgusted and much misunderstood in his elected place at Salem Chapel, ministered the gospel more closely to his Master's appointment than the rector of Carlingford, who was nominated by a college; or the curate of St. Roque's, who had his forty pounds a-year from a tiny ancient endowment, and was spending his own little fortune on his church and district. These men had joined God and mammon—they were in the pay of the State. Mr. Vincent thundered forth the lofty censures of an evangelist whom the State did not recognise, and with whom mammon had little enough to do. He brought forth all the weapons out of the Homerton armoury, new, bright, and dazzling; and he did not know any more than his audience that he never would have wielded them so heartily—perhaps would scarcely have taken them off the wall—but for the sudden sting with which his own inferior place, and the existence of a privileged class doubly shut against his entrance, had quickened his personal consciousness. Such, however, was the stimulus which woke the minister of Salem Chapel into action, and produced that series of lectures on Church and State which, as everybody knows, shook society in Carlingford to its very foundation.

“Now we've got a young man as is a credit to us,” said Tozer; “and now he's warming to his work, as I was a little afraid of at first; for somehow I can't say as I could see to my satisfaction, when he first come, that his heart was in it,—I say, now as we've got a pastor as does us credit, I am not the man to consider a bit of expense. My opinion is as we should take the Music Hall for them lectures. There's folks might go to the Music Hall as would never come to Salem, and we're responsible for our advantages. A clever young man like Mr. Vincent ain't to be named along with Mr. Tufton; we're the teachers of the community, that's what we are. I am for being public-spirited—I always was; and I don't mind standing my share. My opinion is as we should take the Music Hall.”

“If we was charging sixpence a-head or so——” said prudent Pigeon, the poulterer.

“That’s what I’ll never give my consent to—never!” said Tozer. “If we was amusin’ the people, we might charge sixpence a-head; but mark my words,” continued the buttermilk, “there ain’t twenty men in Carlingford, nor in no other place, as would give sixpence to have their minds enlightened. No, sir, we’re conferring of a boon; and let’s do it handsomely, I say—let’s do it handsomely; and here’s my name down for five pound to clear expenses: and if every man in Salem does as well, there ain’t no reason for hesitating. I’m a plain man, but I don’t make no account of a little bit of money when a principle’s at stake.”

This statement was conclusive. When it came to the sacrifice of a little bit of money, neither Mrs. Pigeon nor Mrs. Brown could have endured life had their husbands yielded the palm to Tozer. And the Music Hall was accordingly taken; and there, every Wednesday for six weeks, the young Nonconformist mounted his cheval de bataille, and broke his impetuous spear against the Church. Perhaps Carlingford was in want of a sensation at the moment; and the town was virgin soil, and had never yet been invaded by sight or sound of heresy. Anyhow, the fact was, that this fresh new voice attracted the ear of the public. That personal impetuosity and sense of wrong which gave fire to the discourse, roused the interest of the entire community. Mr. Vincent’s lectures became the fashion in Carlingford, where nobody in the higher levels of society had ever heard before of the amazing evils of a Church Establishment. Some of the weaker or more candid minds among the audience were even upset by the young minister’s arguments. Two or three young people of both sexes declared themselves converted, and were persecuted to their hearts’ desire when they intimated their intention of henceforward joining the congregation of Salem. The two Miss Hemmings were thrown into a state of great distress and perplexity, and wrung their hands, and looked at each other, as each new enormity was brought forth. A very animated interested audience filled the benches in the Music Hall for the three last lectures. It was Mr. Tozer’s conviction, whispered in confidence to all the functionaries at Salem, that the rector himself, in a muffler and blue spectacles, listened in a corner to the voice of rebellion; but no proof of this monstrous supposition ever came before the public. Notwithstanding, the excitement was evident. Miss Wodehouse took tremulous notes, her fingers quivering with anger, with the intention of calling upon Mr. Wentworth to answer and deny these assertions. Dr. Marjoribanks, the old Scotchman, who in his heart enjoyed a hit at the Episcopate, cried “Hear, hear,” with his sturdy northern r rattling through the hall, and clapped his large brown hands, with a broad grin at his daughter, who was “high,” and one of Mr. Wentworth’s sisters of mercy. But poor little Rose Lake, the drawing-master’s daughter, who was going up for confirmation next time the bishop came to Carlingford, turned very pale under Mr. Vincent’s teaching. All the different phases of conviction appeared in her eager little face

—first indignation, then doubt, lastly horror and intense determination to flee out from Babylon. Her father laughed, and told her to attend to her needlework, when Rose confided to him her troubles. Her needlework! She who had just heard that the Church was rotten, and tottering on its foundations; that it was choked with filthy lucre and State support; that Church to which she had been about to give in her personal adhesion. Rose put away her catechism and confirmation good-books, and crossed to the other side of the street that she might not pass Masters's, that emporium of evil. She looked wistfully after the young Nonconformist as he passed her on the streets, wondering what high martyr-thoughts must be in the apostolic mind which entertained so high a contempt for all the honours and distinctions of this world. Meanwhile Mr. Vincent pursued his own way, entirely convinced, as was natural for a young man, that he was "doing a great work" in Carlingford. He was still in that stage of life when people imagine that you have only to state the truth clearly to have it believed, and that to convince a man of what is right is all that is necessary to his immediate reformation. But it was not with any very distinct hopes or wishes of emptying the church in Carlingford, and crowding Salem Chapel, that the young man proceeded. Such expectations, high visions of a day to come when not a sitting could be had in Salem for love or money, did indeed glance into the souls of Tozer and his brother deacons; but the minister did not stand up and deliver his blow at the world—his outcry against things in general—his warm youthful assertion that he too had a right to all the joys and privileges of humanity,—as, by means of sermons, lectures, poems, or what not, youth and poverty, wherever they have a chance, do proclaim their protest against the world.

On the last night of the lectures, just as Vincent had taken his place upon his platform, a rustle, as of some one of importance entering, thrilled the audience. Looking over the sea of heads before him, the breath almost left the young minister's lips when he saw the young Dowager, in all the glory of full-dress, threading her way through the crowd, which opened to let her pass. Mr. Vincent stood watching her progress, unaware that it was time for him to begin, and that his hearers, less absorbed than he, were asking each other what it was which had so suddenly paled his face and checked his utterance. He watched Lady Western and her companion come slowly forward; he saw Tozer, in a delighted bustle, leading the way to one of the raised seats of the orchestra close to the platform. When they were seated, and not till then, the lecturer, drawing a long gasping breath, turned to his audience. But the crowd was hazy to his eyes. He began, half mechanically, to speak—then made a sudden pause, his mind occupied with other things. On the very skirts of the crowd, far back at the door, stood his friend of Back Grove Street. In that momentary pause, he saw her standing alone, with the air of a person who had risen up unconsciously in sudden surprise and consternation. Her pale dark

face looked not less confused and startled than Vincent himself was conscious of looking, and her eyes were turned in the same direction as his had been the previous moment. The crowd of Carlingford hearers died off from the scene for the instant, so far as the young Nonconformist was concerned. He knew but of that fair creature in all her sweet bloom and blush of beauty—the man who accompanied her—Mrs. Hilyard, a thin, dark, eager shadow in the distance—and himself standing, as it were, between them, connecting all together. What could that visionary link be which distinguished and separated these four, so unlike each other, from all the rest of the world? But Mr. Vincent had no leisure to follow out the question, even had his mind been sufficiently clear to do it. He saw the pale woman at the end of the hall suddenly drop into her seat, and draw a thick black veil over her face; and the confused murmur of impatience in the crowd before him roused the young man to his own position. He opened the eyes which had been hazing over with clouds of imagination and excitement. He delivered his lecture. Though he never was himself aware what he had said, it was received with just as much attention and applause as usual. He got through it somehow; and, sitting down at last, with parched lips and a helpless feeling of excitement, watched the audience dispersing, as if they were so many enemies from whom he had escaped. Who was this man with Her? Why did She come to bewilder him in the midst of his work? It did not occur to the poor young fellow that Lady Western came to his lecture simply as to a “distraction.” He thought she had a purpose in it. He pretended not to look as she descended daintily from her seat in the orchestra, drawing her white cloak with a pretty shiver over her white shoulders. He pretended to start when her voice sounded in his expectant ear.

“Oh, Mr. Vincent, how very clever and wicked of you!” cried Lady Western. “I am so horrified, and charmed. To think of you attacking the poor dear old Church, that we all ought to support through everything! And I am such a stanch churchwoman, and so shocked to hear all this; but you won’t do it any more.”

Saying this, Lady Western leaned her beautiful hand upon Mr. Vincent’s table, and looked in his face with a beseeching insinuating smile. The poor minister did all he could to preserve his virtue. He looked aside at Lady Western’s companion to fortify himself, and escape the enervating influence of that smile.

“I cannot pretend to yield the matter to your ladyship,” said Vincent, “for it had been previously arranged that this was to be the last of my lectures at present. I am sorry it did not please you.”

“But it did please me,” said the young Dowager; “only that it was so very wicked and wrong. Where did you learn such dreadful sentiments? I am so sorry I shan’t hear you again, and so glad you are finished. You never came to

see me after my little fête. I am afraid you thought us stupid. Good-night: but you really must come to me, and I shall convert you. I am sure you never can have looked at the Church in the right way: why, what would become of us if we were all Dissenters? What a frightful idea! Thank you for such a charming evening. Good-night."

And Lady Western held out that "treasured splendour, her hand," to the bewildered Nonconformist, who only dared touch it, and let it fall, drawing back from the smile with which the syren beguiled him back again into her toils. But Mr. Vincent turned round hastily as he heard a muttered exclamation, "By Jove!" behind him, and fixed the gaze of angry and instinctive repugnance upon the tall figure which brushed past. "Make haste, Alice—do you mean to stay here all night?" said this wrathful individual, fixing his eyes with a defiant stare upon the minister; and he drew the beauty's arm almost roughly into his own, and hurried her away, evidently remonstrating in the freest and boldest manner upon her civility. "By Jove! the fellow will think you are in love with him," Vincent, with his quickened and suspicious ears, could hear the stranger say, with that delightful indifference to being overheard which characterises some Englishmen of the exalted classes; and the strain of reproof evidently continued as they made their way to the door. Vincent, for his part, when he had watched them out of sight, dropped into his chair, and sat there in the empty hall, looking over the vacant benches with the strangest mixture of feelings. Was it possible that his eager fervour and revolutionary warmth were diminished by these few words and that smile?—that the wrongs of Church and State looked less grievous all at once, and that it was an effort to return to the lofty state of feeling with which he had entered the place two hours ago? As he sat there in his reverie of discomfiture, he could see Tozer, a single black figure, come slowly up the hall, an emissary from the group at the door of "chapel people," who had been enjoying the defeat of the enemy, and were now waiting for the conqueror. "Mr. Vincent," shouted Tozer, "shall we turn off the gas, and leave you to think it all over till the morning, sir? They're all as pleased as Punch and as curious as women down below here, and my Phœbe will have it you're tired. I must say as it is peculiar to see you a-sitting up there all by yourself, and the lights going out, and not another soul in the place," added the buttermilk man, looking round with a sober grin; and in reality the lights diminished every moment as Mr. Vincent rose and stumbled down from his platform into the great empty hall with its skeleton benches. If they had left him there till the morning, it would have been a blessed exchange from that walk home with the party, that invitation to supper, and all the applauses and inquiries that followed. They had the Pigeons to supper that night at the butter-shop, and the whole matter was discussed in all its bearings—the flutter of the "Church folks," the new sittings let during the week, the triumphant conviction of the two deacons that Salem would soon

be overflowing.

“Oh, why were ‘deacons’ made so coarse,
Or parsons made so fine?”

Mr. Vincent did not bethink himself of that touching ditty. He could not see the serio-comic lights in which the whole business abounded. It was all the saddest earnest to the young pastor, who found so little encouragement or support even in the enthusiasm of his flock.

“And, oh, Mr. Vincent,” said the engaging Phœbe, in a half-whisper aside, “how did you come to be so friendly with Lady Western? How she did listen, to be sure! and smiled at you so sweetly. Ah, I don’t wonder now that you can’t see anything in the Carlingford young ladies; but do tell us, please, how you came to know her so well?”

Insensibly to himself, a gleam of gratification lighted up Mr. Vincent’s face. He was gracious to Phœbe. “I can’t pretend to know her well,” he said, with a little mock humility; whereupon the matrons of the party took up their weapons immediately.

“And all the better, Mr. Vincent—all the better!” cried Mrs. Tozer; “she didn’t come there for no good, you may be sure. Them great ladies, when they’re pretty-looking, as I don’t deny she’s pretty-looking——”

“Oh, mamma, beautiful!” exclaimed Phœbe.

“When they’re pretty-looking, as I say,” continued Mrs. Tozer, “they’re no better nor evil spirits—that’s what I tell you, Phœbe. They’ll go out o’ their way, they will, for to lay hold on a poor silly young man (which was not meaning you, Mr. Vincent, that knows better, being a minister), and when they’ve got him fast, they’ll laugh at him—that’s their sport. A minister of our connection as was well acquainted among them sort of folks would be out o’ nature. My boy shall never make no such acquaintances as long as I’m here.”

“I saw her a-speaking to the minister,” said Mrs. Pigeon, “and the thought crossed my mind as it wasn’t just what I expected of Mr. Vincent. Painted ladies, that come out of a night with low necks and flowers in their hair, to have all Carlingford a-staring at them, ain’t fit company for a good pastor. Them’s not the lambs of the flock—not so far as I understand; they’re not friends as Salem folks would approve of, Mr. Vincent. I’m always known for a plain speaker, and I don’t deceive you. It’s a deal better to draw back in time.”

“I have not the least reason to believe that Lady Western means to honour me with her friendship,” said Vincent, haughtily—“so it is premature to discuss the matter. As I feel rather tired, perhaps you’ll excuse me to-night. Come over to my rooms, Mr. Tozer, to-morrow, if you can spare a little time and we will discuss our business there. I hope Mrs. Tozer will pardon me withdrawing so

early, but I am not very well—rather tired—out of sorts a little to-night.”

So saying, the young pastor extricated himself from the table, shook hands, regardless of all remonstrances, and made his way out with some difficulty from the little room, which was choke-full, and scarcely permitted egress. When he was gone, the three ladies looked at each other in dumb amazement. Phœbe, who felt herself aggrieved, was the first to break silence.

“Ma and Mrs. Pigeon,” cried the aggravated girl, “you’ve been and hurt his feelings. I knew you would. He’s gone home angry and disappointed; he thinks none of us understand him; he thinks we’re trying to humble him and keep him down, when, to tell the truth——”

Here Phœbe burst into tears.

“Upon my word,” said Mrs. Pigeon, “dear, deary me! It’s just what I said whenever I knew you had made up your minds to a young minister. He’ll come a-dangling after our girls, says I, and a-trifling with their affections. Bless my heart, Phœbe! if it had been my Maria now that’s always a-crying about something—but you! Don’t take on, dear—fretting’s no good—it’ll spoil your colour and take away your appetite, and that ain’t the way to mend matters: and to think of his lifting his eyes to my Lady Dowager! Upon my word! but there ain’t no accounting for young men’s ways no more than for girls—and being a minister don’t make a bit of difference, so far as I can see.”

“Why, what’s the matter?” cried Tozer: “the pastor’s gone off in a huff, and Phœbe crying. What’s wrong? You’ve been saying somethin’—you women with your sharp tongues.”

“It’s Phœbe and Mr. Vincent have had some words. Be quiet, Tozer—don’t you see the child’s hurt in her feelings?” said his wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Pigeon exchanged looks. “I’ll tell you what it is,” said the latter lady, solemnly. “It’s turned his head. I never approved of the Music Hall myself. It’s a deal of money to throw away, and it’s not like as if it was mercy to poor souls. And such a crush, and the cheering, and my Lady Western to shake hands with him, has turned the minister’s head. Now, just you mark my words. He hasn’t been here three month yet, and he’s a-getting high already. You men’ll have your own adoes with him. Afore a year’s over our heads, he’ll be a deal too high for Salem. His head’s turned—that’s what it is.”

“Oh, Mrs. Pigeon, how unkind of you!” cried Phœbe, “when he’s as good as good—and not a bit proud, nor ever was—and always such a gentleman!—and never neglects the very poorest whenever he’s sent for—oh, it’s so unkind of you.”

“I can’t see as his head isn’t straight enough on his shoulders,” said Tozer himself, with authority. “He’s tired, that’s what it is—and excited a bit, I

shouldn't wonder: a man can't study like he does, and make hisself agreeable at the same time—no, no—by a year's time he'll be settling down, and we'll know where we are; and as for Salem and our connection, they never had a chance, I can tell you, like what they're a-going to have now."

But Mrs. Pigeon shook her head. It was the first cloud that had risen on the firmament of Salem Chapel, so far as Mr. Vincent was concerned.

CHAPTER IX.

IT was a January night on which Vincent emerged abruptly from Tozer's door, the evening of that lecture—a winter night, not very cold, but very dark, the skies looking not blue, but black overhead, and the light of the lamps gleaming dimly on the pavement, which had received a certain squalid power of reflection from the recent rain; for a sharp, sudden shower had fallen while Vincent had been seated at the hospitable table of the butlerman, which had chased everybody from the darkling streets. All the shops were closed, a policeman marched along with heavy tread, and the wet pavement glimmered round his solitary figure. Nothing more uncomfortable could be supposed after the warmth and light of a snug interior, however humble; and the minister turned his face hastily in the direction of his lodging. But the next moment he turned back again, and looked wistfully in the other direction. It was not to gaze along the dark length of street to where the garden-walls of Grange Lane, undiscernible in the darkness, added a far-withdrawing perspective of gentility and aristocratic seclusion to the vulgar pretensions of George Street; it was to look at a female figure which came slowly up, dimming out the reflection on the wet stones as it crossed one streak of lamplight after another. Vincent was excited and curious, and had enough in his own mind to make him wistful for sympathy, if it were to be had from any understanding heart. He recognised Mrs. Hilyard instinctively as she came forward, not conscious of him, walking, strange woman as she was, with the air of a person walking by choice at that melancholy hour in that dismal night. She was evidently not going anywhere: her step was firm and distinct, like the step of a person thoroughly self-possessed and afraid of nothing—but it lingered with a certain meditative sound in the steady firm footfall. Vincent felt a kind of conviction that she had come out here to think over some problem of that mysterious life into which he could not penetrate, and he connected this strange walk involuntarily with the appearance of Lady Western and her careless companion. To his roused fancy, some incomprehensible link existed between himself and the equally incomprehensible woman before him. He turned back almost in spite of himself, and went to meet her. Mrs. Hilyard looked up when she heard his

step. She recognised him also on the spot. They approached each other much as if they had arranged a meeting at eleven o'clock of that wet January night in the gleaming, deserted streets.

"It is you, Mr. Vincent!" she said. "I wonder why I happen to meet you, of all persons in the world, to-night. It is very odd. What, I wonder, can have brought us both together at such an hour and in such a place? You never came to see me that Monday—nor any Monday. You went to see my beauty instead, and you were so lucky as to be affronted with the syren at the first glance. Had you been less fortunate, I think I might have partly taken you into my confidence to-night."

"Perhaps I am less fortunate, if that is all that hinders," said Vincent; "but it is strange to see you out here so late in such a dismal night. Let me go with you, and see you safe home."

"Thank you. I am perfectly safe—nobody can possibly be safer than such a woman as I am, in poverty and middle age," said his strange acquaintance. "It is an immunity that women don't often prize, Mr. Vincent, but it is very valuable in its way. If anybody saw you talking to an equivocal female figure at eleven o'clock in George Street, think what the buttermilk would say; but a single glimpse of my face would explain matters better than a volume. I am going down towards Grange Lane, principally because I am restless to-night, and don't know what to do with myself. I shall tell you what I thought of your lecture if you will walk with me to the end of the street."

"Ah, my lecture?—never mind," said the hapless young minister; "I forget all about that. What is it that brings you here, and me to your side?—what is there in that dark-veiled house yonder that draws your steps and mine to it? It is not accidental, our meeting here."

"You are talking romance and nonsense, quite inconceivable in a man who has just come from the society of deacons," said Mrs. Hilyard, glancing up at him with that habitual gleam of her eyes. "We have met, my dear Mr. Vincent, because, after refreshing my mind with your lecture, I thought of refreshing my body by a walk this fresh night. One saves candles, you know, when one does one's exercise at night: whereas walking by day one wastes everything—time, tissue, daylight, invaluable treasures: the only light that hurts nobody's eyes, and costs nobody money, is the light of day. That illustration of yours about the clouds and the sun was very pretty. I assure you I thought the whole exceedingly effective. I should not wonder if it made a revolution in Carlingford."

"Why do you speak to me so? I know you did not go to listen to my lecture," said the young minister, to whom sundry gleams of enlightenment had come since his last interview with the poor needle-woman of Back Grove Street.

“Ah! how can you tell that?” she said, sharply, looking at him in the streak of lamplight. “But to tell the truth,” she continued, “I did actually go to hear you, and to look at other people’s faces, just to see whether the world at large—so far as that exists in Carlingford—was like what it used to be; and if I confess I saw something there more interesting than the lecture, I say no more than the lecturer could agree in, Mr. Vincent. You, too, saw something that made you forget the vexed question of Church and State.”

“Tell me,” said Vincent, with an earnestness he was himself surprised at, “who was that man?”

His companion started as if she had received a blow, turned round upon him with a glance in her dark eyes such as he had never seen there before, and in a sudden momentary passion drew her breath hard, and stopped short on the way. But the spark of intense and passionate emotion was as shortlived as it was vivid. “I do not suppose he is anything to interest you,” she answered the next moment, with a movement of her thin mouth, letting the hands that she had clasped together drop to her side. “Nay, make yourself quite easy; he is not a lover of my lady’s. He is only a near relation:—and,” she continued, lingering on the words with a force of subdued scorn and rage, which Vincent dimly apprehended, but could not understand, “a very fascinating fine gentleman—a man who can twist a woman round his fingers when he likes, and break all her heartstrings—if she has any—so daintily afterwards, that it would be a pleasure to see him do it. Ah, a wonderful man!”

“You know him then? I saw you knew him,” said the young man, surprised and disturbed, thrusting the first commonplace words he could think of into the silence, which seemed to tingle with the restrained meaning of this brief speech.

“I don’t think we are lucky in choosing our subjects to-night,” said the strange woman. “How about the ladies in Lonsdale, Mr. Vincent? They don’t keep a school? I am glad they don’t keep a school. Teaching, you know, unless when one has a vocation for it, as you had a few weeks ago, is uphill work. I am sorry to see you are not so sure about your work as you were then. Your sister is pretty, I suppose? and does your mother take great care of her and keep her out of harm’s way? Lambs have a silly faculty of running directly in the wolf’s road. Why don’t you take a holiday and go to see them, or have them here to live with you?”

“You know something about them,” said Vincent, alarmed. “What has happened?—tell me. It will be the greatest kindness to say it out at once.”

“Hush,” said Mrs. Hilyard; “now you are absurd. I speak out of my own thoughts, as most persons do, and you, like all young people, make personal applications. How can I possibly know about them? I am not a fanciful

woman, but there are some things that wake one's imagination. In such a dark night as this, with such wet gleams about the streets, when I think of people at a distance, I always think of something uncomfortable happening. Misfortune seems to lie in wait about those black corners. I think of women wandering along dismal solitary roads with babies in their shameful arms—and of dreadful messengers of evil approaching unconscious houses, and looking in at peaceful windows upon the comfort they are about to destroy; and I think," she continued, crossing the road so rapidly (they were now opposite Lady Western's house) that Vincent, who had not anticipated the movement, had to quicken his pace suddenly to keep up with her, "of evil creatures pondering in the dark vile schemes against the innocent——" Here she broke off all at once, and, looking up in Vincent's face with that gleam of secret mockery in her eyes and movement of her mouth to which he was accustomed, added, suddenly changing her tone, "Or of fine gentlemen, Mr. Vincent, profoundly bored with their own society, promenading in a dreary garden and smoking a disconsolate cigar. Look there!"

The young minister, much startled and rather nervous, mechanically looked, as she bade him, through the little grated loophole in Lady Western's garden-door. He saw the lights shining in the windows, and a red spark moving about before the house, as, with a little shame for his undignified position, he withdrew his eyes from that point of vantage. But Mrs. Hilyard was moved by no such sentiment. She planted herself opposite the door, and, bending her head to the little grating, gazed long and steadfastly. In the deep silence of the night, standing with some uneasiness at her side, and not insensible to the fact that his position, if he were seen by anybody who knew him, would be rather absurd and slightly equivocal, Vincent heard the footsteps of the man inside, the fragrance of whose cigar faintly penetrated the damp air. The stranger was evidently walking up and down before the house in enjoyment of that luxury which the feminine arrangements of the young Dowager's household would not permit indoors; but the steady eagerness with which this strange woman gazed—the way in which she had managed to interweave Mrs. Vincent and pretty Susan at Lonsdale into the conversation—the suggestions of coming danger and evil with which her words had invested the very night, all heightened by the instinctive repugnance and alarm of which the young man had himself been conscious whenever he met the eye of Lady Western's companion—filled him with discomfort and dread. His mind, which had been lately too much occupied in his own concerns to think much of Susan, reverted now with sudden uneasiness to his mother's cottage, from which Susan's betrothed had lately departed to arrange matters for their speedy marriage. But how Lady Western's "near relation"—this man whom Mrs. Hilyard watched with an intense regard which looked like hatred, but might be dead love—could be connected with Lonsdale, or Susan, or himself, or the poor

needlewoman in Back Grove Street, Vincent could not form the remotest idea. He stood growing more and more impatient by that dark closed door, which had once looked a gate of paradise—which, he felt in his heart, half-a-dozen words or a single smile could any day make again a gate of the paradise of fools to his bewildered feet—the steps of the unseen stranger within, and the quick breath of agitation from the watcher by his side, being the only sounds audible in the silence of the night. At last some restless movement he made disturbed Mrs. Hilyard in her watch. She left the door noiselessly and rapidly, and turned to recross the wet road. Vincent accompanied her without saying a word. The two walked along together half the length of Grange Lane without breaking silence, without even looking at each other, till they came to the large placid white lamp at Dr. Marjoribanks's gate, which cleared a little oasis of light out of the heart of the gloom. There she looked up at him with a face full of agitated life and motion—kindled eyes, elevated head, nostril and lips swelling with feelings which were totally undecipherable to Vincent; her whole aspect changed by an indescribable inspiration which awoke remnants of what might have been beauty in that thin, dark, middle-aged face.

"You are surprised at me and my curiosity," she said, "and indeed you have good reason; but it is astonishing, when one is shut up in one's self and knows nobody, how excited one gets over the sudden apparition of a person one has known in the other world. Some people die two or three times in a lifetime, Mr. Vincent. There is a real transmigration of souls, or bodies, or both if you please. This is my third life I am going through at present. I knew that man, as I was saying, in the other world."

"The world does change strangely," said Vincent, who could not tell what to say; "but you put it very strongly—more strongly than I——"

"More strongly than you can understand; I know that very well," said Mrs. Hilyard; "but you perceive you are speaking to a woman who has died twice. Coming to life is a bitter process, but one gets over it. If you ever should have such a thing to go through with—and survive it," she added, giving him a wistful glance, "I should like to tell you my experiences. However, I hope better things. You are very well looked after at Salem Chapel, Mr. Vincent. I think of you sometimes when I look out of my window and see your tabernacle. It is not so pretty as Mr. Wentworth's at St. Roque's, but you have the advantage of the curate otherwise. So far as I can see, he never occupies himself with anything higher than his prayer-book and his poor people. I doubt much whether he would ever dream of replying to what you told us to-night."

"Probably he holds a Dissenting minister in too much contempt," said Vincent, with an uncomfortable smile on his lips.

"Don't sneer—never sneer—no gentleman does," said his companion. "I like you, though you are only a Dissenting minister. You know me to be very poor,

and you have seen me in very odd circumstances to-night; yet you walk home with me—I perceive you are steering towards Back Grove Street, Mr. Vincent—without an illusion which could make me feel myself an equivocal person, and just as if this was the most reasonable thing in the world which I have been doing to-night. Thank you. You are a paladin in some things, though in others only a Dissenting minister. If I were a fairy, the gift I would endow you with would be just that same unconsciousness of your own disadvantages, which courtesy makes you show of mine.”

“Indeed,” said Vincent, with natural gratification, “it required no discrimination on my part to recognise at once that I was addressing——”

“Hush! you have never even insinuated that an explanation was necessary, which is the very height and climax of fine manners,” said Mrs. Hilyard; “and I speak who am, or used to be, an authority in such matters. I don’t mean to give you any explanation either. Now, you must turn back and go home. Good-night. One thing I may tell you, however,” she continued, with a little warmth; “don’t mistake me. There is no reason in this world why you might not introduce me to the ladies in Lonsdale, if any accident brought it about that we should meet. I say this to make your mind easy about your penitent; and now, my good young father in the faith, good-night.”

“Let me see you to your door first,” said the wondering young man.

“No—no farther. Good-night,” she said, hastily, shaking hands, and leaving him. The parting was so sudden that it took Vincent a minute to stop short, under way and walking quickly as he was. When she had made one or two rapid steps in advance, Mrs. Hilyard turned back, as if with a sudden impulse.

“Do you know I have an uneasiness about these ladies in Lonsdale?” she said; “I know nothing whatever about them—not so much as their names; but you are their natural protector; and it does not do for women to be as magnanimous and generous in the reception of strangers as you are. There! don’t be alarmed. I told you I knew nothing. They may be as safe, and as middle-aged, and as ugly as I am; instead of a guileless widow and a pretty little girl, they may be hardened old campaigners like myself; but they come into my mind, I cannot tell why. Have them here to live beside you, and they will do you good.”

“My sister is about to be married,” said Vincent, more and more surprised, and looking very sharply into her face in the lamplight, to see whether she really did not know anything more than she said.

A certain expression of relief came over her face.

“Then all is well,” she said, with strange cordiality, and again held out her hand to him. Then they parted, and pursued their several ways through the perfectly silent and dimly-lighted streets. Vincent walked home with the most singular agitation in his mind. Whether to give any weight to such vague but

alarming suggestions—whether to act immediately upon the indefinite terror thus insinuated into his thoughts—or to write, and wait till he heard whether any real danger existed—or to cast it from him altogether as a fantastic trick of imagination, he could not tell. Eventful and exciting as the evening had been, he postponed the other matters to this. If any danger threatened Susan, his simple mother could suffer with her, but was ill qualified to protect her: but what danger could threaten Susan? He consoled himself with the thought that these were not the days of abductions or violent love-making. To think of an innocent English girl in her mother's house as threatened with mysterious danger, such as might have surrounded a heroine of the last century, was impossible. If there are Squire Thornhills nowadays, their operations are of a different character. Walking rapidly home, with now and then a blast of chill rain in his face, and the lamplight gleaming in the wet streets, Vincent found less and less reason for attaching any importance to Mrs. Hilyard's hints and alarms. It was the sentiment of the night, and her own thoughts, which had suggested such fears to her mind—a mind evidently experienced in paths more crooked than any which Vincent himself, much less simple Susan, had ever known. When he reached home, he found his little fire burning brightly, his room arranged with careful nicety, which was his landlady's appropriate and sensible manner of showing her appreciation of the night's lecture, and her devotion to the minister; and, lastly, on the table a letter from that little house in Lonsdale, round which such fanciful fears had gathered. Never was there a letter which breathed more of the peaceful security and tranquillity of home. Mrs. Vincent wrote to her Arthur in mingled rejoicing and admonition, curious and delighted to hear of his lectures, but not more anxious about his fame and success than about his flannels and precautions against wet feet; while Susan's postscript—a half longer than the letter to which it was appended—furnished her affectionate brother with sundry details, totally incomprehensible to him, of her wedding preparations, and, more shyly, of her perfect girlish happiness. Vincent laughed aloud as he folded up that woman's letter. No mysterious horror, no whispering doubtful gloom, surrounded that house from which the pure, full daylight atmosphere, untouched by any darkness, breathed fresh upon him out of these simple pages. Here, in this humble virtuous world, were no mysteries. It was a deliverance to a heart which had begun to falter. Wherever fate might be lingering in the wild darkness of that January night, it was not on the threshold of his mother's house.

CHAPTER X.

ON the next evening after this there was a tea-meeting in Salem Chapel. In the back premises behind the chapel were all needful accommodations for the

provision of that popular refreshment—boilers, tea-urns, unlimited crockery and pewter. In fact, it was one of Mr. Tozer's boasts, that owing to the liberality of the "connection" in Carlingford, Salem was fully equipped in this respect, and did not need to borrow so much as a spoon or teapot, a very important matter under the circumstances. This, however, was the first tea-meeting which had taken place since that one at which Mr. Tufton's purse had been presented to him, and the old pastor had taken leave of his flock. The young pastor, indeed, had set his face against tea-meetings. He was so far behind his age as to doubt their utility, and declared himself totally unqualified to preside over such assemblies; but, in the heat of his recent disappointment, when, stung by other people's neglect, he had taken up Salem and all belonging to it into his bosom, a cruel use had been made of the young minister's compliance. They had wrung a reluctant consent from him in that unguarded moment, and the walls of Carlingford had been for some days blazing with placards of the tea-meeting, at which the now famous (in Carlingford) lecturer on Church and State was to speak. Not Tozer, with all his eloquence, had been able to persuade the pastor to preside; but at least he was to appear, to take tea at that table elevated on the platform, where Phœbe Tozer, under the matronly care of Mrs. Brown (for it was necessary to divide these honours, and guard against jealousy), dispensed the fragrant lymph, and to address the meeting. There had been thoughts of a grand celebration in the Music Hall to do more honour to the occasion; but as that might have neutralised the advantages of having all the needful utensils within themselves, convenience and economy carried the day, and the scene of these festivities, as of all the previous festivities of Salem, was the large low room underneath the chapel, once intended for a school, but never used, except on Sundays, in that capacity. Thither for two or three days all the "young ladies" of the chapel had streamed to and fro, engaged in decorations. Some manufactured festoons of evergreens, some concocted pink and white roses in paper to embellish the same. The printed texts of the Sunday school were framed, and in some cases obliterated, in Christmas garlands. Christmas, indeed, was past, but there were still holly and red berries and green smooth laurel leaves. The Pigeon girls, Phœbe Tozer, Mrs. Brown's niece from the country, and the other young people in Salem who were of sufficiently advanced position, enjoyed the preparations greatly—entering into them with even greater heartiness than Lucy Wodehouse exhibited in the adornment of St. Roque's, and taking as much pleasure in the task as if they had been picturesque Italians adorning the shrine of their favourite saint. Catterina and Francesca with their flower-garlands are figures worthy of any picture, and so is Lucy Wodehouse under the chancel arch at St. Roque's; but how shall we venture to ask anybody's sympathy for Phœbe and Maria Pigeon as they put up their festoons round the four square walls of the low schoolroom in

preparation for the Salem tea-party? Nevertheless it is a fact that the two last mentioned had very much the same intentions and sensations, and amid the coils of fresh ivy and laurel did not look amiss in their cheerful labour—a fact which, before the work was completed, had become perceptible to various individuals of the Carlingford public. But Mr. Vincent was, on this point, as on several others, unequal to the requirements of his position. When he did glance in for a moment of the afternoon of the eventful day, it was in company with Tozer and the Rev. Mr. Raffles of Shoebury, who was to take the chair. Mr. Raffles was very popular in Carlingford, as everywhere. To secure him for a tea-meeting was to secure its success. He examined into all the preparations, tasted the cake, pricked his fingers with the garlands to the immense delight of the young ladies, and complimented them on their skill with beaming cheerfulness; while the minister of Salem, on the contrary, stalked about by his side pale and preoccupied, with difficulty keeping himself from that contempt of the actual things around to which youth is so often tempted. His mind wandered off to the companion of his last night's walk—to the stranger pacing up and down that damp garden with inscrutable unknown thoughts—to the beautiful creature within those lighted windows, so near and yet so overwhelmingly distant—as if somehow they had abstracted life and got it among themselves. Mr. Vincent had little patience for what he considered the mean details of existence nearer at hand. As soon as he could possibly manage it, he escaped, regarding with a certain hopeless disgust the appearance he had to make in the evening, and without finding a single civil thing to say to the fair decorators. “My young brother looks sadly low and out of spirits,” said jolly Mr. Raffles. “What do you mean by being so unkind to the minister, Miss Phœbe, eh?” Poor Phœbe blushed pinker than ever, while the rest laughed. It was pleasant to be supposed “unkind” to the minister; and Phœbe resolved to do what she could to cheer him when she sat by his elbow at the platform table making tea for the visitors of the evening.

The evening came, and there was not a ticket to be had anywhere in Carlingford: the schoolroom, with its blazing gas, its festoons, and its mottoes, its tables groaning with dark-complexioned plumcake and heavy buns, was crowded quite beyond its accommodation; and the edifying sight might be seen of Tozer and his brother deacons, and indeed all who were sufficiently interested in the success of Salem to sacrifice themselves on its behalf, making an erratic but not unsubstantial tea in corners, to make room for the crowd. And in the highest good-humour was the crowd which surrounded all the narrow tables. The urns were well filled, the cake abundant, the company in its best attire. The ladies had bonnets, it is true, but these bonnets were worthy the occasion. At the table on the platform sat Mr. Raffles, in the chair, beaming upon the assembled party, with cheerful little Mrs. Tufton and Mrs. Brown at one side of him, and Phœbe looking very pink and pretty, shaded from the too

enthusiastic admiration of the crowd below by the tea-urn at which she officiated. Next to her, the minister cast abstracted looks upon the assembly. He was, oh, so interesting in his silence and pallor!—he spoke little; and when any one addressed him, he had to come back as if from a distance to hear. If anybody could imagine that Mr. Raffles contrasted dangerously with Mr. Vincent in that reserve and quietness, it would be a mistake unworthy a philosophic observer. On the contrary, the Salem people were all doubly proud of their pastor. It was not to be expected that such a man as he should unbend as the reverend chairman did. They preferred that he should continue on his stilts. It would have been a personal humiliation to the real partisans of the chapel, had he really woke up and come down from that elevation. The more commonplace the ordinary “connection” was, the more proud they felt of their student and scholar. So Mr. Vincent leaned his head upon his hands and gazed unmolested over the lively company, taking in all the particulars of the scene, the busy groups engaged in mere tea-making and tea-consuming—the flutter of enjoyment among humble girls and womankind who knew no pleasure more exciting—the whispers which pointed out himself to strangers among the party—the triumphant face of Tozer at the end of the room, jammed against the wall, drinking tea out of an empty sugar-basin. If the scene woke any movement of human sympathy in the bosom of the young Nonconformist, he was half ashamed of himself for it. What had the high mission of an evangelist—the lofty ambition of a man trained to enlighten his country—the warm assurance of talent which felt itself entitled to the highest sphere,—what had these great things to do in a Salem Chapel tea-meeting? So the lofty spirit held apart, gazing down from a mental elevation much higher than the platform; and all the people who had heard his lectures pointed him out to each other, and congratulated themselves on that studious and separated aspect which was so unlike other men. In fact, the fine superiority of Mr. Vincent was at the present moment the very thing that was wanted to rivet their chains. Even Mrs. Pigeon looked on with silent admiration. He was “high”—never before had Salem known a minister who did not condescend to be gracious at a tea-meeting—and the leader of the opposition honoured him in her heart.

And even when at last the social meal was over, when the urns were cleared away, and with a rustle and flutter the assembly composed itself to the intellectual regale about to follow, Mr. Vincent did not change his position. Mr. Raffles made quite one of his best speeches; he kept his audience in a perpetual flutter of laughter and applause; he set forth all the excellencies of the new minister with such detail and fulness as only the vainest could have swallowed. But the pleased congregation still applauded. He praised Mr. Tufton, the venerable father of the community, he praised the admirable deacons; he praised the arrangements. In short, Mr. Raffles applauded everybody, and everybody applauded Mr. Raffles. After the chairman had

concluded his speech, the hero of the evening gathered himself up dreamily, and rose from Phœbe Tozer's side. He told them he had been gazing at them this hour past, studying the scene before him; how strangely they appeared to him, standing on this little bright gaslighted perch amid the dark sea of life that surged round them; that now he and they were face to face with each other, it was not their social pleasure he was thinking of, but that dark unknown existence that throbbed and echoed around: he bade them remember the dark night which enclosed that town of Carlingford, without betraying the secret of its existence even to the nearest village; of those dark streets and houses which hid so many lives and hearts and tragic histories; he enlarged upon Mrs. Hilyard's idea of the sentiment of "such a night," till timid people threw glances behind them, and some sensitive mothers paused to wonder whether the minister could have heard that Tommy had fallen into the fire, or Mary scalded herself, and took this way to break the news. The speech was the strangest that ever was listened to at a tea-party. It was the wayward capricious pouring forth of a fanciful young mind under an unquiet influence, having no connection whatever with the "object," the place, or the listeners. The consequence was, that it was listened to with breathless interest—that the faces grew pale and the eyes bright, and shivers of restrained emotion ran through the astonished audience. Mr. Vincent perceived the effect of his eloquence, as a nursery story-teller perceives the rising sob of her little hearers. When he saw it, he awoke, as the same nursery minstrel does sometimes, to feel how unreal was the sentiment in his own breast which had produced this genuine feeling in others, and with a sudden amusement proceeded to deepen his colours and make bolder strokes of effect. His success was perfect; before he concluded, he had in imagination dismissed the harmless Salem people out of their very innocent recreation to the dark streets which thrilled round them—to the world of unknown life, of which each man for himself had some knowledge—to the tragedies that might be going on side by side with them, for aught they knew. His hearers drew a long breath when it was over. They were startled, frightened, enchanted. If they had been witnessing a melodrama, they scarcely could have been more excited. He had put the most dreadful suggestions in their mind of all sorts of possible trouble; he sat down with the consciousness of having done his duty by Salem for this night at least.

But when Tozer got up after him to tell about the prosperity of the congregation, the anticlimax was felt even by the people of Salem. Some said, "No, no," audibly, some laughed, not a few rose up and went away. Vincent himself, feeling the room very hot, and not disliking the little commotion of interest which arose on his departure, withdrew himself from the platform, and made his way to the little vestry, where a breath of air was to be had; for, January night as it was, the crowd and the tea had established a very high

temperature in the under-regions of Salem. He opened the window in the vestry, which looked out upon the damp ground behind the chapel and the few gravestones, and threw himself down on the little sofa with a sensation of mingled self-reproach and amusement. Somehow, even when one disapproves of one's self for doing it, one has a certain enjoyment in bewildering the world. Mr. Vincent was rather pleased with his success, although it was only a variety of "humbug." He entertained with Christian satisfaction the thought that he had succeeded in introducing a certain visionary uneasiness into the lively atmosphere of the tea-meeting—and he was delighted with his own cleverness in spite of himself.

While he lay back on his sofa, and pondered this gratifying thought, he heard a subdued sound of voices outside—voices and steps that fell with but little sound upon the damp grass. A languid momentary wonder touched the mind of the minister: who could have chosen so doleful a retirement? It was about the last place in the world for a lover's interview, which was the first thing that suggested itself to the young man; the next moment he started bolt upright, and listened with undisguised curiosity. That voice so different from the careless voices of Salem, the delicate refined intonations which had startled him in the shabby little room in Back Grove Street, awoke an interest in his mind which no youthful accents in Carlingford could have excited. He sat upright on the instant, and edged towards the open window. The gas burned low in the little vestry, which nobody had been expected to enter, and the illumination from all the schoolroom windows, and sounds of cheering and commotion there, had doubtless made the absolute darkness and silence behind seem perfectly safe to the two invisible people now meeting under the cloud of night. Mr. Vincent was not startled into eavesdropping unawares, nor did he engage in any sophistical argument to justify himself for listening. On the contrary, he listened honestly, with the full intention of hearing all he could—suddenly changed from the languid sentimentalist, painful and self-conscious, which the influences of the evening had made him, into a spectator very wide awake and anxious, straining his ear to catch some knowledge of a history, in which a crowd of presentiments warned him that he himself should yet be concerned.

"If you must speak, speak here," said that voice which Vincent had recognised: "it is scarcely the atmosphere for a man of your fine taste, to be sure; but considering the subject of the conference, it will do. What do you want with me?"

"By Jove, it looks dangerous!—what do you mean to suggest by this sweet rendezvous—murder?" said the man, whoever he was, who had accompanied Mrs. Hilyard to the damp yard of Salem Chapel, with its scattered graves.

"My nerves are strong," she answered. "It is a pity you should take the trouble

to be melodramatic. Do you think I am vain enough to imagine that you could subject yourself to all the unpleasant accessories of being hanged on my account? Fancy a rough hempen rope, and the dirty fingers that would adjust it. Pah! you would not risk it for me.”

Her companion swore a muttered oath. “By Jove! I believe you’d be content to be murdered, to make such an end of me,” he answered, in the baffled tone of rage which a man naturally sinks into when engaged in unequal conflict of recrimination with a woman.

“This is too conjugal,” said Mrs. Hilyard; “it reminds me of former experiences: come to the point, I beg of you. You did not come here and seek me out that we might have an amusing conversation—what do you want with me?”

“Don’t tempt me too far with your confounded impertinence,” exclaimed the man, “or there is no telling what may happen. I want to know where that child is; you know I do. I mean to reclaim my rights so far as she is concerned. If she had been a ward in Chancery, a man might have submitted. But I am a reformed individual—my life is of the most exemplary description—no court in Christendom would keep her from my custody now. I want the girl for her own good—she shall marry brilliantly, which she never could do with you. I know she’s grown up as lovely as I expected——”

“How do you know?” interrupted Mrs. Hilyard, with a certain hoarseness in her voice.

“Ah! I have touched you at last. Remembering what her mother was,” he went on, in a mocking tone, “though I am grieved to see how much you have gone off in late years—and having a humble consciousness of her father’s personal advantages, and, in short, of her relatives in general, I know she’s a little beauty—and, by Jove, she shall be a duchess yet.”

There was a pause—something like a hard sob thrilled in the air, rather a vibration than a sound; and Vincent, making a desperate gesture of rage towards the school-room, from which a burst of applause at that moment sounded, approached closer to the window. Then the woman’s voice burst forth passionate, but subdued.

“You have seen her! you!—you that blasted her life before she was born, and confused her sweet mind for ever—how did you dare to look at my child? And I,” cried the passionate voice, forgetting even caution—“I, that would give my life drop by drop to restore what never can be restored to that victim of your sin and my weakness—I do not see her. I refuse myself that comfort. I leave it to others to do all that love and pity can do for my baby. You speak of murder—man! if I had a knife, I could find it in my heart to put an end to your horrid career; and, look you, I will—Coward! I will! I will kill you before you shall

lay your vile hands on my child.”

“She-wolf!” cried the man, grinding his teeth, “do you know how much it would be to my advantage if you never left this lonely spot you have brought me to? By Jove, I have the greatest mind——”

Another momentary silence. Vincent, wound up to a high state of excitement, sprang noiselessly to his feet, and was rushing to the window to proclaim his presence, when Mrs. Hilyard’s voice, perfectly calm, and in its usual tone, brought him back to himself.

“Second thoughts are best. It would compromise you horribly, and put a stop to many pleasures—not to speak of those dreadful dirty fingers arranging that rough rope round your neck, which, pardon me, I can’t help thinking of when you associate your own name with such a vulgar suggestion as murder. I should not mind these little details, but you! However, I excited myself unreasonably, you have not seen her. That skilful inference of yours was only a lie. She was not at Lonsdale, you know.”

“How the devil do you know I was at Lonsdale?” said her companion.

“I keep myself informed of the movements of so interesting a person. She was not there.”

“No,” replied the man, “she was not there; but I need not suggest to your clear wits that there are other Lonsdales in England. What if Miss Mildmay were in her father’s lawful guardianship now?”

Here the air palpitated with a cry, the cry as of a wild creature in sudden blind anguish. It was echoed by a laugh of mockery and exultation. “Should you like me to tell you which of the Lonsdales you honoured with your patronage?” continued the mocking voice: “that in Derbyshire, or that in Devonshire, or that in Cumberland? I am afflicted to have defeated your skilful scheme so easily. Now that you see I am a match for you, perhaps you will perceive that it is better to yield peaceably, and unite with me in securing the girl’s good. She needs only to be seen to——”

“Who do you imagine you are addressing, Colonel Mildmay?” said Mrs. Hilyard, haughtily; “there has been enough of this: you are mistaken if you think you can deceive me for more than a moment: my child is not in your hands, and never will be, please God. But mark what I say,” she continued, drawing a fierce, hard breath, “if you should ever succeed in tracing her—if you should ever be able to snatch her from me—then confess your sins, and say your last prayers, for as sure as I live you shall die in a week.”

“She-devil! murderess!” cried her companion, not without a certain shade of alarm in his voice; “if your power were equal to your will——”

“In that case my power should be equal to my will,” said the steady, delicate

woman's voice, as clear in very fine articulation as if it were some peaceful arrangement of daily life for which she declared herself capable: "you should not escape if you surrounded yourself with a king's guards. I swear to you, if you do what you say, that I will kill you somehow, by whatever means I can attain—and I have never yet broken my word."

An unsteady defiant laugh was the only reply. The man was evidently more impressed with the sincerity, and power to execute her intentions, of the woman than she with his. Apparently they stood regarding each other for another momentary interval in silence. Again Mrs. Hilyard was the first to speak.

"I presume our conference is over now," she said, calmly; "how you could think of seeking it is more than I can understand. I suppose poor pretty Alice, who thinks every woman can be persuaded, induced you to attempt this. Don't let me keep you any longer in a place so repugnant to your taste. I am going to the tea-meeting at Salem Chapel to hear my young friend the minister speak: perhaps this unprofitable discussion has lost me that advantage. You heard him the other night, and were pleased, I trust. Good-night. I suppose, before leaving you, I should thank you for having spared my life."

Vincent heard the curse upon her and her stinging tongue, which burst in a growl of rage from the lips of the other, but he did not see the satirical curtsy with which this strange woman swept past, nor the scarcely controllable impulse which made the man lift his stick and clench it in his hand as she turned away from him those keen eyes, out of which even the gloom of night could not quench the light. But even Mrs. Hilyard herself never knew how near, how very near, she was at that moment to the unseen world. Had her step been less habitually firm and rapid,—had she lingered on her way—the temptation might have been too strong for the man, maddened by many memories. He made one stride after her, clenching his stick. It was perfectly dark in that narrow passage which led out to the front of the chapel. She might have been stunned in a moment, and left there to die, without any man being the wiser. It was not virtue, nor hatred of bloodshed, nor repugnance to harm her, which restrained Colonel Mildmay's hand: it was half the rapidity of her movements, and half the instinct of a gentleman, which vice itself could not entirely obliterate. Perhaps he was glad when he saw her disappear from before him down the lighted steps into the Salem schoolroom. He stood in the darkness and watched her out of sight, himself unseen by any one, and then departed on his way, a splendid figure, all unlike the population of Grove Street. Some of the Salem people, dispersing at the moment, saw him sauntering down the street grand and leisurely, and recognised the gentleman who had been seen in the Music Hall with Lady Western. They thought he must have come privately once more to listen to their minister's eloquence.

Probably Lady Western herself, the leader of fashion in Carlingford, would appear next Sunday to do Mr. Vincent honour. The sight of this very fine gentleman picking his leisurely way along the dark pavement of Grove Street, leaning confidently upon that stick over which his tall person swayed with fashionable languor, gave a climax to the evening in the excited imaginations of Mr. Vincent's admirers. Nobody but the minister and one utterly unnoted individual in the crowd knew what had brought the Colonel and his stick to such a place. Nobody but the Colonel himself, and the watchful heavens above, knew how little had prevented him from leaving a silent, awful witness of that secret interview upon the chapel steps.

When Mr. Vincent returned to the platform, which he did hurriedly, Mr. Pigeon was addressing the meeting. In the flutter of inquiries whether he was better, and gentle hopes from Phœbe that his studies had not been too much for him, nobody appeared to mark the eagerness of his eyes, and the curiosity in his face. He sat down in his old place, and pretended to listen to Mr. Pigeon. Anxiously from under the shadow of his hands he inspected the crowd before him, who had recovered their spirits. In a corner close to the door he at last found the face he was in search of. Mrs. Hilyard sat at the end of a table, leaning her face on her hand. She had her eyes fixed upon the speaker, and there passed now and then across the corners of her close-shut mouth that momentary movement which was her symbol for a smile. She was not pretending to listen, but giving her entire attention to the honest poulterer. Now and then she turned her eyes from Pigeon, and perused the room and the company with rapid glances of amusement and keen observation. Perhaps her eyes gleamed keener, and her dark cheek owned a slight flush—that was all. Out of her mysterious life—out of that interview, so full of violence and passion—the strange woman came, without a moment's interval, to amuse herself by looking at and listening to all those homely innocent people. Could it be that she was taking notes of Pigeon's speech? Suddenly, all at once, she had taken a pencil out of her pocket and began to write, glancing up now and then towards the speaker. Mr. Vincent's head swam with the wonder he was contemplating—was she flesh and blood after all, or some wonderful skeleton living a galvanic life? But when he asked himself the question, her cry of sudden anguish, her wild, wicked promise to kill the man who stole her daughter, came over his mind, and arrested his thoughts. He, dallying as he was on the verge of life, full of fantastic hopes and disappointment, could only pretend to listen to Pigeon; but the good poulterer turned gratified eyes towards Mrs. Hilyard. He recognised her real attention and interest; was it the height of voluntary sham and deception?—or was she really taking notes?

The mystery was solved after the meeting was over. There was some music, in the first place—anthems in which all the strength of Salem united, Tozer taking a heavy bass, while Phœbe exerted herself so in the soprano that Mr.

Vincent's attention was forcibly called off his own meditations, in terror lest something should break in the throat so hardly strained. Then there were some oranges, another speech, a hymn, and a benediction; and then Mr. Raffles sprang joyfully up, and leaned over the platform to shake hands with his friends. This last process was trying. Mr. Vincent, who could no longer take refuge in silence, descended into the retiring throng. He was complimented on his speech, and even by some superior people, who had a mind to be fashionable, upon the delightful evening they had enjoyed. When they were all gone, there were still the Tozers, the Browns, the Pigeons, Mrs. Tufton, and Mr. Raffles. He was turning back to them disconsolate, when he was suddenly confronted by Mrs. Hilyard out of her corner with the fly-leaf of the hymn-book the unscrupulous woman had been writing in, torn out in her hand.

"Stop a minute!" she cried; "I want to speak to you. I want your help, if you will give it me. Don't be surprised at what I ask. Is your mother a good woman—was it she that trained you to act to the forlorn as you did to me last night? I have been too hasty—I take away your breath;—never mind, there is no time to choose one's words. The buttermilk is looking at us, Mr. Vincent. The ladies are alarmed; they think I want spiritual consolation at this unsuitable moment. Make haste—answer my question. Would she do an act of Christian charity to a woman in distress?"

"My mother is—yes, I know she would, what do you want of her?—my mother is the best and tenderest of women," cried Vincent, in utter amazement.

"I want to send a child to her—a persecuted, helpless child, whom it is the object of my life to keep out of evil hands," said Mrs. Hilyard, her dark thin face growing darker and more pallid, her eyes softening with tears. "She will be safe at Lonsdale now, and I cannot go in my own person at present to take her anywhere. Here is a message for the telegraph," she added, holding up the paper which Vincent had supposed to be notes of Mr. Pigeon's speech; "take it for me—send it off to-night—you will? and write to your mother; she shall suffer no loss, and I will thank her on my knees. It is life or death."

"I know—I am aware!" cried Vincent, not knowing what he said. "There is no time to be lost."

She put the paper into his hand, and clasped it tight between both of hers, not knowing in the excitement which she was so well trained to repress, that he had betrayed any special knowledge of her distress. It seemed natural, in that strain of desperation, that everybody should understand her. "Come to-morrow and tell me," she said, hurriedly, and then hastened away, leaving him with the paper folded close into his hand as her hard grasp had left it. He turned away from the group which awaited his coming with some curiosity and impatience, and read the message by the light of one of the garlanded and festive lamps.

“Rachel Russell to Miss Smith, Lonsdale, Devonshire. Immediately on receiving this, take the child to Lonsdale, near Peterborough—to Mrs. Vincent’s; leave the train at some station near town, and drive to a corresponding station on the Great Northern; don’t enter London. Blue veil—care—not to be left for an instant. I trust all to you.” Mr. Vincent put the message in his pocketbook, took it out again—tried it in his purse, his waistcoat pocket, everywhere he could think of—finally, closed his hand over it as at first, and in a high state of excitement went up to the chattering group at the little platform, the only thought in his mind being how to get rid of them, that he might hasten upon his mission before the telegraph office was closed for the night.

And, as was to be expected, Mr. Vincent found it no easy matter to get rid of the Tozers and Pigeons, who were all overflowing about the tea-party, its provisions, its speeches, and its success. He stood with that bit of paper clenched in his hand, and endured the jokes of his reverend brother, the remarks of Mrs. Tufton, the blushes of Phœbe. He stood for half an hour at least perforce in unwilling and constrained civility—at last he became desperate;—with a wild promise to return presently, he rushed out into the night. The station was about half a mile out of Carlingford, at the new end, a long way past Dr. Rider’s. When Vincent reached it, the telegraph clerk was putting on his hat to go away, and did not relish the momentary detention; when the message was received and despatched, the young minister drew breath—he went out of the office, wiping his hot forehead, to the railway platform, where the last train for town was just starting. As Vincent stood recovering himself and regaining his breath, the sudden flash of a match struck in one of the carriages attracted his attention. He looked, and saw by the light of the lamp inside a man stooping to light his cigar. The action brought the face, bending down close to the window, clearly out against the dark-blue background of the empty carriage; hair light, fine, and thin, in long but scanty locks—a high-featured eagle-face, too sharp for beauty now, but bearing all the traces of superior good looks departed—a light beard, so light that it did not count for its due in the aspect of that remarkable countenance—a figure full of ease and haughty grace: all these particulars Vincent noted with a keen rapid inspection. In another moment the long leash of carriages had plunged into the darkness. With a strange flush of triumph he watched them disappear, and turned away with a smile on his lips. The message of warning was already tingling along the sensitive wires, and must outspeed the slow human traveller. This face, which so stamped itself upon his memory, which he fancied he could see pictured on the air as he returned along the dark road, was the face of the man who had been Lady Western’s companion at the lecture. That it was the same face which had confronted Mrs. Hilyard in the dark graveyard behind Salem Chapel he never doubted. With a thrill of active hatred and fierce

enmity which it was difficult to account for, and still more difficult for a man of his profession to excuse, the young man looked forward to the unknown future with a certainty of meeting that face again.

We drop a charitable veil over the conclusion of the night. Mr. Raffles and Mr. Vincent supped at Pigeon's, along with the Browns and Tozers; and Phœbe's testimony is on record that it was a feast of reason and a flow of soul.

CHAPTER XI.

THE next morning Vincent awoke with a sense of personal occupation and business, which perhaps is only possible to a man engaged with the actual occurrences of individual life. Professional duties and the general necessities of existing, do not give that thrill of sensible importance and use which a man feels who is busy with affairs which concern his own or other people's very heart and being. The young Nonconformist was no longer the sentimentalist who had made the gaping assembly at Salem Chapel uneasy over their tea-drinking. That dark and secret ocean of life which he had apostrophised, opened up to him immediately thereafter one of its most mysterious scenes. This had shaken Vincent rudely out of his own youthful vagaries. Perhaps the most true of philosophers, contemplating, however profoundly, the secrets of nature or thought, would come to a sudden standstill over a visible abyss of human guilt, wretchedness, heroic self-restraint, and courage, yawning apparent in the meditative way. What, then, were the poor dialectics of Church and State controversy, or the fluctuations of an uncertain young mind feeling itself superior to its work, to such a spectacle of passionate life, full of evil and of noble qualities—of guilt and suffering more intense than anything philosophy dreams of? The thin veil which youthful ignorance, believing in the supremacy of thought and superior charm of intellectual concerns, lays over the world, shrivelled up under the fiery lurid light of that passionate scene. Two people clearly, who had once loved each other, hating each other to the death, struggling desperately over a lesser thread of life proceeding from them both—the mother, driven to the lowest extremities of existence, standing up like a wild creature to defend her offspring—what could philosophy say to such phenomena? A wild circle of passion sprang into conscious being under the young man's half-frightened eyes—wild figures that filled the world, leaving small space for the calm suggestions of thought, and even to truth itself so little vantage-ground. Love, Hatred, Anger, Jealousy, Revenge—how many more? Vincent, who was no longer the lofty reasoning Vincent of Homerton, found life look different under the light of those torch-bearers. But he had no leisure on this particular morning to survey the subject. He had to

carry his report and explanation to the strange woman who had so seized upon and involved him in her concerns.

Mrs. Hilyard was seated in her room, just as he had seen her before, working with flying needle and nervous fingers at her coarsest needlework. She said, "Come in," and did not rise when he entered. She gave him an eager, inquiring look, more importunate and commanding than any words, but never stopped working, moving her thin fingers as if there was some spell in the continuance of her labour. She was impatient of his silence before he had closed the door—desperate when he said the usual greeting. She opened her pale lips and spoke, but Vincent heard nothing. She was beyond speech.

"The message went off last night, and I wrote to my mother," said Vincent; "don't fear. She will do what you wish, and everything will be well."

It was some time before Mrs. Hilyard quite conquered her agitation; when she succeeded, she spoke so entirely in her usual tone that Vincent started, being inexperienced in such changes. He contemplated her with tragic eyes in her living martyrdom; she, on the contrary, more conscious of her own powers, her own strength of resistance and activity of life, than of any sacrifice, had nothing about her the least tragical, and spoke according to nature. Instead of any passionate burst of self-revelation, this is what she said—

"Thank you. I am very much obliged to you. How everything is to be well, does not appear to me; but I will take your word for it. I hope I may take your word for your mother also, Mr. Vincent. You have a right to know how this is. Do you claim it, and must I tell you now?"

Here for the first time Vincent recollected in what an unjustifiable way he had obtained his information. Strangely enough, it had never struck him before. He had felt himself somehow identified with the woman in the strange interview he had overheard. The man was a personal enemy. His interest in the matter was so honest and simple amid all the complication of his youthful superficial insincerities, that this equivocal action was one of the very few which Vincent had actually never questioned even to himself. He was confounded now when he saw how the matter stood. His face became suddenly crimson;—shame took possession of his soul.

"Good heavens, I have done the most dishonourable action!" cried Vincent, betrayed into sudden exclamation by the horror of the discovery. Then he paused, turning an alarmed look upon his new friend. She took it very calmly. She glanced up at him with a comic glance in her eyes, and a twitch at the corners of her mouth. Notwithstanding last night—notwithstanding the anxiety which she dared not move in her own person to alleviate—she was still capable of being amused. Her eyes said, "What now?" with no very alarming apprehensions. The situation was a frightful one for poor Vincent.

“You will be quite justified in turning me out of your house,” he said, clearing his throat, and in great confusion; “but if you will believe it, I never till this moment saw how atrocious—— Mrs. Hilyard, I was in the vestry; the window was open; I heard your conversation last night.”

For a moment Vincent had all the punishment he expected, and greater. Her eyes blazed upon him out of that pale dark face with a certain contempt and lofty indifference. There was a pause. Mr. Vincent crushed his best hat in his hands, and sat speechless doing penance. He was dismayed with the discovery of his own meanness. Nobody could deliver such a cutting sentence as he was pronouncing on himself.

“All the world might have listened, so far as I am concerned,” she said, after a while, quietly enough. “I am sorry you did it; but the discovery is worse for yourself than for me.” Then, after another pause, “I don’t mean to quarrel. I am glad for my own sake, though sorry for yours. Now you know better than I can tell you. There were some pleasant flowers of speech to be gathered in that dark garden,” she continued, with another odd upward gleam of her eyes. “We must have startled your clerical ideas rather. At the moment, however, Mr. Vincent, people like Colonel Mildmay and myself mean what we say.”

“If I had gained my knowledge in a legitimate way,” said the shame-stricken minister, not venturing to look her in the face, “I should have said that I hoped it was only for the moment.”

Mrs. Hilyard laid down her work, and looked across at him with undisguised amusement. “I am sorry there is nobody here to perceive this beautiful situation,” she said. “Who would not have their ghostly father commit himself, if he repented after this fashion? Thank you, Mr. Vincent, for what you don’t say. And now we shall drop the subject, don’t you think? Were the deacons all charmed with the tea-meeting last night?”

“You want me to go now,” said Vincent, rising, with disconcerted looks.

“Not because I am angry. I am not angry,” she said, rising and holding out her hand to him. “It was a pity, but it was an inadvertence, and no dishonourable action. Yes, go. I am best to be avoided till I hear how this journey has been managed, and what your mother says. It was a sudden thought, that sending them to Lonsdale. I know that, even if he has not already found the right one, he will search all the others now. And your Lonsdale has been examined and exhausted; all is safe there. Yes, go. I am glad you know; but don’t say anything to Alice, if you see her, as she is sure to seek you out. You know who I mean by Alice? Lady Western—yes. Good-bye. I trust you, notwithstanding the vestry window; but close it after this on January nights.”

She had sunk into her seat again, and was absorbed in her needlework, before Vincent left the room. He looked back upon her before he shut the door, but

she had no look to spare from that all-engrossing work; her thin fingers were more scarred than ever, and stained with the coarse blue stuff. All his life after the young man never saw that colour without thinking of the stains on those poor hands.

He went about his work assiduously all that day, visiting sick people, poor people, men and women, "which were sinners." That dark ocean of life with which he had frightened the Salem people last night, Mr. Vincent made deeper investigations into this day than he had made before during all the time he had been in Carlingford. He kept clear of the smug comfort of the leading people of "the connection." Absolute want, suffering, and sorrow, were comparatively new to him; and being as yet a stranger to philanthropic schemes, and not at all scientific in the distribution of his sympathies, the minister of Salem conducted himself in a way which would have called forth the profoundest contempt and pity of the curate of St. Roque's. He believed everybody's story, and emptied his purse with the wildest liberality; for, indeed, visitation of the poor had not been a branch of study at Homerton. Tired and all but penniless, he did not turn his steps homeward till the wintry afternoon was sinking into night, and the lamps began to be lighted about the cheerful streets. As he came into George Street he saw Lady Western's carriage waiting at the door of Masters's. Alice! that was the name they called her. He looked at the celestial chariot wistfully. He had nothing to do with it or its beautiful mistress—never, as anything but a stranger, worshipping afar off, could the Dissenting minister of Carlingford approach that lovely vision—never think of her but as of a planet, ineffably distant—never——

"My lady's compliments," said a tall voice on a level with Vincent's eyebrows: "will you please to step over and speak to her ladyship?" The startled Nonconformist raised his eyes. The big footman, whose happy privilege it was to wait upon that lady of his dreams, stood respectful by his side, and from the carriage opposite the fairest face in the world was beaming, the prettiest of hands waving to him. Vincent believed afterwards that he crossed the entire breadth of George Street in a single stride.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Vincent," said Lady Western, giving him her hand; "I did so want to see you after the other night. Oh, how could you be soclever and wicked—so wicked to your friends! Indeed, I shall never be pleased till you recant, and confess how wrong you were. I must tell you why I went that night. I could not tell what on earth to do with my brother, and I took him to amuse him; or else, you know, I never could have gone to hear the poor dear old Church attacked. And how violent you were too! Indeed I must not say how clever I thought it, or I should feel I was an enemy to the Church. Now I want you to dine with me, and I shall have somebody to come who will be a match for you. I am very fond of clever society, though there is so little of

it in Carlingford. Tell me, will you come to-morrow? I am disengaged. Oh, pray, do! and Mr. Wentworth shall come too, and you shall fight.”

Lady Western clapped her pretty hands together with the greatest animation. As for Vincent, all the superior thoughts in which he would probably have indulged—the contrast he would have drawn between the desperate brother and this butterfly creature, fluttering on the edge of mysteries so dark and evil, had she been anybody else—deserted him totally in the present crisis. She was not anybody else—she was herself. The words that fell from those sweetest lips were of a half-divine simplicity to the bewildered young man. He would have gone off straightway to the end of the world if she had chosen to command him. All unwarned by his previous failure, paradise opened again to his delighted eyes.

“And I want to consult you about our friend,” said Lady Western; “it will be so kind of you to come. I am so pleased you have no engagement. I am sure you thought us very stupid last time; and I am stupid, I confess,” added the beauty, turning those sweet eyes, which were more eloquent than genius, upon the slave who was reconquered by a glance; “but I like clever people dearly. Good-bye till to-morrow. I shall quite reckon upon to-morrow. Oh, there is Mr. Wentworth! John, call Mr. Wentworth to speak to me. Good morning—remember, half-past six—now, you must not forget.”

Spite of the fact that Mr. Wentworth took his place immediately by the side of the carriage, Vincent passed on, a changed man. Forget! He smiled to himself at the possibility, and as he walked on to his lodging, a wonderful maze of expectation fell upon the young man’s mind. Why, he asked, was he brought into this strange connection with Her relations and their story? what could be, he said to himself with a little awe, the purpose of that Providence which shapes men’s ends, in interweaving his life with Hers by these links of common interest? The skies throbbed with wonder and miracle as soon as they were lighted up by her smile. Who could predict what might be coming, through all the impossibilities of fact and circumstance? He would not dissipate that delicious haze by any definite expectations like those which brought him to sudden grief on a former occasion. He was content to believe it was not for nothing that all these strange circles of fate were weaving round his charmed feet.

In this elevated frame of mind, scarcely aware of the prosaic ground he trod, Vincent reached home. The little maid at the door said something about a lady, to which he paid no attention, being occupied with his own thoughts. With an unconscious illumination on his face he mounted the stair lightly, three steps at a time, to his own rooms. The lamp was lighted in his little sitting-room, and some one rose nervously from the table as he went in at the door. What was this sudden terror which fell upon the young man in the renewed glory of his

youthful hopes? It was his mother, pale and faint, with sleepless tearful eyes, who, with the cry of an aching heart, worn out by fatigue and suspense, came forward, holding out anxious hands to him, and dropped in an utter abandon of weariness and distress into his astonished arms.

CHAPTER XII.

“WHAT has happened? For heaven’s sake tell me, mother,” cried Vincent, as she sank back, wiping her eyes, and altogether overpowered, half with the trouble which he did not know, half with the joy of seeing him again—“say it out at once, and don’t keep me in this dreadful suspense. Susan? She is not married? What is wrong?”

“Oh, my dear boy!” said Mrs. Vincent, recovering herself, but still trembling in her agitation—“oh, my affectionate boy, always thinking of us in his good heart! No, dear. It’s—it’s nothing particular happened. Let me compose myself a little, Arthur, and take breath.”

“But, Susan?” cried the excited young man.

“Susan, poor dear!—she is very well; and—and very happy up to this moment, my darling boy,” said Mrs. Vincent, “though whether she ought to be happy under the circumstances—or whether it’s only a cruel trick—or whether I haven’t been foolish and precipitate—but, my dear, what could I do but come to you, Arthur? I could not have kept it from her if I had stayed an hour longer at home. And to put such a dreadful suspicion into her head, when it might be all a falsehood, would have only been killing her; and, my dear boy, now I see your face again, I’m not so frightened—and surely it can be cleared up, and all will be well.”

Vincent, whose anxiety conquered his impatience, even while exciting it, kneeled down by his mother’s side and took her hands, which still trembled, into his own. “Mother, think that I am very anxious; that I don’t know what you are referring to; and that the sudden sight of you has filled me with all sort of terrors—for I know you would not lightly take such a journey all by yourself,” said the young man, growing still more anxious as he thought of it—“and try to collect your thoughts and tell me what is wrong.”

His mother drew one of her hands out of his, laid it on his head, and fondly smoothed back his hair. “My dear good son! you were always so sensible—I wish you had never left us,” she said, with a little groan; “and indeed it was a great thought to undertake such a journey; and since I came here, Arthur, I have felt so flurried and strange, that I have not, as you see, even taken off my bonnet; but I think now you’ve come, dear, if you would ring the bell and

order up the tea? When I see you, and see you looking so well, Arthur, it seems as if things could never be so bad, you know. My dear,” she said at last, with a little quiver in her voice, stopping and looking at him with a kind of nervous alarm, “it was about Mr. Fordham, you may be sure.”

“Tea directly,” said Vincent to the little maid, who appeared just at this crisis, and who was in her turn alarmed by the brief and peremptory order.

“What about Mr. Fordham?” he said, helping his mother to take off the cloak and warm wraps in which she had been sitting, in her nervous tremor and agitation, while she waited his return.

“Oh, my dear, my dear,” cried poor Mrs. Vincent, wringing her hands, “if he should not turn out as he ought, how can I ever forgive myself? I had a kind of warning in my mind the first time he came to the house, and I have always dreamt such uncomfortable dreams of him, Arthur. Oh! if you only could have seen him, my dear boy! But he was such a gentleman, and had such ways. I am sure he must have mixed in the very highest society—and he seemed so to appreciate Susan—not only to be in love with her, you know, my dear, as any young man might, but to really appreciate my sweet girl. Oh, Arthur, Arthur, if he should turn out badly, it will kill me, for my Susan will break her heart.”

“Mother, you drive me frantic. What has he done?” cried poor Vincent.

“He has done nothing, my dear, that I know of. It is not him, Arthur, for he has been gone for a month, arranging his affairs, you know, before the wedding, and writes Susan regularly and beautiful letters. It is a dreadful scrawl I got last night. I have it in my pocket-book. It came by the last post when Susan was out, thank heaven. I’ll show it you presently, my dear, as soon as I can find it, but I have so many papers in my pocket-book. She saw directly when she came in that something had happened, and oh, Arthur, it was so hard to keep it from her. I don’t know when I have kept anything from her before. I can’t tell how we got through the night. But this morning I made up the most artful story I could—here is the dreadful letter, my dear, at last—about being determined to see you, and making sure that you were taking care of yourself; for she knew as well as I did how negligent you always are about wet feet. Are you sure your feet are dry now, Arthur? Yes, my dear boy, it makes me very uncomfortable. You don’t wonder to see your poor mother here, now, after that?”

The letter which Vincent got meanwhile, and anxiously read, was as follows—the handwriting very mean, with a little tremor in it, which seemed to infer that the writer was an old man:—

“MADAM,—Though I am but a poor man, I can’t abear to see wrong going on, and do nothink to stop it. Madam, I beg of you to excuse me, as am unknown to you, and as can’t sign my honest name to it like a man. This is the

only way as I can give you a word of warning. Don't let the young lady marry him as she's agoing to, not if her heart should break first. Don't have nothink to do with Mr. Fordham. That's not his right name, and he has got a wife living—and this I say is true, as sure as I have to answer at the judgment;—and I say to you as a friend, Stop it, stop it! Don't let it go on a step, if you vally the young lady's charackter and her life. I don't add no more, because that's all I dare say, being only a servant; but I hope it's enough to save the poor young lady out of his clutches, as is a man that goeth about seeking whom he may devour.—From a well-wisher, though

A STRANGER.”

Mrs. Vincent's mind was easier when this epistle was out of her hands. She stood up before the mirror to take off her bonnet, and put her cap tidy; she glided across the room to take up the shawl and cloak which her son had flung upon the little sofa anyhow, and to fold them and lay them together on a chair. Then the trim little figure approached the table, on which stood a dimly burning lamp, which smoked as lamps will when they have it all their own way. Mrs. Vincent turned down the light a little, and then proceeded to remove the globe and chimney by way of seeing what was wrong—bringing her own anxious patient face, still retaining many traces of the sweet comeliness which had almost reached the length of beauty in her daughter, into the full illumination of the smoky blaze. Notwithstanding the smoke, the presence of that little woman made the strangest difference in the room. She took note of various evidences of litter and untidiness with her mind's eye as she examined the lamp. She had drawn a long breath of relief when she put the letter into Arthur's hand. The sense of lightened responsibility seemed almost to relieve her anxiety as well. She held the chimney of the lamp in her hand, when an exclamation from her son called her back to the consideration of that grievous question. She turned to him with a sudden deepening of all the lines in her face.

“Oh, Arthur dear! don't you think it may be an enemy? don't you think it looks like some cruel trick? You don't believe it's true?”

“Mother, have you an enemy in the world?” cried Vincent, with an almost bitter affectionateness. “Is there anybody living that would take pleasure in wounding you?”

“No, dear; but Mr. Fordham might have one,” said the widow. “He is not like you or your dear father, Arthur. He looks as if he might have been in the army, and had seen a great deal of life. That is what has been a great consolation to me. A man like that, you know, dear, is sure to have enemies; so very different from our quiet way of life,” said Mrs. Vincent, holding up the chimney of the lamp, and standing a little higher than her natural five feet, with a simple consciousness of that grandeur of experience: “some one that wished him ill

might have got some one else to write the letter. Hush, Arthur, here is the maid with the tea.”

The maid with the tea pushed in, bearing her tray into a scene which looked very strange to her awakened curiosity. The minister stood before the fire with the letter in his hand, narrowly examining it, seal, post-mark, handwriting, even paper. He did not look like the same man who had come up-stairs three steps at a time, in the glow and exhilaration of hope, scarcely half an hour ago. His teeth were set, and his face pale. On the table the smoky lamp blazed into the dim air, unregulated by the chimney, which Mrs. Vincent was nervously rubbing with her handkerchief before she put it on. The little maid, with her round eyes, set down the tray upon the table with an answering thrill of excitement and curiosity. There was “somethink to do” with the minister and his unexpected visitor. Vincent himself took no notice of the girl; but his mother, with feminine instinct, proceeded to disarm this possible observer. Mrs. Vincent knew well, by long experience, that when the landlady happens to be one of the flock, it is as well that the pastor should keep the little shocks and crises of his existence studiously to himself.

“Does it always smoke?” said the gentle Jesuit, addressing the little maid.

The effect of so sudden and discomposing a question, at a moment when the person addressed was staring with all her soul at the minister, open-mouthed and open-eyed, may be better imagined than described. The girl gave a start and stifled exclamation, and made all the cups rattle on the tray as she set it down. Did what smoke?—the chimney, or the minister, or the landlady’s husband down-stairs?

“Does it always smoke?” repeated Mrs. Vincent, calmly, putting on the chimney. “I don’t think it would if you were very exact in putting this on. Look here: always at this height, don’t you see? and now it burns perfectly well.”

“Yes, ma’am; I’ll tell missis, ma’am,” said the girl, backing out, with some alarm. Mrs. Vincent sat down at the table with all the satisfaction of success and conscious virtue. Her son, for his part, flung himself into the easy-chair which she had given up, and stared at her with an impatience and wonder which he could not restrain.

“To think you should talk about the lamp at such a time, or notice it at all, indeed, if it smoked like fifty chimneys!” he exclaimed, with a tone of annoyance; “why, mother, this is life or death.”

“Yes, yes, my dear!” said the mother, a little mortified in her turn: “but it does not do to let strangers see when you are in trouble. Oh, Arthur, my own boy, you must not get into any difficulty here. I know what gossip is in a congregation; you never would bear half of what your poor dear papa did,”

said the widow, with tears in her eyes, laying her soft old fingers upon the young man's impatient hand. "You have more of my quick temper, Arthur; and whatever you do, dear, you must not expose yourself to be talked of. You are all we have in the world. You must be your sister's protector; for oh, if this should be true, what a poor protector her mother has been! And, dear boy, tell me, what are we to do?"

"Had he any friends?" asked Vincent, half sullenly; for he did feel an instinctive desire to blame somebody, and nobody seemed so blamable as the mother, who had admitted a doubtful person into her house. "Did he know anybody—in Lonsdale, or anywhere? Did he never speak of his friends?"

"He had been living abroad," said Mrs. Vincent, slowly. "He talked of gentlemen sometimes, at Baden, and Homburg, and such places. I am afraid you would think it very silly, and—and perhaps wrong, Arthur; but he seemed to know so much of the world—so different from our quiet way of life—that being so nice and good and refined himself with it all—I am afraid it was rather an attraction to Susan. It was so different to what she was used with, my dear. We used to think a man who had seen so much, and known so many temptations, and kept his nice simple tastes through it all—oh, dear, dear! If it is true, I was never so deceived in all my life."

"But you have not told me," said Arthur, morosely, "if he had any friends?"

"Nobody in Lonsdale," said Mrs. Vincent. "He came to see some young relative at school in the neighbourhood——"

At this point Mrs. Vincent broke off with a half scream, interrupted by a violent start and exclamation from her son, who jumped off his seat, and began to pace up and down the room in an agitation which she could not comprehend. This start entirely overpowered his mother. Her overwrought nerves and feelings relieved themselves in tears. She got up, trembling, approached the young man, put her hand, which shook, through his arm, and implored him, crying softly all the time, to tell her what he feared, what he thought, what was the matter? Poor Vincent's momentary ill-humour deserted him: he began to realise all the complications of the position; but he could not resist the sight of his mother's tears. He led her back gently to the easy-chair, poured out for her a cup of the neglected tea, and restrained himself for her sake. It was while she took this much-needed refreshment that he unfolded to her the story of the helpless strangers whom, only the night before, he had committed to her care.

"The mother you shall see for yourself to-morrow. I can't tell what she is, except a lady, though in the strangest circumstances," said Vincent. "She has some reason—I cannot tell what—for keeping her child out of the father's hands. She appealed to me to let her send it to you, because he had been at

Lonsdale already, and I could not refuse. His name is Colonel Mildmay; he has been at Lonsdale; did you hear of such a man?"

Mrs. Vincent shook her head—her face grew more and more troubled.

"I don't know about reasons for keeping a child from its father," she said, still shaking her head. "My dear, dear boy, I hope no designing woman has got a hold upon you. Why did you start so, Arthur? what had Mr. Fordham to do with the child? Susan would open my letters, of course, and I daresay she will make them very comfortable; but, Arthur dear, though I don't blame you, it was very imprudent. Is Colonel Mildmay the lady's husband? or—or what? Dear boy, you should have thought of Susan—Susan, a young girl, must not be mixed up with anybody of doubtful character. It was all your good heart, I know, but it was very imprudent, to be sure."

Vincent laughed, in a kind of agony of mingled distress, anxiety, and strange momentary amusement. His mother and he were both blaming each other for the same fault. Both of them had equally yielded to kind feelings, and the natural impulse of generous hearts, without any consideration of prudence. But his mistake could not be attended by any consequences a hundredth part so serious as hers.

"In the mean time, we must do something," he said. "If he has no friends, he has at least an address, I suppose. Susan"—and a flush of indignation and affectionate anger crossed the young man's face—"Susan, no doubt, writes to the rascal. Susan! my sister! Good heaven!"

"Arthur!" said Mrs. Vincent. "Your dear papa always disapproved of such exclamations: he said they were just a kind of oath, though people did not think so. And you ought not to call him a rascal without proof—indeed, it is very sinful to come to such hasty judgments. Yes, I have got the address written down—it is in my pocket-book. But what shall you do? Will you write to himself, Arthur? or what? To be sure, it would be best to go to him and settle it at once."

"Oh, mother, have a little prudence now," cried the afflicted minister; "if he were base enough to propose marriage to Susan (confound him! that's not an oath—my father himself would have said as much) under such circumstances, don't you think he has the courage to tell a lie as well? I shall go up to town, and to his address to-morrow, and see what is to be found there. You must rest in the mean time. Writing is out of the question; what is to be done, I must do—and without a moment's loss of time."

The mother took his hand again, and put her handkerchief to her eyes—"God bless my dear boy," she said, with a mother's tearful admiration—"Oh, what a thing for me, Arthur, that you are grown up and a man, and able to do what is right in such a dreadful difficulty as this! You put me in mind more and more

of your dear father when you settle so clearly what is to be done. He was always ready to act when I used to be in a flutter, which was best. And, oh, how good has the Father of the fatherless been to me in giving me such a son!”

“Ah, mother,” said the young minister, “you gave premature thanks before, when you thought the Father of the fatherless had brought poor Susan a happy lot. Do you say the same now?”

“Always the same, Arthur dear,” cried his mother, with tears—“always the same. If it is even so, is it me, do you think, or is it Him that knows best?”

After this the agitation and distress of the first meeting gradually subsided. That mother, with all her generous imprudence and innocence of heart, was, her son well knew, the tenderest, the most indulgent, the most sympathetic of all his friends. Though the little—the very little insight he had obtained into life and the world had made him think himself wiser than she was in some respects, nothing had ever come between them to disturb the boy’s half-adoring, half-protecting love. He bethought himself of providing for her comfort, as she sat looking at him in the easy-chair, with her eyes smiling on him through their tears, patiently sipping the tea, which was a cold and doubtful infusion, nothing like the fragrant lymph of home. He poked the fire till it blazed, and drew her chair towards it, and hunted up a footstool which he had himself kicked out of the way, under the sofa, a month before. When he looked at the dear tender fresh old face opposite to him, in that close white cap which even now, after the long fatiguing journey, looked fresher and purer than other people’s caps and faces look at their best, a thaw came upon the young man’s heart. Nature awoke and yearned in him. A momentary glimpse crossed his vision of a humble happiness long within his reach, which never till now, when it was about to become impossible for ever, had seemed real or practicable, or even desirable before.

“Mother, dear,” said Vincent, with a tremulous smile, “you shall come here, Susan and you, to me; and we shall all be together again—and comfort each other,” he added, with a deeper gravity still, thinking of his own lot.

His mother did not answer in many words. She said, “My own boy!” softly, following him with her eyes. It was hard, even with Susan’s dreadful danger before her, to help being tearfully happy in seeing him again—in being his guest—in realising the full strength of his manhood and independence. She gave herself up to that feeling of maternal pride and consolation as she once more dried the tears which would come, notwithstanding all her efforts. Then he sat down beside her, and resigned himself to that confidential talk which can rarely be but between members of the same family. He had unburdened his mind unconsciously in his letters about Tozer and the deacons; and it cannot be told what a refreshment it was to be able to utter roundly in words his sentiments on all those subjects. The power of saying it out with no greater

hindrance than her mild remonstrances, mingled, as they were, with questions which enabled him to complete his sketches, and smiles of amusement at his descriptive powers, put him actually in better humour with Salem. He felt remorseful and charitable after he had said his worst.

“And are you sure, dear,” said Mrs. Vincent, at last resuming the subject nearest her heart, “that you can go away to-morrow without neglecting any duty? You must not neglect a duty, Arthur—not even for Susan’s sake. Whatever happens to us, you must keep right.”

“I have no duty to detain me,” said Vincent, hastily. Then a sudden glow came over the young man, a flush of happiness which stole upon him like a thief, and brightened his own personal firmament with a secret unacknowledgable delight; “but I must return early,” he added, with a momentary hesitation—“for if you won’t think it unkind to leave you, mother, I am engaged to dinner. I should scarcely like to miss it,” he concluded, after another pause, tying knots in his handkerchief, and taking care not to look at her as he spoke.

“To dinner, Arthur? I thought your people only gave teas,” said Mrs. Vincent, with a smile.

“The Salem people do; but this—is not one of the Salem people,” said the minister, still hesitating. “In fact, it would be ungracious of me not to go, and cowardly, too—for that curate, I believe, is to meet me—and Lady Western would naturally think——”

“Lady Western!” said Mrs. Vincent, with irrestrainable pleasure; “is that one of the great people in Carlingford?” The good woman wiped her eyes again with the very tenderest and purest demonstration of that adoration of rank which is said to be an English instinct. “I don’t mean to be foolish, dear,” she said, apologetically; “I know these distinctions of society are not worth your caring about; but to see my Arthur appreciated as he should be, is——” She could not find words to say what it was—she wound up with a little sob. What with trouble and anxiety, and pride and delight, and bodily fatigue added to all, tears came easiest that night.

Vincent did not say whether or not these distinctions of society were worth caring about. He sat abstractedly, untying the knots in his handkerchief, with a faint smile on his face. Then, while that pleasurable glow remained, he escorted his mother to his own sleeping-room, which he had given up to her, and saw that her fire burned brightly, and that all was comfortable. When he returned to poke his solitary fire, it was some time before he took out the letter which had disturbed his peace. The smile died away first by imperceptible degrees from his face. He gradually erected himself out of the meditative lounge into which he had fallen; then, with a little start, as if throwing dreams away, he took out and examined the letter. The more he looked at it, the graver

and deeper became the anxiety in his face. It had every appearance of being genuine in its bad writing and doubtful spelling. And Vincent started again with an unexplainable thrill of alarm when he thought how utterly unprotected his mother's sudden journey had left that little house in Lonsdale. Susan had no warning, no safeguard. He started up in momentary fright, but as suddenly sat down again with a certain indignation at his own thoughts. Nobody could carry her off, or do any act of violence; and as for taking advantage of her solitude, Susan, a straightforward, simple-minded English girl, was safe in her own pure sense of right.

CHAPTER XIII.

NEXT morning Mr. Vincent got up early, with an indescribable commotion in all his thoughts. He was to institute inquiries which might be life or death to his sister, but yet could not keep his mind to the contemplation of that grave necessity. A flicker of private hope and expectation kept gleaming with uncertain light over the dark weight of anxiety in his heart. He could not help, in the very deepest of his thoughts about Susan, breaking off now and then into a momentary digression, which suddenly carried him into Lady Western's drawing-room, and startled his heart with a thrill of conscious delight, secret and exquisite, which he could neither banish nor deny. In and out, and round about that grievous doubt which had suddenly disturbed the quiet history of his family, this capricious fairy played, touching all his anxious thoughts with thrills of sweetness. It seemed an action involuntary to himself, and over which he had no power; but it gave the young man an equally involuntary and causeless cheer and comfort. It did not seem possible that any dreadful discovery could be made that day, in face of the fact that he was to meet Her that night.

When he met his mother at breakfast, the recollection of Mrs. Hilyard and the charge she had committed to him, came to his mind again. No doubt Susan would take the wanderers in—no doubt they were as safe in the cottage as it was possible to be in a humble inviolable English home, surrounded by all the strength of neighbours and friends, and the protection of a spotless life which everybody knew; but yet—— That was not what his strange acquaintance had expected or bargained for. He felt as if he had broken faith with her when he realised his mother's absence from her own house. Yet somehow he felt a certain hesitation in broaching the subject, and unconsciously prepared himself for doubts and reluctance. The certainty of this gave a forced character to the assumed easiness with which he spoke.

“You will go to see Mrs. Hilyard,” he said; “I owe it to her to explain that you

were absent before her child went there. They will be safe enough at home, no doubt, with Susan; but still, you know, it would have been different had you been there.”

“Yes, Arthur,” said Mrs. Vincent, with an indescribable dryness in her voice.

“You will find her a very interesting woman,” said her son, instinctively contending against that unexpressed doubt—“the strangest contrast to her surroundings. The very sound of her voice carries one a thousand miles from Salem. Had I seen her in a palace, I doubt whether I should have been equally impressed by her. You will be interested in spite of yourself.”

“It is, as you say, very strange, Arthur,” said Mrs. Vincent—the dryness in her voice increasing to the extent of a short cough; “when does your train start?”

“Not till eleven,” said Vincent, looking at his watch; but you must please me, and go to see her, mother.”

“That reminds me, dear,” said Mrs. Vincent, hurriedly, “that now I am here, little as it suits my feelings, you must take me to see some of your people, Arthur. Mrs. Tufton, and perhaps the Tozers, you know. They might not like to hear that your mother had been in Carlingford, and had not gone to see them. It will be hard work visiting strangers while I am in this dreadful anxiety, but I must not be the means of bringing you into any trouble with your flock.”

“Oh, never mind my flock,” said Vincent, with some impatience; “put on your bonnet, and come and see her, mother.”

“Arthur, you are going by the first train,” said his mother.

“There is abundant time, and it is not too early for her,” persisted the minister.

But it was not so easy to conquer that meek little woman. “I feel very much fatigued to-day,” she said, turning her eyes, mild but invincible, with the most distinct contradiction of her words to her son’s face; “if it had not been my anxiety to have all I could of you, Arthur, I should not have got up to-day. A journey is a very serious matter, dear, for an old woman. One does not feel it so much at first,” continued this plausible defendant, still with her mild eyes on her son’s face, secure in the perfect reasonableness of her plea, yet not unwilling that he should perceive it was a pretence; “it is the next day one feels it. I shall lie down on the sofa, and rest when you are gone.”

And, looking into his mother’s soft eyes, the young Nonconformist retreated, and made no more attempts to shake her. Not the invulnerability of the fortress alone discouraged him—though that was mildly obdurate, and proof to argument—but a certain uneasiness in the thought of that meeting, an inclination to postpone it, and stave off the thought of all that might follow, surprised himself in his own mind. Why he should be afraid of the encounter, or how any complication could arise out of it, he could not by any means

imagine, but such was the instinctive sentiment in his heart.

Accordingly he went up to London by the train, leaving Mrs. Hilyard unwarned, and his mother reposing on the sofa, from which, it is sad to say, she rose a few minutes after he was gone, to refresh herself by tidying his bookcase and looking over all his linen and stockings, in which last she found a very wholesome subject of contemplation, which relieved the pressure of her thoughts much more effectually than could have been done by the rest which she originally proposed. Arthur, for his part, went up to London with a certain nervous thrill of anxiety rising in his breast as he approached the scene and the moment of his inquiries; though it was still only by intervals that he realised the momentous nature of those inquiries, on the result of which poor Susan's harmless girlish life, all unconscious of the danger that threatened it, hung in the balance. Poor Susan! just then going on with a bride's preparations for the approaching climax of her youthful existence. Was she, indeed, really a bride, with nothing but truth and sweet honour in the contract that bound her, or was she the sport of a villanous pastime that would break her heart, and might have shipwrecked her fair fame and innocent existence? Her brother set his teeth hard as he asked himself that question. Minister as he was, it might have been a dangerous chance for Fordham, had he come at that moment without ample proofs of guiltlessness in the Nonconformist's way.

When he got to town, he whirled, as fast as it was possible to go, to the address where Susan's guileless letters were sent almost daily. It was in a street off Piccadilly, full of lodging-houses, and all manner of hangers-on and ministrants to the world of fashion. He found the house directly, and was somewhat comforted to find it really an actual house, and not a myth or Doubtful Castle, or a post-office window. He knocked with the real knocker, and heard the bell peal through the comparative silence in the street, and insensibly cheered up, and began to look forward to the appearance of a real Mr. Fordham, with unquestionable private history and troops of friends. A quiet house, scrupulously clean, entirely respectable, yet distinct in all its features of lodging-house; a groom in the area below, talking to an invisible somebody, also a man, who seemed to be cleaning somebody else's boots; upstairs, at the first-floor balcony, a smart little tiger making a fashion of watering plants, and actually doing his best to sprinkle the conversational groom below; altogether a superabundance of male attendants, quite incompatible with the integrity of the small dwelling-place as a private house. Another man, who evidently belonged to the place, opened the door, interrupting Vincent suddenly in his observations—an elderly man, half servant, half master, in reality the proprietor of the place, ready either to wait or be waited on as occasion might require. Turning with a little start from his inspection of the attendant circumstances, Vincent asked, did Mr. Fordham live there?

The man made a momentary but visible pause; whatever it might betoken, it was not ignorance. He did not answer with the alacrity of frank knowledge or simple non-information. He paused, then said, "Mr. Fordham, sir?" looking intently at Vincent, and taking in every particular of his appearance, dress, and professional looks, with one rapid glance.

"Mr. Fordham," repeated Vincent, "does he live here?"

Once more the man perused him, swiftly and cautiously. "No, sir, he does not live here," was the second response.

"I was told this was his address," said Vincent. "I perceive you are not ignorant of him; where does he live? I know his letters come here."

"There are a many gentlemen in the house in the course of the season," answered the man, still on the alert to find out Vincent's meaning by his looks—"sometimes letters keep on coming months after they are gone. When we knows their home address, sir, we sends them; when we don't, we keeps them by us till we see if any owner turns up. Gen'leman of the name of Fordham?—do you happen to know, sir, what part o' the country he comes from? There's the Lincolnshire Fordhams, as you know, sir, and the Northumberland Fordhams; but there's no gen'leman of that name lives here."

"I am sure you know perfectly whom I mean," said Vincent, in his heat and impatience. "I don't mean Mr. Fordham any harm—I only want to see him, or to get some information about him, if he is not to be seen. Tell me where he does live, or tell me which of his friends is in town, that I may ask them. I tell you I don't mean Mr. Fordham any harm."

"No, sir?—nor I don't know as anybody means any harm," said the man, once more examining Vincent's appearance. "What was it as you were wishing to know? Though I ain't acquainted with the gen'leman myself, the missis or some of the people may be. We have a many coming and going, and I might confuse a name.—What was it as you were wishful to know?"

"I wish to see Mr. Fordham," said Vincent, impatiently.

"I have told you, sir, he don't live here," said the guardian of the house.

"Then, look here; you don't deceive me, remember. I can see you know all about him," said Vincent; "and, as I tell you, I mean him no harm; answer me one or two simple questions, and I will either thank or reward you as you like best. In the first place, Is this Mr. Fordham a married man? and, Has he ever gone by another name?"

As he asked these questions the man grinned in his face. "Lord bless you, sir, we don't ask no such questions here. A gen'leman comes and has his rooms, and pays, and goes away, and gives such name as he pleases. I don't ask a certificate of baptism, not if all's right in the pay department. We don't take

ladies in, being troublesome; but if a man was to have a dozen wives, what could we know about it? Sorry to disoblige a clergyman, sir; but as I don't know nothing about Mr. Fordham, perhaps you'll excuse me, as it's the busiest time of the day."

"Well, then, my good man," said Vincent, taking out his purse, "tell me what friend he has that I can apply to; you will do me the greatest service, and I _____"

"Sorry to disoblige a clergyman, as I say," said the man, angrily; "but, begging your pardon, I can't stand jabbering here. I never was a spy on a gen'lman, and never will be. If you want to know, you'll have to find out. Time's money to me."

With which the landlord of No. 10 Nameless Street, Piccadilly, shut the door abruptly in Vincent's face. A postman was audibly approaching at the moment. Could that have anything to do with the sudden breaking off of the conference? The minister, exasperated, yet, becoming more anxious, stood for a moment in doubt, facing the blank closed door. Then, desperate, turned round suddenly, and faced the advancing Mercury. He had no letters for No. 10; he was hastening past, altogether regardless of Vincent's look of inquiry. When he was addressed, however, the postman responded with immediate directness. "Fordham, sir—yes—a gentleman of that name lives at No. 10—leastways he has his letters there—No. 10—where you have just been, sir."

"But they say he doesn't live there," said Vincent.

"Can't tell, sir—has his letters there," said the public servant, decidedly.

More than ever perplexed, Vincent followed the postman to pursue his inquiries. "What sort of a house is it?" he asked.

"Highly respectable house, sir," answered the terse and decisive functionary, performing an astounding rap next door.

In an agony of impatience and uncertainty, the young man lingered opposite the house, conscious of a helplessness and impotence which made him furious with himself. That he ought to be able to get to the bottom of it was clear; but that he was as far as possible from knowing how to do that same, or where to pursue his inquiries, was indisputable. One thing was certain, that Mr. Fordham did not choose to be visible at this address to which his letters were sent, and that it was hopeless to attempt to extract any information on the subject by such frank inquiries as the minister had already made. He took a half-hour's walk, and thought it over with no great enlightenment on the subject. Then, coming back, applied once more at the highly respectable uncommunicative door. He had entertained hopes that another and more manageable adherent of the house might possibly appear this time—a maid, or impressionable servitor of some description, and had a little piece of gold

ready for the propitiatory tip in his hand. His hopes were, however, put to flight by the appearance of the same face, increased in respectability and composure by the fact that the owner had thrown off the jacket in which he had formerly been invested, and now appeared in a solemn black coat, the essence of respectable and dignified servitude. He fixed his eyes severely upon Vincent as soon as he opened the door. He was evidently disgusted by this return to the charge.

“Look here,” said Vincent, somewhat startled and annoyed to find himself confronted by the same face which had formerly defied him; “could you get a note conveyed from me to Mr. Fordham?—the postman says he has his letters here.”

“If he gets his letters here they come by the post,” said the man, insolently. “There’s a post-office round the corner, but I don’t keep one here. If one reaches him, another will. It ain’t nothing to me.”

“But it is a great deal to me,” said Vincent, with involuntary earnestness. “You have preserved his secret faithfully, whatever it may be; but it surely can’t be any harm to convey a note to Mr. Fordham. Most likely, when he hears my name,” said the young man, with a little consciousness that what he said was more than he believed, “he will see me; and I have to leave town this evening. You will do me a great service if you will save me the delay of the post, and get it delivered at once. And you may do Mr. Fordham a service too.”

The man looked with less certainty in Vincent’s face.—“Seems to me some people don’t know what ‘No’ means, when it’s said,” he replied, with a certain relenting in his voice. “There’s things as a gen’leman ought to know, sure enough—something happened in the family or so; but you see, he don’t live here; and since you stand it out so, I don’t mind saying that he’s a gen’leman as can’t be seen in town to-day, seeing he’s in the country, as I’m informed, on urgent private affairs. It’s uncommon kind of a clergyman, and a stranger, to take such an interest in my house,” continued the fellow, grinning spitefully; “but what I say first I say last—he don’t live here.”

“And he is not in town?” asked Vincent eagerly, without noticing the insolence of the speech. The man gradually closed the door upon himself till he had shut it, and stood outside, facing his persistent visitor.

“In town or out of town,” he said, folding his arms upon his chest, and surveying Vincent with all the insolence of a lackey who knows he has to deal with a man debarred by public opinion from the gratifying privilege of knocking him down, “there ain’t no more information to be got here.”

Such was the conclusion of Vincent’s attempted investigation. He went away at once, scarcely pausing to hear this speech out, to take the only means that presented themselves now; and going into the first stationer’s shop in his way,

wrote a note entreating Mr. Fordham to meet him, and giving a friend's address in London, as well as his own in Carlingford, that he might be communicated with instantly. When he had written and posted this note, Vincent proceeded to investigate the Directory and all the red and blue books he could lay his hands upon, for the name of Fordham. It was not a plentiful name, but still it occurred sufficiently often to perplex and confuse him utterly. When he had looked over the list of Fordhams in London, sufficiently long to give himself an intense headache, and to feel his under-taking entirely hopeless, he came to a standstill. What was to be done? He had no clue, nor the hope of any, to guide him through this labyrinth; but he had no longer any trust in the honour of the man whom his mother had so rashly received, and to whom Susan had given her heart. By way of the only precaution which occurred to him, he wrote a short note to Susan, begging her not to send any more letters to Mr. Fordham until her mother's return; and desiring her not to be alarmed by this prohibition, but to be very careful of herself, and wait for an explanation when Mrs. Vincent should return. He thought he himself would accompany his mother home. The note was written, as Vincent thought, in the most guarded terms; but in reality was such an abrupt, alarming performance, as was sure to drive a sensitive girl into the wildest fright and uncertainty. Having eased his conscience by this, he went back to the railway, and returned to Carlingford. Night had fallen before he reached home. Under any other circumstances, he would have encountered his mother after such an ineffectual enterprise, conscious as he was of carrying back nothing but heightened suspicion, with very uncomfortable feelings, and would have been in his own person too profoundly concerned about this dreadful danger which menaced his only sister, to be able to rest or occupy himself about other things. But the fact was, that whenever he relapsed into the solitary carriage in which he travelled to Carlingford, and when utterly quiet and alone, wrapped in the haze of din and smoke and speed which abstracts railway travellers from all the world,—gave himself up to thought, the rosy hue of his own hopes came stealing over him unawares. Now and then he woke up, as men wake up from a doze, and made a passing snatch at his fears. But again and again they eluded his grasp, and the indefinite brightness which had no foundation in reason, swallowed up everything which interfered with its power. The effect of this was to make the young man preternaturally solemn when he entered the room where his mother awaited him. He felt the reality of the fear so much less than he ought to do, that it was necessary to put on twice the appearance. Had he really been as deeply anxious and alarmed as he should have been, he would naturally have tried to ease and lighten the burden of the discovery to his mother; feeling it so hazily as he did, no such precautions occurred to him. She rose up when he came in, with a face which gradually paled out of all its colour as he approached. When he was near enough to hold out his hand to

her, Mrs. Vincent was nearly fainting. "Arthur," she cried, in a scarcely audible voice, "God have pity upon us; it is true: I can see it in your face."

"Mother, compose yourself. I have no evidence that it is true. I have discovered nothing," cried Vincent, in alarm.

The widow dropped heavily into her chair, and sobbed aloud. "I can read it in your face," she said. "Oh! my dear boy, have you seen that—that villain? Does he confess it? Oh, my Susan, my Susan! I will never forgive myself; I have killed my child."

From this passion it was difficult to recover her, and Vincent had to represent so strongly the fact that he had ascertained nothing certain, and that, for anything he could tell, Fordham might still prove himself innocent, that he almost persuaded his own mind in persuading hers.

"His letters might be taken in at a place where he did not live, for convenience sake," said Vincent. "The man might think me a dun, or something disagreeable. Fordham himself, for anything we can tell, may be very angry about it. Cheer up, mother; things are no worse than they were last night. I give you my word I have made no discovery, and perhaps to-morrow may bring us a letter clearing it all up."

"Ah! Arthur, you are so young and hopeful. It is different with me, who have seen so many terrors come true," said the mother, who notwithstanding was comforted. As for Vincent, he felt neither the danger nor the suspense. His whole soul was engrossed with the fact that it was time to dress; and it was with a little conscious sophistry that he himself made the best of it, and excused himself for his indifference.

"I can't bear to leave you, mother, in such suspense and distress," he said, looking at his watch; "but—I have to be at Lady Western's at half-past six."

Mrs. Vincent looked up with an expression of stupified surprise and pain for a moment, then brightened all at once. "My dear, I have laid out all your things," she said, with animation. "Do you think I would let you miss it, Arthur? Never mind talking to me. I shall hear all about it when you come home to-night. Now go, dear, or you will be late. I will come and talk to you when you are dressing, if you don't mind your mother? Well, perhaps not. I will stay here, and you can call me when you are ready, and I will bring you a cup of tea. I am sure you are tired, what with the fatigue and what with the anxiety. But you must try to put it off your mind, and enjoy yourself to-night."

"Yes, mother," said Vincent, hastening away; the tears were in her gentle eyes when she gave him that unnecessary advice. She pressed his hands fast in hers when he left her at last, repeating it, afraid in her own heart that this trouble had spoilt all the brightness of the opening hopes which she perceived with so much pride and joy. When he was gone, she sat down by the solitary fire, and

cried over her Susan in an utter forlornness and helplessness, which only a woman, so gentle, timid, and unable to struggle for herself, could feel. Her son, in the mean time, walked down Grange Lane, first with a momentary shame at his own want of feeling, but soon, with an entire forgetfulness both of the shame and the subject of it, absorbed in thoughts of his reception there. With a palpitating heart he entered the dark garden, now noiseless and chill in winterly decay, and gazed at the lighted windows which had looked like distant planets to him the last time he saw them. He lingered looking at them, now that the moment approached so near. A remembrance of his former disappointment went to his heart with a momentary pang as he hesitated on the edge of his present happiness. Another moment and he had thrown himself again, with a degree of suppressed excitement wonderful to think of, upon the chances of his fate.

Not alarming chances, so far as could be predicated from the scene. A small room, the smaller half of that room which he had seen full of the pretty crowd of the summer-party, the folding-doors closed, and a curtain drawn across them; a fire burning brightly; groups of candles softly lighting the room in clusters upon the wall, and throwing a colourless soft illumination upon the pictures of which Lady Western was so proud. She herself, dropped amid billows of dark blue silk and clouds of black lace in a low easy-chair by the side of the fire, smiled at Vincent, and held out her hand to him without rising, with a sweet cordiality and friendliness which rapt the young man into paradise. Though Lucy Wodehouse was scarcely less pretty than the young Dowager, Mr. Vincent saw her as if he saw her not, and still less did he realise the presence of Miss Wodehouse, who was the shadow to all this brightness. He took the chair which Lady Western pointed to him by her side. He did not want anybody to speak; or anything to happen. The welcome was not given as to a stranger, but made him at once an intimate and familiar friend of the house. At once all his dreams were realised. The sweet atmosphere was tinged with the perfumy breath which always surrounded Her; the room, which was so fanciful and yet so home-like, seemed a reflection of her to his bewildered eyes; and the murmur of soft sound, as these two lovely creatures spoke to each other, made the most delicious climax to the scene; although the moment before he had been afraid lest the sound of a voice should break the spell. But the spell was not to be broken that night. Mr. Wentworth came in a few minutes after him, and was received with equal sweetness; but still the young Nonconformist was not jealous. It was he whose arm Lady Western appropriated, almost without looking at him as she did so, when they went to dinner. She had put aside the forms which were intended to keep the outer world at arm's length. It was as her own closest personal friends that the little party gathered around the little table, just large enough for them, which was placed before the fire in the great dining-room. Lady Western was not a

brilliant talker, but Mr. Vincent thought her smallest observation more precious than any utterance of genius. He listened to her with a fervour which few people showed when listening to him, notwithstanding his natural eloquence; but as to what he himself said in reply, he was entirely oblivious, and spoke like a man in a dream. When she clapped her pretty hands, and adjured the Churchman and the Nonconformist to fight out their quarrel, it was well for Vincent that Mr. Wentworth declined the controversy. The lecturer on Church and State was hors de combat; he was in charity with all men. The curate of St. Roque's, who—blind and infatuated man!—thought Lucy Wodehouse the flower of Grange Lane, did not come in his way. He might pity him, but it was a sympathetic pity. Mr. Vincent took no notice when Miss Wodehouse launched tiny arrows of argument at him. She was the only member of the party who seemed to recollect his heresies in respect to Church and State—which, indeed, he had forgotten himself, and the state of mind which led to them. No such world existed now as that cold and lofty world which the young man of genius had seen glooming down upon his life, and shutting jealous barriers against his progress. The barriers were opened, the coldness gone—and he himself raised high on the sunshiny heights, where love and beauty had their perennial abode. He had gained nothing—changed in nothing—from his former condition: not even the golden gates of society had opened to the dissenting minister; but glorious enfranchisement had come to the young man's heart. It was not Lady Western who had asked him to dinner—a distinction of which his mother was proud. It was the woman of all women who had brought him to her side, whose sweet eyes were sunning him over, whose voice thrilled to his heart. By her side he forgot all social distinctions, and all the stings contained in them. No prince could have reached more completely the ideal elevation and summit of youthful existence. Ambition and its successes were vulgar in comparison. It was a poetic triumph amid the prose tumults and downfalls of life.

When the two young men were left over their wine, a somewhat grim shadow fell upon the evening. The curate of St. Roque's and the minister of Salem found it wonderfully hard to get up a conversation. They discussed the advantages of retiring with the ladies as they sat glum and reserved opposite each other—not by any means unlike, and, by consequence, natural enemies. Mr. Wentworth thought it an admirable plan, much more sensible than the absurd custom which kept men listening to a parcel of old fogies, who retained the habits of the last generation; and he proposed that they should join the ladies—a proposal to which Vincent gladly acceded. When they returned to the drawing-room, Lucy Wodehouse was at the piano; her sister sat at table with a pattern-book before her, doing some impossible pattern in knitting; and Lady Western again sat languid and lovely by the fire, with her beautiful hands in her lap, relieved from the dark background of the billowy blue dress by the

delicate cambric and lace of her handkerchief. She was not doing anything, or looking as if she could do anything. She was leaning back in the low chair, with the rich folds of her dress sweeping the carpet, and her beautiful ungloved hands lying lightly across each other. She did not move when the gentlemen entered. She turned her eyes to them, and smiled those sweet welcoming smiles, which Vincent knew well enough were for both alike, yet which made his heart thrill and beat. Wentworth (insensible prig!) went to Lucy's side, and began to talk to her over her music, now and then appealing to Miss Wodehouse. Vincent, whom no man hindered, and for whose happiness all the fates had conspired, invited by those smiling eyes, approached Lady Western with the surprised delight of a man miraculously blessed. He could not understand why he was permitted to be so happy. He drew a chair between her and the table, and, shutting out the other group by turning his back upon them, had her all to himself. She never changed her position, nor disturbed her sweet indolence, by the least movement. The fire blazed no longer. The candles, softly burning against the wall, threw no very brilliant light upon this scene. To Vincent's consciousness, bewildered as he was by the supreme delight of his position, they were but two in a new world, and neither thing nor person disturbed the unimaginable bliss. But Miss Wodehouse, when she raised her eyes from her knitting, only saw the young Dowager leaning back in her chair, smiling the natural smiles of her sweet temper and kind heart upon the young stranger whom she had chosen to make a protégé of. Miss Wodehouse silently concluded that perhaps it might be dangerous for the young man, who knew no better, and that Lady Western always looked well in a blue dress. Such was the outside world's interpretation of that triumphant hour of Vincent's life.

How it went on he never could tell. Soft questions, spoken in that voice which made everything eloquent, gently drew from him the particulars of his life; and sweet laughter, more musical than that song of Lucy's to which the curate (dull clod!) gave all his attention, rang silvery peals over the name of Tozer and the economics of Salem. Perhaps Lady Western enjoyed the conversation almost half as much as her worshipper did. She was amused, most delicate and difficult of all successes. She was pleased with the reverential devotion which had a freshness and tender humility conjoined with sensitive pride which was novel to her, and more flattering than ordinary adoration. When he saw it amused her, the young man exerted himself to set forth his miseries with their ludicrous element fully developed. They were no longer miseries, they were happinesses which brought him those smiles. He said twice enough to turn him out of Salem, and make him shunned by all the connection. He forgot everything in life but the lovely creature beside him, and the means by which he could arouse her interest, and keep her ear a little longer. Such was the position of affairs, when Miss Wodehouse came to the plain part of her

pattern, where she could go on without counting; and seeing Lady Western so much amused, became interested and set herself to listen too. By this time Vincent had come to more private concerns.

“I have been inquiring to-day after some one whom my mother knows, and whom I am anxious to hear about,” said Vincent. “I cannot discover anything about him. It is a wild question to ask if you know him, but it is just possible; there are such curious encounters in life.”

“What is his name?” said Lady Western, with a smile as radiant as a sunbeam.

“His name is Fordham—Herbert Fordham: I do not know where he comes from, nor whether he is of any profession; nor, indeed, anything but his name. I have been in town to-day——”

Here Vincent came to a sudden stop. He had withdrawn his eyes from that smile of hers for the moment. When he raised them again, the beautiful picture was changed as if by magic. Her eyes were fixed upon him dilated and almost wild. Her face was deadly pale. Her hands, which had been lying lightly crossed, grasped each other in a grasp of sudden anguish and self-control. He stopped short with a pang too bitter and strange for utterance. At that touch all his fancies dispersed into the air. He came to himself strangely, with a sense of chill and desolation. In one instant, from the height of momentary bliss down to the miserable flat of conscious unimportance. Such a downfall was too much for man to endure without showing it. He stopped short at the aspect of her face.

“You have been in town to-day?” she repeated, pointedly, with white and trembling lips.

“And could hear nothing of him,” said Vincent, with a little bitterness. “He was not to be heard of at his address.”

“Where was that?” asked Lady Western again, with the same intent and anxious gaze.

Vincent, who was sinking down, down in hopeless circles of jealousy, miserable fierce rage and disappointment, answered, “10 Nameless Street, Piccadilly,” without an unnecessary word.

Lady Western uttered a little cry of excitement and wonder. She knew nothing of the black abyss into which her companion had fallen any more than she knew the splendid heights to which her favour had raised him; but the sound of her own voice recalled her to herself. She turned away from Vincent and pulled the bell which was within her reach—pulled it once and again with a nervous twitch, and entangled her bracelet in the bell-pull, so that she had to bend over to unfasten it. Vincent sat gloomily by and looked on, without offering any assistance. He knew it was to hide her troubled face and gain a

moment to compose herself; but he was scarcely prepared for her total avoidance of the subject when she next spoke.

“They are always so late of giving us tea,” she said, rising from her chair, and going up to Miss Wodehouse: “I can see you have finished your pattern; let me see how it looks. That is pretty; but I think it is too elaborate. How many things has Mary done for this bazaar, Mr. Wentworth?—and do tell us when is it to be?”

What did Vincent care for the answer? He sat disenchanted in that same place which had been his bower of bliss all the evening, watching her as she moved about the room; her beautiful figure went and came with a certain restlessness, surely not usual to her, from one corner to another. She brought Miss Wodehouse something to look at from the work-table, and fetched some music for Lucy from a window. She had the tea placed in a remote corner, and made it there; and insisted on bringing it to the Miss Wodehouses with her own hands. She was disturbed; her sweet composure was gone. Vincent sat and watched her under the shade of his hands, with feelings as miserable as ever moved man. It was not sorrow for having disturbed her;—feelings much more personal, mortification and disappointment, and, above all, jealousy, raged in his heart. Warmer and stronger than ever was his interest in Mr. Fordham now.

After a miserable interval, he rose to take his leave. When he came up to her, Lady Western’s kind heart once more awoke in his behalf. She drew him aside after a momentary struggle with herself.

“I know that gentleman,” she said, quickly, with a momentary flush of colour, and shortening of breath; “at least I knew him once; and the address you mention is my brother’s address. If you will tell me what you want to know, I will ask for you. My brother and he used not to be friends, but I suppose——. What did you want to know?”

“Only,” said Vincent, with involuntary bitterness, “if he was a man of honour, and could be trusted; nothing else.”

The young Dowager paused and sighed; her beautiful eyes softened with tears. “Oh, yes—yes; with life—to death!” she said, with a low accompaniment of sighing, and a wistful melancholy smile upon her lovely face.

Vincent hastened out of the house. He ventured to say nothing to himself as he went up Grange Lane in the starless night, with all the silence and swiftness of passion. He dared not trust himself to think. His very heart, the physical organ itself, seemed throbbing and bursting with conscious pain. Had she loved this mysterious stranger whose undecipherable shadow hung over the minister’s path? To Vincent’s fancy, nothing else could account for her agitation; and was he so true, and to be trusted? Poor gentle Susan, whom such a fate and doom was approaching as might have softened her brother’s heart, had but little

place in his thoughts. He was not glad of that favourable verdict. He was overpowered with jealous rage and passion. Alas for his dreams! Once more, what downfall and over-throw had come of it! once more he had come down to his own position, and the second awakening was harder than the first. When he got home, and found his mother, affectionately proud, waiting to hear all about the great lady he had been visiting, it is impossible to express in words the intolerable impatience and disgust with himself and his fate which overpowered the young man. He had a bad headache, Mrs. Vincent said, she was sure, and he did not contradict her. It was an unspeakable relief to him when she went to her own room, and delivered him from the tender scrutiny of her eyes—those eyes full of nothing but love, which, in the irritation of his spirit, drove him desperate. He did not tell her about the unexpected discovery he had made. The very name of Fordham would have choked him that night.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE next morning brought no letters except from Susan. Fordham, if so true as Lady Western called him, was not, Vincent thought with bitterness, acting as an honourable man should in this emergency. But perhaps he might come to Carlingford in the course of the day, to see Susan's brother. The aspect of the young minister was changed when he made his appearance at the breakfast table. Mrs. Vincent made the most alarmed inquiries about his health, but—stopped abruptly in making them by his short and ungracious answer—came to a dead pause; and with a pang of fright and mortification, acknowledged to herself that her son was no longer her boy, whose entire heart she knew, but a man with a life and concerns of his own, possibly not patent to his mother. That breakfast was not a cheerful meal. There had been a long silence, broken only by those anxious attentions to each other's personal comfort, with which people endeavour to smooth down the embarrassment of an intercourse apparently confidential, into which some sudden unexplainable shadow has fallen. At last Vincent got up from the table, with a little outbreak of impatience.

"I can't eat this morning; don't ask me. Mother, get your bonnet on," said the young man; "we must go to see Mrs. Hilyard to-day."

"Yes, Arthur," said Mrs. Vincent, meekly; she had determined not to see Mrs. Hilyard, of whom her gentle respectability was suspicious; but, startled by her son's looks, and by the evident arrival of that period, instinctively perceived by most women, at which a man snatches the reins out of his adviser's hand, and has his way, the alarmed and anxious mother let her arms fall, and gave in without a struggle.

“The fact is, I heard of Mr. Fordham last night,” said Vincent, walking about the room, lifting up and setting down again abstractedly the things on the table. “Lady Western knows him, it appears; perhaps Mrs. Hilyard does too.”

“Lady Western knows him? Oh, Arthur, tell me—what did she say?” cried his mother, clasping her hands.

“She said he could be trusted—with life—to death,” said Vincent, very low, with an inaudible groan in his heart. He was prepared for the joy and the tears, and the thanksgiving with which his words were received; but he could not have believed, how sharply his mother’s exclamation, “God bless my Susan! now I am happy about her, Arthur. I could be content to die,” would go to his heart. Susan, yes;—it was right to be happy about her; and as for himself, who cared? He shut up his heart in that bitterness; but it filled him with an irritation and restlessness which he could not subdue.

“We must go to Mrs. Hilyard; probably she can tell us more,” he said, abruptly; “and there is her child to speak of. I blame myself,” he added, with impatience, “for not telling her before. Let us go now directly—never mind ringing the bell; all that can be done when we are out. Dinner? oh, for heaven’s sake, let them manage that! Where is your bonnet, mother? the air will do me good after a bad night.”

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs. Vincent, moved by this last argument. It must be his headache, no doubt, she tried to persuade herself. Stimulated by the sound of his footstep in the next room, she lost very little time over her toilette. Perhaps the chill January air, sharp with frost, air full of natural exhilaration and refreshment, did bring a certain relief to the young Nonconformist’s aching temples and exasperated temper. It was with difficulty his mother kept time with his long strides, as he hurried her along the street, not leaving her time to look at Salem, which was naturally the most interesting point in Carlingford to the minister’s mother. Before she had half prepared herself for this interview, he had hurried her up the narrow bare staircase which led to Mrs. Hilyard’s lodgings. On the landing, with the door half open, stood Lady Western’s big footman, fully occupying the narrow standing-ground, and shedding a radiance of plush over the whole shabby house. The result upon Mrs. Vincent was an immediate increase of comfort, for surely the woman must be respectable to whom people sent messages by so grand a functionary. The sight of the man struck Vincent like another pang. She had sent to take counsel, no doubt, on the evidently unlooked-for information which had startled her so last night.

“Come in,” said the inhabitant of the room. She was folding a note for which the footman waited. Things were just as usual in that shabby place. The coarse stuff at which she had been working lay on the table beside her. Seeing a woman with Vincent, she got up quickly, and turned her keen eyes upon the

new-comer. The timid doubtful mother, the young man, somewhat arbitrary and self-willed, who had brought his companion there against her will, the very look, half fright, half suspicion, which Mrs. Vincent threw round the room, explained matters to this quick observer. She was mistress of the position at once.

“Take this to Lady Western, John,” said Mrs. Hilyard. “She may come when she pleases—I shall be at home all day; but tell her to send a maid next time, for you are much too magnificent for Back Grove Street. This is Mrs. Vincent, I know. Your son has brought you to see me, and I hope you have not come to say that I was too rash in asking a Christian kindness from this young man’s mother. If he had not behaved like a paladin, I should not have ventured upon it; but when a young man conducts himself so, I think his mother is a good woman. You have taken in my child?”

She had taken Mrs. Vincent by both hands, and placed her in a chair, and sat down beside her. The widow had not a word to say. What with the praise of her son, which was music to her ears—what with the confusion of her own position, she was painfully embarrassed and at a loss, and anxiously full of explanations. “Susan has, I have no doubt; but I am sorry I left home on Wednesday morning, and we did not know then they were expected; but we have a spare room, and Susan, I don’t doubt——”

“The fact is, my mother had left home before they could have reached Lonsdale,” interposed Vincent; “but my sister would take care of them equally well. They are all safe. A note came this morning announcing their arrival. My mother,” said the young man, hastily, “returns almost immediately. It will make no difference to the strangers.”

“I am sure Susan will make them comfortable, and the beds would be well aired,” said Mrs. Vincent; “but I had sudden occasion to leave home, and did not even know of it till the night before. My dear,” she said, with hesitation, “did you think Mrs. Hilyard would know? I brought Susan’s note to show you,” she added, laying down that simple performance in which Susan announced the receipt of Arthur’s letter, and the subsequent arrival of “a governess-lady, and the most beautiful girl that ever was seen.” The latter part of Susan’s hurried note, in which she declared this beautiful girl to be “very odd—a sort of grown-up baby,” was carefully abstracted by the prudent mother.

The strange woman before them took up the note in both her hands and drank it in, with an almost trembling eagerness. She seemed to read over the words to herself again and again with moving lips. Then she drew a long breath of relief.

“Miss Smith is the model of a governess-lady,” she said, turning with a

composure wonderfully unlike that eagerness of anxiety to Mrs. Vincent again—"she never writes but on her day, whatever may happen; and yesterday did not happen to be her day. Thank you; it is Christian charity. You must not be any loser meantime, and we must arrange these matters before you go away. This is not a very imposing habitation," she said, glancing round with a movement of her thin mouth, and comic gleam in her eye—"but that makes no difference, so far as they are concerned. Mr. Vincent knows more about me than he has any right to know," continued the strange woman, turning her head towards him for the moment with an amused glance—"a man takes one on trust sometimes, but a woman must always explain herself to a woman: perhaps, Mr. Vincent, you will leave us together while I explain my circumstances to your mother?"

"Oh, I am sure it—it is not necessary," said Mrs. Vincent, half alarmed; "but, Arthur, you were to ask——"

"What were you to ask?" said Mrs. Hilyard, laying her hand with an involuntary movement upon a tiny note lying open on the table, to which Vincent's eyes had already wandered.

"The fact is," he said, following her hand with his eyes, "that my mother came up to inquire about some one called Fordham, in whom she is interested. Lady Western knows him," said Vincent, abruptly, looking in Mrs. Hilyard's face.

"Lady Western knows him. You perceive that she has written to ask me about him this morning. Yes," said Mrs. Hilyard, looking at the young man, not without a shade of compassion. "You are quite right in your conclusions; poor Alice and he were in love with each other before she married Sir Joseph. He has not been heard of for a long time. What do you want to know, and how is it he has showed himself now?"

"It is for Susan's sake," cried Mrs. Vincent, interposing; "oh, Mrs. Hilyard, you will feel for me better than any one—my only daughter! I got an anonymous letter the night before I left. I am so flurried, I almost forget what night it was—Tuesday night—which arrived when my dear child was out. I never kept anything from her in all her life, and to conceal it was dreadful—and how we got through that night——"

"Mother, the details are surely not necessary now," said her impatient son. "We want to know what are this man's antecedents and his character—that is all," he added, with irrestrainable bitterness.

Mrs. Hilyard took up her work, and pinned the long coarse seam to her knee. "Mrs. Vincent will tell me herself," she said, looking straight at him with her amused look. Of all her strange peculiarities, the faculty of amusement was the strangest. Intense restrained passion, anxiety of the most desperate kind, a wild will which would pause at nothing, all blended with and left room for this

unfailing perception of any ludicrous possibility. Vincent got up hastily, and, going to the window, looked out upon the dismal prospect of Salem, throwing its shabby shadow upon those dreary graves. Instinctively he looked for the spot where that conversation must have been held which he had overheard from the vestry window; it came most strongly to his mind at that moment. As his mother went through her story, how Mr. Fordham had come accidentally to the house—how gradually they had admitted him to their friendship—how, at last, Susan and he had become engaged to each other—her son stood at the window, following in his mind all the events of that evening, which looked so long ago, yet was only two or three evenings back. He recalled to himself his rush to the telegraph office; and again, with a sharp stir of opposition and enmity, recalled, clear as a picture, the railway-carriage just starting, the flash of light inside, the face so clearly evident against the vacant cushions. What had he to do with that face, with its eagle outline and scanty long locks? Somehow, in the meshes of fate he felt himself so involved that it was impossible to forget this man. He came and took his seat again with his mind full of that recollection. The story had come to a pause, and Mrs. Hilyard sat silent, taking in with her keen eyes every particular of the gentle widow's character, evidently, as Vincent could see, following her conduct back to those springs of gentle but imprudent generosity and confidence in what people said to her, from which her present difficulties sprang.

“And you admitted him first?” said Mrs. Hilyard, interrogatively, “because——?” She paused. Mrs. Vincent became embarrassed and nervous.

“It was very foolish, very foolish,” said the widow, wringing her hands; “but he came to make inquiries, you know. I answered him civilly the first time, and he came again and again. It looked so natural. He had come down to see a young relation at school in the neighbourhood.”

Mrs. Hilyard uttered a sudden exclamation—very slight, low, scarcely audible; but it attracted Vincent's attention. He could see that her thin lips were closed, her figure slightly erected, a sudden keen gleam of interest in her face. “Did he find his relation?” she asked, in a voice so ringing and distinct that the young minister started, and sat upright, bracing himself for something about to happen. It did not flash upon him yet what that meaning might be; but his pulses leapt with a prescient thrill of some tempest or earthquake about to fall.

“No; he never could find her—it did not turn out to be our Lonsdale, I think—what is the matter?” cried Mrs. Vincent; “you both know something I don't know—what has happened? Arthur, have I said anything dreadful?—oh, what does it mean?”

“Describe him if you can,” said Mrs. Hilyard, in a tone which, sharp and calm, tingled through the room with a passionate clearness which nothing but extreme excitement could give. She had taken Mrs. Vincent's hand, and held it

tightly with a certain compassionate compulsion, forcing her to speak. As for Vincent, the horrible suspicion which stole upon him unmanned him utterly. He had sprung to his feet, and stood with his eyes fixed on his mother's face with an indescribable horror and suspense. It was not her he saw. With hot eyes that blazed in their sockets, he was fixing the gaze of desperation upon a picture in his mind, which he felt but too certain would correspond with the faltering words which fell from her lips. Mrs. Vincent, for her part, would have thrown herself wildly upon him, and lost her head altogether in a frightened attempt to find out what this sudden commotion meant, had she not been fixed and supported by that strong yet gentle grasp upon her hand. "Describe him—take time," said her strange companion again—not looking at her, but waiting in an indescribable calm of passion for the words which she could frame in her mind before they were said.

"Tall," said the widow's faltering alarmed voice, falling with a strange uncertainty through the intense stillness, in single words, with gasps between; "not—a very young man—aquiline—with a sort of eagle-look—light hair—long and thin, and as fine as silk—very light in his beard, so that it scarcely showed. Oh, God help us! what is it? what is it?—You both know whom I mean."

Neither of them spoke; but the eyes of the two met in a single look, from which both withdrew, as if the communication were a crime. With a shudder Vincent approached his mother; and, speechless though he was, took hold of her, and drew her to him abruptly. Was it murder he read in those eyes, with their desperate concentration of will and power? The sight of them, and recollection of their dreadful splendour, drove even Susan out of his mind. Susan, poor gentle soul!—what if she broke her tender heart, in which no devils lurked? "Mother, come—come," he said, hoarsely, raising her up in his arm, and releasing the hand which the extraordinary woman beside her still clasped fast. The movement roused Mrs. Hilyard as well as Mrs. Vincent. She rose up promptly from the side of the visitor who had brought her such news.

"I need not suggest to you that this must be acted on at once," she said to Vincent, who, in his agitation, saw how the hand, with which she leant on the table, clenched hard till it grew white with the pressure. "The man we have to deal with spares nothing." She stopped, and then, with an effort, went up to the half-fainting mother, who hung upon Vincent's arm, and took her hands and pressed them close. "We have both thrust our children into the lion's mouth," she cried, with a momentary softening. "Go, poor woman, and save your child if you can, and so will I—we are companions in misfortune. And you are a priest, why cannot you curse him?" she exclaimed, with a bitter cry. The next moment she had taken down a travelling-bag from a shelf, and, kneeling down by a trunk, began to transfer some things to it. Vincent left his mother, and

went up to her with a sudden impulse, "I am a priest, let me bless you," said the young man, touching with a compassionate hand the dark head bending before him. Then he took his mother away. He could not speak as he supported her down-stairs; she, clinging to him with double weakness, could scarcely support herself at all in her agitation and wonder when they got into the street. She kept looking in his face with a pitiful appeal that went to his heart.

"Tell me, Arthur, tell me!" She sobbed it out unawares, and over and over before he knew what she was saying. And what could he tell her? "We must go to Susan—poor Susan!" was all the young man could say.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. VINCENT came to a dead stop as they passed the doors of Salem, which were ajar, taking resolution in the desperateness of her uncertainty—for the feelings in the widow's mind were not confined to one burning impulse of terror for Susan, but complicated by a wonderful amount of flying anxieties about other matters as well. She knew, by many teachings of experience, what would be said by all the connection, when it was known that the minister's mother had been in Carlingford without going to see anybody—not even Mrs. Tufton, the late minister's wife, or Mrs. Tozer, who was so close at hand. Though her heart was racked, Mrs. Vincent knew her duty. She stopped short in her fright and distress with the mild obduracy of which she was capable. Before rushing away out of Carlingford to protect her daughter, the mother, notwithstanding her anxiety, could not forget the injury which she might possibly do by this means to the credit of her son.

"Arthur, the chapel is open—I should like to go in and rest," she said, with a little gasp; "and oh, my dear boy, take a little pity upon me! To see the state you are in, and not to know anything, is dreadful. You must have a vestry, where one could sit down a little—let us go in."

"A vestry—yes; it will be a fit place," cried Vincent, scarcely knowing what he was saying, and indeed worn out with the violence of his own emotions. This little persistent pause of the widow, who was not absorbed by any one passionate feeling, but took all the common cares of life with her into her severest trouble, awoke the young man to himself. He, too, recollected that this enemy who had stolen into his house was not to be reached by one wild rush, and that everything could not be suffered to plunge after Susan's happiness into an indiscriminate gulf of ruin. All his own duties pricked at his heart with bitter reminders in that moment when he stood by the door of Salem, where two poor women were busy inside, with pails and brushes, preparing for Sunday. The minister, too, had to prepare for Sunday. He could

not dart forth, breathing fire and flame at a moment's notice, upon the serpent who had entered his Eden. Even at this dreadful moment, in all the fever of such a discovery, the touch of his mother's hand upon his arm brought him back to his lot. He pushed open the mean door, and led her into the scene of his weekly labours with a certain sickening disgust in his heart which would have appalled his companion. She was a dutiful woman, subdued by long experience of that inevitable necessity against which all resistance fails; and he a passionate young man, naturally a rebel against every such bond. They could not understand each other; but the mother's troubled face, all conscious of Tufton and Tozer, and what the connection would say, brought all the weight of his own particular burden back upon Vincent's mind. He pushed in past the pails with a certain impatience which grieved Mrs. Vincent. She followed him with a pained and disapproving look, nodding, with a faint little smile, to the women, who no doubt were members of the flock, and might spread an evil report of the pastor, who took no notice of them. As she followed him to the vestry, she could not help thinking, with a certain strange mixture of pain, vexation, and tender pride, how different his dear father would have been. "But Arthur, dear boy, has my quick temper," sighed the troubled woman. After all, it was her fault rather than her son's.

"This is a very nice room," said Mrs. Vincent, sitting down with an air of relief; "but I think it would be better to close the window, as there is no fire. You were always very susceptible to cold, Arthur, from a child. And now, my dear boy, we are undisturbed, and out of those dreadful glaring streets where everybody knows you. I have not troubled you, Arthur, for I saw you were very much troubled; but, oh! don't keep me anxious now."

"Keep you anxious! You ask me to make you anxious beyond anything you can think of," said the young man, closing the window with a hasty and fierce impatience, which she could not understand. "Good heavens, mother! why did you let that man into your innocent house?"

"Who is he, Arthur?" asked Mrs. Vincent, with a blanched face.

"He is——" Vincent stopped with his hand upon the window where he had overheard that conversation, a certain awe coming over him. Even Susan went out of his mind when he thought of the dreadful calmness with which his strange acquaintance had promised to kill her companion of that night. Had she started already on this mission of vengeance? A cold thrill came over him where he stood. "I can't tell who he is," he exclaimed, abruptly, throwing himself down upon the little sofa; "but it was to be in safety from him that Mrs. Hilyard sent her daughter to Lonsdale. It was he whom she vowed to kill if he found the child. Ah!—he is," cried the young man, springing to his feet again with a sudden pang and smothered exclamation as the truth dawned upon him, "Lady Western's brother. What other worse thing he is I cannot tell.

Ruin, misery, and horror at the least—death to Susan—not much less to me.”

“To you? Oh, Arthur, have pity upon me, my heart is breaking,” said Mrs. Vincent. “Oh, my boy, my boy, whom I would die to save from any trouble! don’t tell me I have destroyed you. That cannot be, Arthur—that cannot be!”

The poor minister did not say anything—his heart was bitter within him. He paced up and down the vestry with dreadful thoughts. What was She to him if she had a hundred brothers? Nothing in the world could raise the young Nonconformist to that sweet height which she made beautiful; and far beyond that difference came the cruel recollection of those smiles and tears—pathetic, involuntary confessions. If there was another man in the world whom she could trust “with life—to death!” what did it matter though a thousand frightful combinations involved poor Vincent with her kindred? He tried to remind himself of all this, but did not succeed. In the mean time, the fact glared upon him that it was her brother who had aimed this deadly blow at the honour and peace of his own humble house; and his heart grew sad with the thought that, however indifferent she might be to him, however unattainable, here was a distinct obstacle which must cut off all that bewildering tantalising intercourse which at present was still possible, notwithstanding every other hindrance. He thought of this, and not of Susan, as the floor of the little vestry thrilled under his feet. He was bitter, aggrieved, indignant. His troubled mother, who sat by there, half afraid to cry, watching him with frightened, anxious, uncomprehending eyes, had done him a sharp and personal injury. She could not fancy how it was, nor what she could have done. She followed him with mild tearful glances, waiting with a woman’s compelled patience till he should come to himself, and revolving thoughts of Salem, and supply for the pulpit there, with an anxious pertinacity. But in her way Mrs. Vincent was a wise woman. She did not speak—she let him wear himself out first in that sudden apprehension of the misfortune personal to himself, which was at the moment so much more poignant and bitter than any other dread. When he had subsided a little—and first of all he threw up the window, leaning out, to his mother’s great vexation, with a total disregard of the draught, and receiving the chill of the January breeze upon his heated brow—she ventured to say, gently, “Arthur, what are we to do?”

“To go to Lonsdale,” said Vincent. “When we came in here, I thought we could rush off directly; but these women outside there, and this place, remind me that I am not a free man, who can go at once and do his duty. I am in fetters to Salem, mother. Heaven knows when I may be able to get away. Sunday must be provided for first. No natural immediate action is possible to me.”

“Hush, Arthur dear—oh, hush! Your duty to your flock is above your duty even to your sister,” said the widow, with a tremulous voice, timid of saying

anything to him whose mood she could not comprehend. "You must find out when the first train starts, and I will go. I have been very foolish," faltered the poor mother, "as you say, Arthur; but if my poor child is to bear such a dreadful blow, I am the only one to take care of her. Susan"—here she made a pause, her lip trembled, and she had all but broken into tears—"will not upbraid me, dear. You must not neglect your duty, whatever happens; and now let us go and inquire about the train, Arthur, and you can come on Monday, after your work is over; and, oh! my dear boy, we must not repine, but accept the arrangements of Providence. It was what your dear father always said to his dying day."

Her face all trembling and pale, her eyes full of tears which were not shed, her tender humility, which never attempted a defence, and those motherly, tremulous, wistful advices which it now for the first time dawned upon Mrs. Vincent her son was not certain to take, moved the young Nonconformist out of his personal vexation and misery.

"This will not do," he said. "I must go with you; and we must go directly. Susan may be less patient, less believing, less ready to take our word for it, than you imagine, mother. Come; if there is anybody to be got to do this preaching, the thing will be easy. Tozer will help me, perhaps. We will waste no more time here."

"I am quite rested, Arthur dear," said Mrs. Vincent; "and it will be right for me to call at Mrs. Tozer's too. I wish I could have gone to Mrs. Tufton's, and perhaps some others of your people. But you must tell them, dear, that I was very hurried—and—and not very well; and that it was family business that brought me here."

"I do not see they have any business with the matter," said the rebellious minister.

"My dear, it will of course be known that I was in Carlingford; and I know how things are spoken of in a flock," said Mrs. Vincent, rising; "but you must tell them all I wanted to come, and could not—which, indeed, will be quite true. A minister's family ought to be very careful, Arthur," added the much-experienced woman. "I know how little a thing makes mischief in a congregation. Perhaps, on the whole, I ought not to call at Mrs. Tozer's, as there is no time to go elsewhere. But still I should like to do it. One good friend is often everything to a young pastor. And, my dear, you should just say a word in passing to the women outside."

"By way of improving the occasion?" said Vincent, with a little scorn. "Mother, don't torture yourself about me. I shall get on very well; and we have plenty on our hands just now without thinking of Salem. Come, come; with this horrible cloud overhanging Susan, how can you spare a thought for such

trifles as these?”

“Oh, Arthur, my dear boy, must not we keep you right?” said his mother; “are not you our only hope? If this dreadful news you tell me is true, my child will break her heart, and I will be the cause of it; and Susan has no protector or guardian, Arthur dear, that can take care of her, but you.”

Wiping her eyes, and walking with a feeble step, Mrs. Vincent followed her son out of Salem; but she looked up with gentle interest to his pulpit as she passed, and said it was a cold day to the cleaners, with anxious carefulness. She was not carried away from her palpable standing-ground by any wild tempest of anxiety. Susan, whose heart would be broken by this blow, was her mother’s special object in life; but the thought of that coming sorrow which was to crush the girl’s heart, made Mrs. Vincent only the more anxiously concerned to conciliate and please everybody whose influence could be of any importance to her son.

So they came out into the street together, and went on to Tozer’s shop. She, tremulous, watchful, noting everything; now lost in thought as to how the dreadful truth was to be broken to Susan; now in anxious plans for impressing upon Arthur the necessity of considering his people—he, stinging with personal wounds and bitterness, much more deeply alarmed than his mother, and burning with consciousness of all the complications which she was totally ignorant of. Fury against the villain himself, bitter vexation that he was Lady Western’s brother, anger at his mother for admitting, at Susan for giving him her heart, at Mrs. Hilyard for he could not tell what, because she had added a climax to all, burned in Vincent’s mind as he went on to George Street with his mother leaning on his arm, who asked him after every wayfarer who passed them, Who was that? It was not wonderful that the young man gradually grew into a fever of excitement and restless misery. Everything conspired to exasperate him,—even the fact that Sunday came so near, and could not be escaped. The whirl of his brain came to a climax when Lady Western’s carriage drove past, and through the mist of his wretchedness he saw the smile and the beautiful hand waved to him in sweet recognition. Oh heaven! to bring tears to those eyes, or a pang to that heart!—to have her turn from him shuddering, or pass him with cold looks, because her brother was a villain, and he the avenger of that crime! His mother, almost running to keep up with his unconsciously quickened pace, cast pitiful looks at him, inquiring what it was. The poor young fellow could not have told even if he would. It was a combination of miseries, sharply stimulated to the intolerable point by the mission on which he had now to enter Tozer’s shop.

“We heard you was come, ma’am,” said Tozer, graciously, “and in course was looking for a call. I hope you are going to stay awhile and help us take care of the pastor. He don’t take that care of himself as his friends would wish,” said

the buttermilk. "Mr. Vincent, sir, I've a deal to say to you when you're at leisure. Old Mr. Tufton, he has a deal to say to you. We are as anxious as ever we can be, us as are old stagers, to keep the minister straight, ma'am. He's but a young man, and he's come into a deal of popularity, and any one more thought on in our connection, I don't know as I would wish to see; but it wouldn't do to let him have his head turned. Them lectures on Church and State couldn't but be remarked, being delivered, as you may say, in the world, all on us making a sacrifice to do our duty by our fellow-creatures, seein' what we had in our power. But man is but mortal; and us Salem folks don't like to see no signs of that weakness in a pastor; it's our duty to see as his head's not turned."

"Indeed, I trust there is very little fear of that," said Mrs. Vincent, roused, and set on the defensive. "My dear boy has been used to be appreciated, and to have people round him who could understand him. As for having his head turned, that might happen to a man who did not know what intelligent approbation was; but after doing so well as he did at college, and having his dear father's approval, I must say I don't see any cause to apprehend that, Mr. Tozer. I am not surprised at all, for my part,—I always knew what my Arthur could do." "No more of this," said Vincent, impatiently. "Look here, I have come on a special business. Can any one be got, do you think, to preach on Sunday? I must go home with my mother to-day."

"To-day!" Tozer opened his eyes, with a blank stare, as he slowly took off his apron. "You was intimated to begin that course on the Miracles, Mr. Vincent, if you'll excuse me, on Sunday. Salem folks is a little sharp, I don't deny. It would be a great disappointment, and I can't say I think as it would be took well if you was to go away."

"I can't help that," said the unfortunate minister, to whom opposition at this moment was doubly intolerable. "The Salem people, I presume, will hear reason. My mother has come upon——"

"Family business," interrupted Mrs. Vincent, with the deepest trembling anxiety. "Arthur dear, let me explain it, for you are too susceptible. My son is all the comfort we have in the world, Mr. Tozer," said the anxious widow. "I ought not to have told him how much his sister wanted him, but I was rash, and did so; and now I ought to bear the penalty. I have made him anxious about Susan; but, Arthur dear, never mind; you must let me go by myself, and on Monday you can come. Your dear father always said his flock was his first duty, and if Sunday is a special day, as Mr. Tozer says——"

"Oh, Pa, is it Mrs. Vincent? and you keep her in the shop, when we are all as anxious as ever we can be to see her," said Phœbe, who suddenly came upon the scene. "Oh, please to come up-stairs to the drawing-room. Oh, I am so glad to see you! and it was so unkind of Mr. Vincent not to let us know you were

coming. Mamma wanted to ask you to come here, for she thought it would be more comfortable than a bachelor's rooms; and we did think the minister would have told us," said Phœbe, with reproachful looks; "but now that you have come back again, after such a long time, please, Mr. Vincent, let your mother come up-stairs. They say you don't think us good enough to be trusted now; but oh, I don't think you could ever be like that!" continued Phœbe, pausing by the door as she ushered Mrs. Vincent into the drawing-room, and giving the minister an appealing remonstrative glance before she dropped her eyelids in virginal humility. Poor Vincent paused too, disgusted and angry, but with a certain confusion. To fling out of the house, dash off to his rooms, make his hasty preparations for the journey, was the impulse which possessed him; but his mother was looking back with wistful curiosity, wondering what the two could mean by pausing behind her at the door.

"I am exactly as I was the last time I saw you, which was on Tuesday," he said, with some indignation. "I will follow you, please. My mother has no time to spare, as she leaves to-day—can Mrs. Tozer see her? She has been agitated and worn out, and we have not really a moment to spare."

"Appearingly not—not for your own friends, Mr. Vincent," said Mrs. Tozer, who now presented herself. "I hope I see you well, ma'am, and proud to see you in my house, though I will say the minister don't show himself not so kind as was to be wished. Phœbe, don't put on none o' your pleading looks—for shame of yourself, Miss! If Mr. Vincent has them in Carlingford as he likes better than any in his own flock, it ain't no concern of ours. It's a thing well known as the Salem folks are all in trade, and don't drive their carriages, nor give themselves up to this world and vanity. I never saw no good come, for my part, of folks sacrificing theirselves and their good money as Tozer and the rest set their hearts on, with that Music Hall and them advertisings and things—not as I was meaning to upbraid you, Mr. Vincent, particular not before your mother, as is a stranger—but we was a deal comfortabler before them lectures and things, and taking off your attention from your own flock."

Before this speech was finished, the whole party had assembled in the drawing-room, where a newly-lighted fire, hastily set light to on the spur of the moment by Phœbe, was sputtering drearily. Mrs. Vincent had been placed in an arm-chair at one side, and Mrs. Tozer, spreading out her black silk apron and arranging her cap, set herself doggedly on the other, with a little toss of her head and careful averting of her eyes from the accused pastor. Tozer, without his apron, had drawn a chair to the table, and was drumming on it with the blunt round ends of his fingers; while Phœbe, in a slightly pathetic attitude, ready for general conciliation, hovered near the minister, who grew red all over, and clenched his hand with an emphasis most intelligible to his frightened mother. The dreadful pause was broken by Phœbe, who rushed to

the rescue.

“Oh, Ma, how can you!” cried that young lady—“you were all worrying and teasing Mr. Vincent, you know you were; and if he does know that beautiful lady,” said Phœbe, with her head pathetically on one side, and another glance at him, still more appealing and tenderly reproachful—“and—and likes to go to see her—it’s—it’s the naturalest thing that ever was. Oh, I knew he never could think anything of anybody else in Carlingford after Lady Western! and I am sure, whatever other people may say, I—I—never can think Mr. Vincent was to blame.”

Phœbe’s words were interrupted by her feelings—she sank back into a seat when she had concluded, and put a handkerchief to her eyes. As for Tozer, he still drummed on the table. A certain human sympathy was in the mind of the butlerman, but he deferred to the readier utterance of his indignant wife.

“I never said it was any concern of ours,” said Mrs. Tozer. “It ain’t our way to court nobody as doesn’t seek our company; but a minister as we’ve all done a deal to make comfortable, and took an interest in equal to a son, and has been made such a fuss about as I never see in our connection—it’s disappointing, I will say, to see him a-going off after worldly folks that don’t care no more about religion than I do about playing the piano. Not as Phœbe doesn’t play the piano better than most—but such things ain’t in my thoughts. I do say it’s disappointing, and gives folks a turn. If she’s pretty-lookin’—as she may be, for what I can tell—it ain’t none of the pastor’s business. Them designing ladies is the ruin of a young man; and when he deserts his flock, as are making sacrifices, and goes off after strangers, I don’t say if it’s right or wrong, but I say it’s disappointin’, and what wasn’t looked for at Mr. Vincent’s hands.”

Vincent had listened up to this point with moderate self-restraint—partially, perhaps, subdued by the alarmed expression of his mother’s face, who had fixed her anxious eyes upon him, and vainly tried to convey telegraphic warnings; but the name of Lady Western stung him. “What is all this about?” he asked, with assumed coldness. “Nobody supposes, surely, that I am to render an account of my private friends to the managers of the chapel. It is a mistake, if it has entered any imagination. I shall do nothing of the kind. There is enough of this. When I neglect my duties, I presume I shall hear of it more seriously. In the mean time, I have real business in hand.”

“But, Arthur dear, I daresay some one has misunderstood you,” said his mother; “it always turns out so. I came the day before yesterday, Mrs. Tozer. I left home very suddenly in great anxiety, and I was very much fatigued by the journey, and I must go back to-day. I have been very selfish, taking my son away from his usual occupations. Never mind me, Arthur dear; if you have any business, leave me to rest a little with Mrs. Tozer. I can take such a liberty here, because I know she is such a friend of yours. Don’t keep Mr. Tozer away

from his business on my account. I know what it is when time is valuable. I will just stay a little with Mrs. Tozer, and you can let me know when it is time for the train. Yes, I came up very hurriedly,” said the gentle diplomatist, veiling her anxiety as she watched the gloomy countenances round her. “We had heard some bad news; I had to ask my son to go to town yesterday for me, and—and I must go home to-day without much comfort. I feel a good deal shaken, but I dare not stay away any longer from my dear child at home.”

“Dear, dear; I hope it’s nothing serious as has happened?” said Mrs. Tozer, slightly mollified.

“It is some bad news about the gentleman Susan was going to marry,” said Mrs. Vincent, with a rapid calculation of the necessities of the position; “and she does not know yet. Arthur, my dear boy, it would be a comfort to my mind to know about the train.”

“Oh, and you will be so fatigued!” said Phœbe. “I do so hope it’s nothing bad. I am so interested about Miss Vincent. Oh, Pa, do go down-stairs and look at the railway bill. Won’t you lie down on the sofa a little and rest? Fancy, mamma, taking two journeys in three days!—it would kill you; and, oh, I do so hope it is nothing very bad. I have so longed to see you and Mr. Vincent’s sister. He told me all about her one evening. Is the gentleman ill? But do lie down and rest after all your fatigue. Mamma, don’t you think it would do Mrs. Vincent good?”

“We’ll have a bit of dinner presently,” said Mrs. Tozer. “Phœbe, go and fetch the wine. There is one thing in trouble, that it makes folks find out their real friends. It wouldn’t be to Lady Western the minister would think of taking his mother. I ain’t saying anything, Tozer—nor Mr. Vincent needn’t think I am saying anything. If I speak my mind a bit, I don’t bear malice. Phœbe’s a deal too feelin’, Mrs. Vincent—she’s overcome, that’s what she is; and if I must speak the truth, it’s disappointing to see our pastor, as we’ve all made sacrifices for, following after the ungodly. I am a mother myself,” continued Mrs. Tozer, changing her seat, as her husband, followed by the indignant Vincent, went down-stairs, “and I know a mother’s feelin’s: but after what I heard from Mrs. Pigeon, and how it’s going through all the connection in Carlingford——”

Mrs. Vincent roused herself to listen. Her son’s cause was safe in her hands.

Meantime Vincent went angry and impetuous down-stairs. “I will not submit to any inquisition,” cried the young man. “I have done nothing I am ashamed of. If I dine with a friend, I will suffer no questioning on the subject. What do you mean? What right has any man in any connection to interfere with my actions? Why, you would not venture to attack your servant so! Am I the servant of this congregation? Am I their slave? Must I account to them for

every accident of my life? Nobody in the world has a right to make such a demand upon me.”

“If a minister ain’t a servant, we pays him his salary at the least, and expects him to please us,” said Tozer, sulkily. “If it weren’t for that, I don’t give a sixpence for the Dissenting connection. Them as likes to please themselves would be far better in a State Church, where it wouldn’t disappoint nobody; not meaning to be hard on you as has given great satisfaction, them’s my views; but if the Chapel folks is a little particular, it’s no more nor a pastor’s duty to bear with them, and return a soft answer. I don’t say as I’m dead again’ you, like the women,” added the buttermilk man, softening; “they’re jealous, that’s what they are; but I couldn’t find it in my heart, not for my own part, to be hard on a man as was led away after a beautiful creature like that. But there can’t no good come of it, Mr. Vincent; take my advice, sir, as have seen a deal of the world—there can’t no good come of it. A man as goes dining with Lady Western, and thinking as she means to make a friend of him, ain’t the man for Salem. We’re different sort of folks, and we can’t go on together. Old Mr. Tufton will tell you just the same, as has gone through it all—and that’s why I said both him and me had a deal to say to you, as are a young man, and should take good advice.”

It was well for Vincent that the worthy buttermilk man was lengthy in his address. The sharp impression of resentment and indignation which possessed him calmed down under this outpouring of words. He bethought himself of his dignity, his character. A squabble of self-defence, in which the sweet name of the lady of his dreams must be involved—an angry encounter of words about her, down here in this mean world to which the very thought of her was alien, wound up her young worshipper into supernatural self-restraint. He edged past the table in the back-parlour to the window, and stood there looking out with a suppressed fever in his veins, biting his lip, and bearing his lecture. On the whole, the best way, perhaps, would have been to leave Carlingford at once, as another man would have done, and leave the Sunday to take care of itself. But though he groaned under his bonds, the young Nonconformist was instinctively confined by them, and had the habits of a man trained in necessary subjection to circumstances. He turned round abruptly when the buttermilk man at last came to a pause.

“I will write to one of my friends in Homerton,” he said, “if you will make an apology for me in the chapel. I daresay I could get Beecher to come down, who is a very clever fellow; and as for the beginning of that course of sermons _____”

He stopped short with a certain suppressed disgust. Good heavens! what mockery it seemed. Amid these agonies of life, a man overwhelmed with deadly fear, hatred, and grief might indeed pause to snatch a burning lesson, or

appropriate with trembling hands a consolatory promise; but with the whole solemn future of his sister's life hanging on a touch, with all the happiness and peace of his own involved in a feverish uncertainty, with dark unsuspected depths of injury and wretchedness opening at his feet—to think of courses of sermons and elaborate preachments, ineffectual words, and pretences of teaching! For the first time in the commotion of his soul, in the resentments and forebodings to which he gave no utterance, in the bitter conviction of uncertainty in everything which consumed his heart, a doubt of his own ability to teach came to Vincent's mind. He stopped short with an intolerable pang of impatience and self-disgust.

“And what of that, Mr. Vincent?” said Tozer. “I can't say as I think it'll be well took to see a stranger in the pulpit after them intimations. I made it my business to send the notices out last night; and after saying everywhere as you were to begin a coorse, as I always advised, if you had took my advice, it ain't a way to stop talk to put them off now. Old Mr. Tufton, you know, he was a different man; it was experience as was his line; and I don't mean to say nothing against experience,” said the worthy deacon. “There ain't much true godliness, take my word, where there's a shrinking from disclosin' the state of your soul; but for keeping up a congregation there's nothing I know on like a coorse—and a clever young man as has studied his subjects, and knows the manners of them old times, and can give a bit of a description as takes the interest, that's what I'd set my heart on for Salem. There's but three whole pews in the chapel as isn't engaged,” said the buttermilk man, with a softening glance at the pastor; “and the Miss Hemmings sent over this morning to say as they meant to come regular the time you was on the Miracles; and but for this cackle of the women, as you'll soon get over, there ain't a thing as I can see to stop us filling up to the most influential chapel in the connection; I mean in our parts.”

The subdued swell of expectation with which the ambitious buttermilk man concluded, somehow made Vincent more tolerant even in his undiminished excitement. He gave a subdued groan over all this that was expected of him, but not without a little answering thrill in his own troubled and impatient heart.

“A week can't make much difference, if I am ever to do any good,” said the young man. “I must go now; but if you explain the matter for me, you will smooth the way. I will bring my mother and sister here,” he went on, giving himself over for a moment to a little gleam of comfort, “and everything will go on better. I am worried and anxious now, and don't know what I am about. Give me some paper, and I will write to Beecher. You will like him. He is a good fellow, and preaches much better than I do,” added poor Vincent with a sigh, sitting wearily down by the big table. He was subdued to his condition at

that moment, and Tozer appreciated the momentary humbleness.

“I am not the man to desert my minister when he’s in trouble,” said the brave butterman. “Look you here, Mr. Vincent; don’t fret yourself about it. I’ll take it in hand; and I’d like to see the man in Salem as would say to the contrary again’ me and the pastor both. Make your mind easy; I’ll manage ’em. As for the women,” said Tozer, scratching his head, “I don’t pretend not to be equal to that; but my missis is as reasonable as most; and Phœbe, she’ll stand up for you, whatever you do. If you’ll take my advice, and be a bit prudent, and don’t go after no more vanities, things ain’t so far wrong but a week or two will make them right.”

With this consolatory assurance Vincent began to write his letter. Before he had concluded it, the maid came to lay the cloth for dinner, thrusting him into a corner, where he accomplished his writing painfully on his knee with his ink on the window-sill, a position in which Phœbe found him when she ventured down-stairs. It was she who took his letter from him, and ran with it to the shop to despatch it at once; and Phœbe came back to tell him that Mrs. Vincent was resting, and that it was so pleasant to see him back again after such a time. “I never expected you would have any patience for us when I saw you knew Lady Western so well. Oh, she is so sweetly pretty! and if I were a gentleman, I know I should fall deep in love with her,” said Phœbe, with a sidelong glance, and not without hopes of calling forth a disclaimer from the minister; but the poor minister, jammed up in the corner, whence it was now necessary to extricate his chair preparatory to sitting down to a family dinner with the Tozers, was, as usual, unequal to the occasion, and had nothing to say. Phœbe’s chair was by the minister’s side during that substantial meal; and the large fire which burned behind Mrs. Tozer at the head of the table, and the steaming viands on the hospitable board, and the prevailing atmosphere of cheese and bacon which entered when the door was opened, made even Mrs. Vincent pale and flush a little in the heroic patience and friendliness with which she bent all her powers to secure the support of these adherents to her son. “I could have wished, Arthur, they were a little more refined,” she said, faintly, when the dinner was over, and they were at last on their way to the train; “but I am sure they are very genuine, my dear; and one good friend is often everything to a pastor; and I am so glad we went at such a time.” So glad! The young Nonconformist heaved a tempestuous sigh, and turned away not without a reflection upon the superficial emotions of women who at such a time could be glad. But Mrs. Vincent, for her part, with a fatigue and sickness of heart which she concealed from herself as much as she could, let down her veil, and cried quietly behind it. Perhaps her share of the day’s exhaustion had not been the mildest or least hard.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE journey was troublesome and tedious, involving a change from one railway to another, and a troubled glimpse into the most noisy streets of London by the way. Vincent had left his mother, as he thought, safe in the cab which carried them to the second railway station, and was disposing of the little luggage they had with them, that he might not require to leave her again, when he heard an anxious voice calling him, and found her close behind him, afloat in the bustle and confusion of the crowd, dreadfully agitated and helpless, calling upon her Arthur with impatient accents of distress. His annoyance to find her there increased her confusion and trembling. "Arthur," she gasped out, "I saw him—I saw him—not a minute ago—in a cab—with some ladies; oh, my dear, run after him. That was the way he went. Arthur, Arthur, why don't you go? Never mind me—I can take care of myself."

"Who was it—how did he go?—why didn't you stop him, mother?" cried the young man, rushing back to the spot she had left. Nothing was to be seen there but the usual attendant group of railway porters, and the alarmed cabman who had been keeping his eye on Mrs. Vincent. The poor widow gasped as she gazed and saw no traces of the enemy who had eluded them.

"Oh, Arthur, my dear boy, I thought, in such a case, it ought to be a man to speak to him," faltered Mrs. Vincent. "He went that way—that way, look!—in a cab, with somebody in a blue veil."

Vincent rushed away in the direction she indicated, at a pace which he was totally unused to, and of course quite unable to keep up beyond the first heat; but few things could be more hopeless than to dash into the whirl of vehicles in the crowded current of the New Road, with any vain hope of identifying one which had ten minutes' start, and no more distinctive mark of identity than the spectrum of a blue veil. He rushed back again, angry with himself for losing breath in so vain an attempt, just in time to place his mother in a carriage and jump in beside her before the train started. Mrs. Vincent's anxiety, her questions which he could not hear, her doubts whether it might not have been best to have missed the train and followed Mr. Fordham, aggravated the much-tried patience of her son beyond endurance. They set off upon their sad journey with a degree of injured feeling on both sides, such as often gives a miserable complication to a mutual anxiety. But the mother, wounded and timid, feeling more than ever the difference between the boy who was all her own and the man who had thoughts and impulses of which she knew nothing, was naturally the first to recover and to make wistful overtures of peace.

"Well, Arthur," she said, after a while, leaning forward to him, her mild voice making a gentle murmur through the din of the journey, "though it was very foolish of me not to speak to him when I saw him, still, dear, he is gone and

out of the way; that is a great comfort—we will never, never let him come near Susan again. That is just what I was afraid of; I have been saying to myself all day, ‘What if he should go to Lonsdale too, and deny it all?’ but Providence, you see, dear, has ordered it for us, and now he shall never come near my poor child again.”

“Do you think he has been to Lonsdale?” asked Vincent.

“My poor Susan!” said his simple mother, “she will be happier than ever when we come to her with this dreadful news. Yes; I suppose he must have been seeing her, Arthur—and I am glad it has happened while I was away, and before we knew; and now he is gone,” said the widow, looking out of the carriage with a sigh of relief, as if she could still see the road by which he had disappeared—“now he is gone, there will be no need for any dreadful strife or arguments. God always arranges things for us so much better than we can arrange them for ourselves. Fancy if he had come to-morrow to tear her dear heart to pieces!—Oh, Arthur, I am very thankful! There will be nothing to do now but to think best how to break it to her. He had ladies with him; it is dreadful to think of such villany. Oh, Arthur, do you imagine it could be his wife?—and somebody in a blue veil.”

“A blue veil!”—Mrs. Hilyard’s message suddenly occurred to Vincent’s mind, with its special mention of that article of disguise. “If this man is the man we suppose, he has accomplished one of his wishes,” said the minister, slowly; “and she will kill him as sure as he lives.”

“Who will kill him?—I hope nothing has occurred about your friend’s child to agitate my Susan,” said his mother. “It was all the kindness of your heart, my dear boy; but it was very imprudent of you to let Susan’s name be connected with anybody of doubtful character. Oh, Arthur, dear, we have both been very imprudent!—you have so much of my quick temper. It was a punishment to me to see how impatient you were to-day; but Susan takes after your dear father. Oh, my own boy, pray; pray for her, that her heart may not be broken by this dreadful news.”

And Mrs. Vincent leant back in her corner, and once more put down her veil. Pray!—who was he to pray for? Susan, forlorn and innocent, disappointed in her first love, but unharmed by any worldly soil or evil passion?—or the other sufferers involved in more deadly sort, himself palpitating with feverish impulses, broken loose from all his peaceful youthful moorings, burning with discontents and aspirations, not spiritual, but of the world? Vincent prayed none as he asked himself that bitter question. He drew back in his seat opposite his mother, and pondered in his heart the wonderful difference between the objects of compassion to whom the world gives ready tears, and those of whom the world knows and suspects nothing. Susan! he could see her mother weeping over her in her white and tender innocence. What if, perhaps,

she broke her young heart? the shock would only send the girl with more clinging devotion to the feet of the great Father; but as for himself, all astray from duty and sober life, devoured with a consuming fancy, loathing the way and the work to which he had been trained to believe that Father had called him—who thought of weeping?—or for Her, whom his alarmed imagination could not but follow, going forth remorseless and silent to fulfil her promise, and kill the man who had wronged her? Oh, the cheat of tears!—falling sweet over the young sufferers whom sorrow blessed—drying up from the horrible complex pathways where other souls, in undisclosed anguish, went farther and farther from God!

With such thoughts the mother and son hurried on upon their darkling journey. It was the middle of the night when they arrived in Lonsdale—a night starless, but piercing with cold. They were the only passengers who got out at the little station, where two or three lamps glared wildly on the night, and two pale porters made a faint bustle to forward the long convoy of carriages upon its way. One of these men looked anxiously at the widow, as if with the sudden impulse of asking a question, or communicating some news, but was called off by his superior before he could speak. Vincent unconsciously observed the look, and was surprised and even alarmed by it, without knowing why. It returned to his mind, as he gave his mother his arm to walk the remaining distance home. Why did the man put on that face of curiosity and wonder? But, to be sure, to see the mild widow arrive in this unexpected way in the middle of the icy January night, must have been surprising enough to any one who knew her, and her gentle decorous life. He tried to think no more of it, as they set out upon the windy road, where a few sparsely-scattered lamps blinked wildly, and made the surrounding darkness all the darker. The station was half a mile from the town, and Mrs. Vincent's cottage was on the other side of Lonsdale, across the river, which stole sighing and gleaming through the heart of the little place. Somehow the sudden black shine of that water as they caught it, crossing the bridge, brought a shiver and flash of wild imagination to the mind of the Nonconformist. He thought of suicides, murders, ghastly concealment, and misery; and again the face of the porter returned upon him. What if something had happened while the watchful mother had been out of the way? The wind came sighing round the corners with an ineffectual gasp, as if it too had some warning, some message to deliver. Instinctively he drew his mother's arm closer, and hurried her on. Suggestions of horrible unthought-of evil seemed lurking everywhere in the noiseless blackness of the night.

Mrs. Vincent shivered too, but it was with cold and natural agitation. In her heart she was putting tender words together, framing tender phrases—consulting with herself how she was to look, and how to speak. Already she could see the half-awakened girl, starting up all glowing and sweet from her safe rest, unforeboding of evil; and the widow composed her face under the

shadow of her veil, and sent back with an effort the unshed tears from her eyes, that Susan might not see any traces in her face, till she had “prepared her” a little, for that dreadful, inevitable blow.

The cottage was all dark, as was natural—doubly dark to-night, for there was no light in the skies, and the wind had extinguished the lamp which stood nearest, and on ordinary occasions threw a doubtful flicker on the little house. “Susan will soon hear us, she is such a light sleeper,” said Mrs. Vincent. “Ring the bell, Arthur. I don’t like using the knocker, to disturb the neighbours. Everybody would think it so surprising to hear a noise in the middle of the night from our house. There—wait a moment. That was a very loud ring; Susan must be sleeping very soundly if that does not wake her up.”

There was a little pause; not a sound, except the tinkling of the bell, which they could hear inside as the peal gradually subsided, was in the air; breathless silence, darkness, cold, an inhuman preternatural chill and watchfulness, no welcome sound of awakening sleepers, only their own dark shadows in the darkness, listening like all the hushed surrounding world at that closed door.

“Poor dear! Oh, Arthur, it is dreadful to come and break her sleep,” sighed Mrs. Vincent, whose strain of suspense and expectation heightened the effect of the cold: “when will she sleep as sound again? Give another ring, dear. How terribly dark and quiet it is! Ring again, again, Arthur!—dear, dear me, to think of Susan in such a sound sleep!—and generally she starts at any noise. It is to give her strength to bear what is coming, poor child, poor child!”

The bell seemed to echo out into the silent road, it pealed so clearly and loudly through the shut-up house, but not another sound disturbed the air without or within. Mrs. Vincent began to grow restless and alarmed. She went out into the road, and gazed up at the closed windows; her very teeth chattered with anxiety and cold.

“It is very odd she does not wake,” said the widow; “she must be rousing now, surely. Arthur, don’t look as if we had bad news. Try to command your countenance, dear. Hush! don’t you hear them stirring? Now, Arthur, Arthur, oh remember not to look so dreadful as you did in Carlingford! I am sure I hear her coming down-stairs. Hark! what is it? Ring again, Arthur—again!”

The words broke confused and half-articulate from her lips; a vague dread took possession of her, as of her son. For his part, he rang the bell wildly without pausing, and applied the knocker to the echoing door with a sound which seemed to reverberate back and back through the darkness. It was not the sleep of youth Vincent thought of, as, without a word to say, he thundered his summons on the cottage door. He was not himself aware what he was afraid of; but in his mind he saw the porter’s alarmed and curious look, and felt the ominous silence thrilling with loud clangour of his own vain appeals

through the deserted house.

At length a sound—the mother and son both rushed speechless towards the side-window, from which it came. The window creaked slowly open, and a head, which was not Susan's, looked cautiously out. "Who is there?" cried a strange voice; it's some mistake. This is Mrs. Vincent's, this is, and nobody's at home. If you don't go away I'll spring the rattle, and call Thieves, thieves—Fire! What do you mean coming rousing folks like this in the dead of night?"

"Oh, Williams, are you there? Thank God!—then all is well," said Mrs. Vincent, clasping her hands. "It is I—you need not be afraid—I and my son: don't disturb Miss Susan, since she has not heard us—but come down, and let us in;—don't disturb my daughter. It is I—don't you know my voice?"

"Good Lord!" cried the speaker at the window; then in a different tone, "I'm coming, ma'am—I'm coming." Instinctively, without knowing why, Vincent drew his mother's arm within his own, and held her fast. Instinctively the widow clung to him, and kept herself erect by his aid. They did not say a word—no advices now about composing his countenance. Mrs. Vincent's face was ghastly, had there been any light to see it. She went sheer forward when the door was open, as though neither her eyes nor person were susceptible of any other motion. An inexpressible air of desolation upon the cottage parlour, where everything looked far too trim and orderly for recent domestic occupation, brought to a climax all the fanciful suggestions which had been tormenting Vincent. He called out his sister's name in an involuntary outburst of dread and excitement, "Susan! Susan!" The words pealed into the midnight echoes—but there was no Susan to answer to the call.

"It is God that keeps her asleep to keep her happy," said his mother, with her white lips. She dropt from his arm upon the sofa in a dreadful pause of determination, facing them with wide-open eyes—daring them to undeceive her—resolute not to hear the terrible truth, which already in her heart she knew. "Susan is asleep, asleep!" she cried, in a terrible idiocy of despair, always facing the frightened woman before her with those eyes which knew better, but would not be undeceived. The shivering midnight, the mother's dreadful looks, the sudden waking to all this fright and wonder, were too much for the terrified guardian of the house. She fell on her knees at the widow's feet.

"Oh, Lord! Miss Susan's gone! I'd have kep her if I had been here. I'd have said her mamma would never send no gentleman but Mr. Arthur to fetch her away. But she's gone. Good Lord! it's killed my missis—I knew it would kill my missis. Oh, good Lord! good Lord! Run for a doctor, Mr. Arthur; if the missis is gone, what shall we do?"

Vincent threw the frightened creature off with a savage carelessness of which

he was quite unconscious, and raised his mother in his arms. She had fallen back in a dreary momentary fit which was not fainting—her eyes fluttering under their half-closed lids, her lips moving with sounds that did not come. The shock had struck her as such shocks strike the mortal frame when it grows old. When sound burst at last from the moving lips, it was in a babble that mocked all her efforts to speak. But she was not unconscious of the sudden misery. Her eyes wandered about, taking in everything around her, and at last fixed upon a letter lying half-open on Susan's work-table, almost the only token of disorder or agitation in the trim little room. The first sign of revival she showed was pointing at it with a doubtful but impatient gesture. Before she could make them understand what she meant, that "quick temper" of which Mrs. Vincent accused herself blazed up in the widow's eyes. She raised herself erect out of her son's arms, and seized the paper. It was Vincent's letter to his sister, written from London after he had failed in his inquiries about Mr. Fordham. In the light of this dreadful midnight the young man himself perceived how alarming and peremptory were its brief injunctions. "Don't write to Mr. Fordham again till my mother's return; probably I shall bring her home: we have something to say to you on this subject, and in the mean time be sure you do as I tell you." Mrs. Vincent gradually recovered herself as she read this; she said it over under her breath, getting back the use of her speech. There was not much explanation in it, yet it seemed to take the place, in the mother's confused faculties, of an apology for Susan. "She was frightened," said Mrs. Vincent, slowly, with strange twitches about her lips—"she was frightened." That was all her mind could take in at once. Afterwards, minute by minute, she raised herself up, and came to self-command and composure. Only as she recovered did the truth reveal itself clearly even to Vincent, who, after the first shock, had been occupied entirely by his mother. The young man's head throbbed and tingled as if with blows. As she sat up and gazed at him with her own recovered looks, through the dim ice-cold atmosphere, lighted faintly with one candle, they both woke up to the reality of their position. The shock of the discovery was over—Susan was gone; but where, and with whom? There was still something to hope, if everything to fear.

"She is gone to her aunt Alice," said Mrs. Vincent, once more looking full in the eyes of the woman who had been left in charge of the house, and who stood shivering with cold and agitation, winding and unwinding round her a thin shawl in which she had wrapped up her arms. "She has gone to her aunt Alice—she was frightened, and thought something had happened. To-morrow we can go and bring her home."

"Oh, good Lord! No; she ain't there," cried the frightened witness, half inaudible with her chattering teeth.

"Or to Mrs. Hastings at the farm. Susan knows what friends I can trust her to.

Arthur, dear, let us go to bed. It's uncomfortable, but you won't mind for one night," said the widow, with a gasp, rising up and sitting down again. She dared not trust herself to hear any explanation, yet all the time fixed with devouring eyes upon the face of the woman whom she would not suffer to speak.

"Mother, for Heaven's sake let us understand it; let her speak—let us know. Where has Susan gone? Speak out; never mind interruptions. Where is my sister?" cried Vincent, grasping the terrified woman by the arm.

"Oh Lord! If the missis wouldn't look at me like that! I ain't to blame!" cried Williams, piteously. "It was the day afore yesterday as the ladies came. I come up to help Mary with the beds. There was the old lady as had on a brown bonnet and the young miss in the blue veil——"

Vincent uttered a sudden exclamation, and looked at his mother; but she would not meet his eyes—would not acknowledge any recognition of that fatal piece of gauze. She gave a little gasp, sitting bolt upright, holding fast by the back of a chair, but kept her eyes steadily and sternly upon the woman's face.

"We tidied the best room for the lady, and Miss Susan's little closet; and Mary had out the best sheets, for she says——"

"Mary—where's Mary?" cried Mrs. Vincent, suddenly.

"I know no more nor a babe," cried Williams, wringing her hands. "She's along with Miss Susan—wherever that may be—and the one in the blue veil."

"Go on, go on!" cried Vincent.

But his mother did not echo his cry. Her strained hand fell upon her lap with a certain relaxation and relief; her gaze grew less rigid; incomprehensible moisture came to her eyes. "Oh, Arthur, there's comfort in it!" said Mrs. Vincent, looking like herself again. "She's taken Mary, God bless her! she's known what she was doing. Now I'm more easy; Williams, you can sit down and tell us the rest."

"Go on!" cried Vincent, fiercely. "Good heavens! what good can a blundering country girl do here?—go on."

The women thought otherwise; they exchanged looks of sympathy and thankfulness; they excited the impatient young man beside them, who thought he knew the world, into the wildest exasperation by that pause of theirs. His mother even loosed her bonnet off her aching head, and ventured to lean back under the influence of that visionary consolation; while Vincent, aggravated to the intolerable pitch, sprang up, and, once more seizing Williams by the arm, shook her unawares in the violence of his anxiety. "Answer me!" cried the young man; "you tell us everything but the most important of all. Besides this girl—and Mary—who was with my sister when she went away?"

“Oh Lord! you shake the breath out of me, Mr. Arthur—you do,” cried the woman. “Who? why, who should it be, to be sure, but him as had the best right after yourself to take Miss Susan to her mamma? You’ve crossed her on the road, poor dear,” said the adherent of the house, wringing her hands; “but she was going to her ma—that’s where she was going. Mr. Arthur’s letter gave her a turn; and then, to be sure, when Mr. Fordham came, the very first thing he thought upon was to take her to her mamma.”

Vincent groaned aloud. In his first impulse of fury he seized his hat and rushed to the door to pursue them anyhow, by any means. Then, remembering how vain was the attempt, came back again, dashed down the hat he had put on, and seized upon the railway book in his pocket, to see when he could start upon that desperate mission. Minister as he was, a muttered curse ground through his teeth—villain! coward! destroyer!—curse him! His passion was broken in the strangest way by the composed sounds of his mother’s voice.

“It was very natural,” she said, with dry tones, taking time to form the words as if they choked her; “and of course, as you say, Williams, Mr. Fordham had the best right. He will take her to his mother’s—or—or leave her in my son’s rooms in Carlingford; and as she has Mary with her—Arthur,” continued his mother, fixing a warning emphatic look upon him as he raised his astonished eyes to her face, “you know that is quite right: after you—Mr. Fordham is—the only person—that could have taken care of her in her journey. There, I am satisfied. Perhaps, Williams, you had better go to bed. My son and I have something to talk of, now I feel myself.”

“I’ll go light the fire, and get you a cup of tea—oh Lord! what Miss Susan would say if she knew you were here, and had got such a fright!” cried the old servant; “but now you’re composed, there’s nothing as’ll do you good like a cup of tea.”

“Thank you—yes; make it strong, and Mr. Arthur will have some too,” said the widow; “and take care the kettle is boiling; and then, Williams, you must not mind us, but go to bed.”

Vincent threw down his book, and stared at her with something of that impatience and half-contempt which had before moved him. “If the world were breaking up, I suppose women could still drink tea!” he said, bitterly.

“Oh, Arthur, my dear boy,” cried his mother, “don’t you see we must put the best face on it now? Everybody must not know that Susan has been carried away by a—— O God, forgive me! don’t let me curse him, Arthur. Let us get away from Lonsdale, dear, before we say anything. Words will do no good. Oh, my dear boy, till we know better, Mr. Fordham is Susan’s betrothed husband, and he has gone to take care of her to Carlingford. Hush—don’t say any more. I am going to compose myself, Arthur, for my child’s sake,” cried

the mother, with a smile of anguish, looking into her son's face. How did she drive those tears back out of her patient eyes? how did she endure to talk to the old servant about what was to be done to-morrow—and how the sick lady was next door—till the excited and shivering attendant could be despatched upstairs and got out of the way? Woman's weaker nature, that could mingle the common with the great; or woman's strength, that could endure all things—which was it? The young man, sitting by in a sullen, intolerable suspense, waiting till it was practicable to rush away through the creeping gloom of night after the fugitives, could no more understand these phenomena of love and woe, than he could translate the distant mysteries of the spheres.

CHAPTER XVII.

EARLY morning, but black as midnight; bitter cold, if bitterer cold could be, than that to which they entered when they first came to the deserted house; the little parlour, oh, so woefully trim and tidy, with the fire laid ready for lighting, which even the mother, anxious about her son, had not had the heart to light; the candle on the table between them lighting dimly this speechless interval; some shawls laid ready to take with them when they went back again to the earliest train; Mrs. Vincent sitting by with her bonnet on, and its veil drooping half over her pale face, sometimes rousing up to cast hidden looks of anxiety at her son, sometimes painfully saying something with a vain effort at smiling—what o'clock was it? when did he think they could reach town?—little ineffectual attempts at the common intercourse, which seemed somehow to deepen the dreadful silence, the shivering cold, the utter desolation of the scene. Such a night!—its minutes were hours as they stole by noiseless in murderous length and tedium—and the climax of its misery was in the little start with which Mrs. Vincent now and then woke up out of her own thoughts to make that pitiful effort to talk to her son.

They were sitting thus, waiting, not even venturing to look at each other, when a sudden sound startled them. Nothing more than a footstep outside approaching softly. A footstep—surely two steps. They could hear them far off in this wonderful stillness, making steady progress near—nearer. Mrs. Vincent rose up, stretching her little figure into a preternatural hysteric semblance of height. Who was it? Two people—surely women—and what women could be abroad at such an hour? One lighter, one heavier, irregular as female steps are, coming this way—this way! Her heart fluttered in the widow's ears with a sound that all but obliterated those steps which still kept advancing. Hark, sudden silence! a pause—then, oh merciful heaven, could it be true? a tinkle at the bell—a summons at the closed door.

Mrs. Vincent had flown forth with open arms—with eyes blinded. The poor soul thought nothing less than that it was her child returned. They carried her back speechless, in a disappointment too cruel and bitter to have expression. Two women—one sober, sleepy, nervous, and full of trouble, unknown to either mother or son—the other with a certain dreadful inspiration in her dark face, and eyes that gleamed out of it as if they had concentrated into them all the blackness of the night.

“You are going back, and so am I,” Mrs. Hilyard said. “I came to say a word to you before I go away. If I have been anyhow the cause, forgive me. God knows, of all things in the world the last I dreamt of was to injure this good woman or invade her innocent house. Do you know where they have gone?—did she leave any letters?—Tell me. She shall be precious to me as my own, if I find them out.”

Mrs. Vincent freed herself from her son’s arms, and got up with her blanched face. “My daughter—followed me—to Carlingford,” she said, in broken words, with a determination which sat almost awful on her weakness. “We have had the great misfortune—to cross each other—on the way. I am going—after her—directly. I am not afraid—of my Susan. She is all safe in my son’s house.”

The others exchanged alarmed looks, as they might have done had a child suddenly assumed the aspect of a leader. She, who could scarcely steady her trembling limbs to stand upright, faced their looks with a dumb denial of her own anguish. “It is—very unfortunate—but I am not anxious,” she said, slowly, with a ghastly smile. Human nature could do no more. She sank down again on her seat, but still faced them—absolute in her self-restraint, rejecting pity. Not even tears should fall upon Susan’s sweet name—not while her mother lived to defend it in life and death.

The Carlingford needlewoman stood opposite her, gazing with eyes that went beyond that figure, and yet dwelt upon it, at so wonderful a spectacle. Many a terrible secret of life unknown to the minister’s gentle mother throbbed in her heart; but she stood in a pause of wonder before that weaker woman. The sight of her stayed the passionate current for a moment, and brought the desperate woman to a pause. Then she turned to the young man, who stood speechless by his mother’s side—

“You are a priest, and yet you do not curse,” she said. “Is God as careless of a curse as of a blessing? She thinks He will save the Innocents yet. She does not know that He stands by like a man, and sees them murdered, and shines and rains all the same. God! No—He never interferes. Good-bye,” she added, suddenly, holding out to him the thin hand upon which, even in that dreadful moment, his eye still caught the traces of her work, the scars of the needle, and stains of the coarse colour. “If you ever see me again, I shall be a famous

woman, Mr. Vincent. You will have a little of the trail of my glory, and be able to furnish details of my latter days. This good Miss Smith here will tell you of the life it was before; but if I should make a distinguished end after all, come to see me then—never mind where. I speak madly, to be sure, but you don't understand me. There—not a word. You preach very well, but I am beyond preaching now—Good-bye.”

“No,” said Vincent, clutching her hand—“never, if you go with that horrible intention in your eyes; I will say no farewell to such an errand as this.”

The eyes in their blank brightness paused at him for a moment before they passed to the vacant air on which they were always fixed—paused with a certain glance of troubled amusement, the lightning of former days. “You flatter me,” she said, steadily, with the old habitual movement of her mouth. “It is years since anybody has taken the trouble to read any intention in my eyes. But don't you understand yet that a woman's intention is the last thing she is likely to perform in this world? We do have meanings now and then, we poor creatures, but they seldom come to much. Good-bye, good-bye!”

“You cannot look at me,” said Vincent, with a conscious incoherence, reason or argument being out of the question. “What is it you see behind there? Where are you looking with those dreadful eyes?”

She brought her eyes back as he spoke, with an evident effort, to fix them upon his face. “I once remarked upon your high-breeding,” said the strange woman. “A prince could not have shown finer manners than you did in Carlingford, Mr. Vincent. Don't disappoint me now. If I see ghosts behind you, what then? Most people that have lived long enough, come to see ghosts before they die. But this is not exactly the time for conversation, however interesting it may be. If you and I ever see each other again, things will have happened before then; you too, perhaps, may have found the ghosts out. I appoint you to come to see me after you have come to life again, in the next world. Good-night. I don't forget that you gave me your blessing when we parted last.”

She was turning away when Mrs. Vincent rose, steadying herself by the chair, and put a timid hand upon the stranger's arm. “I don't know who you are,” said the widow; “it is all a strange jumble; but I am an older woman than you, and a—a minister's wife. You have something on your mind. My son is frightened you will do something—I cannot tell what. You are much cleverer than I am; but I am, as I say, an older woman, and a—a minister's wife. I am not—afraid of anything. Yes! I know God does not always save the Innocents, as you say—but He knows why, though we don't. Will you go with me? If you have gone astray when you were young,” said the mild woman, raising up her little figure with an ineffable simplicity, “I will never ask any questions, and it will not matter—for everybody I care for knows me. The dreadful things you

think of will not happen if we go together. I was a minister's wife thirty years. I know human nature and God's goodness. Come with me."

"Mother, mother! what are you saying?" cried Vincent, who had all the time been making vain attempts to interrupt this extraordinary speech. Mrs. Hilyard put him away with a quick gesture. She took hold of the widow's hand with that firm, supporting, compelling pressure under which, the day before, Mrs. Vincent had yielded up all her secrets. She turned her eyes out of vacancy to the little pale woman who offered her this protection. A sudden mist surprised those gleaming eyes—a sudden thrill ran through the thin, slight, iron figure, upon which fatigue and excitement seemed to make no impression. The rock was stricken at last.

"No—no," she sighed, with a voice that trembled. "No—no! the lamb and the lion do not go together yet in this poor world. No—no—no. I wonder what tears have to do in my eyes; ah, God in the skies! if you ever do miracles, do one for this woman, and save her child! Praying and crying are strange fancies for me—I must go away, but first," she said, still holding Mrs. Vincent fast—"a woman is but a woman after all—if it is more honourable to be a wicked man's wife than to have gone astray, as you call it, then there is no one in the world who can breathe suspicion upon me. Ask this other good woman here, who knows all about me, but fears me, like you. Fears me! What do you suppose there can be to fear, Mr. Vincent, you who are a scholar, and know better than these soft women," said Mrs. Hilyard, suddenly dropping the widow's hand, and turning round upon the young minister, with an instant throwing off of all emotion, which had the strangest horrifying effect upon the little agitated company, "in a woman who was born to the name of Rachel Russell, the model English wife? Will the world ever believe harm, do you imagine, of such a name? I will take refuge in my ancestress. But we go different ways, and have different ends to accomplish," she continued, with a sudden returning gleam of the subdued horror—"Good-night—good-night!"

"Oh, stop her, Arthur—stop her!—Susan will be at Carlingford when we get there; Susan will go nowhere else but to her mother," cried Mrs. Vincent, as the door closed on the nocturnal visitors—"I am as sure—as sure——! Oh, my dear, do you think I can have any doubt of my own child? As for Susan going astray—or being carried off—or falling into wickedness—Arthur!" said his mother, putting back her veil from her pale face, "now I have got over this dreadful night, I know better—nobody must breathe such a thing to me. Tell her so, dear—tell her so!—call her back—they will be at Carlingford when we get there!"

Vincent drew his mother's arm through his own, and led her out into the darkness, which was morning and no longer night. "A few hours longer and we shall see," he said, with a hard-drawn breath. Into that darkness Mrs.

Hilyard and her companion had disappeared. There was another line of railway within a little distance of Lonsdale, but Vincent was at pains not to see his fellow-travellers as he placed his mother once more in a carriage, and once more caught the eye of the man whose curious look had startled him. When the grey morning began to dawn, it revealed two ashen faces, equally speechless and absorbed with thoughts which neither dared communicate to the other. They did not even look at each other, as the merciful noise and motion wrapped them in that little separate sphere of being. One possibility and no more kept a certain coherence in both their thoughts, otherwise lost in wild chaos—horrible suspense—an uncertainty worse than death.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IT was the very height of day when the travellers arrived in Carlingford. It would be vain to attempt to describe their transit through London in the bustling sunshine of the winter morning after the vigil of that night, and in the frightful suspense and excitement of their minds. Vincent remembered, for years after, certain cheerful street-corners, round which they turned on their way from one station to another, with shudders of recollection, and an intense consciousness of all the life circulating about them, even to the attitudes of the boys that swept the crossings, and their contrast with each other. His mother made dismal attempts now and then to say something; that he was looking pale; that after all he could yet preach, and begin his course on the Miracles; that it would be such a comfort to rest when they got home; but at last became inaudible, though he knew by her bending across to him, and the motion of those parched lips with which she still tried to smile, that the widow still continued to make those pathetic little speeches without knowing that she had become speechless in the rising tide of her agony. But at last they reached Carlingford, where everything was at its brightest, all the occupations of life afloat in the streets, and sunshine, lavish though ineffectual, brightening the whole aspect of the town. When they emerged from the railway, Mrs. Vincent took her son's arm, and for the last time made some remark with a ghastly smile—but no sound came from her lips. They walked up the sunshiny street together with such silent speed as would have been frightful to look at had anybody known what was in their hearts. Mrs. Pigeon, who was coming along the other side, crossed over on purpose to accost the minister and be introduced to his mother, but was driven frantic by the total blank unconsciousness with which the two swept past her; "taking no more notice than if he had never set eyes on me in his born days!" as she described it afterwards. The door of the house where Vincent lived was opened to them briskly by the little maid in holiday attire; everything wore the most sickening,

oppressive brightness within in fresh Saturday cleanliness. Vincent half carried his mother up the steps, and held fast in his own to support her the hand which he had drawn tightly through his arm. "Is there any one here? Has anybody come for me since I left?" he asked, with the sound of his own words ringing shrilly into his ears. "Please, sir, Mr. Tozer's been," said the girl, alertly, with smiling confidence. She could not comprehend the groan with which the young man startled all the clear and sunshiny atmosphere, nor the sudden rustle of the little figure beside him, which moved somehow, swaying with the words as if they were a wind. "Mother, you are going to faint!" cried Vincent—and the little maid flew in terror to call her mistress, and bring a glass of water. But when she came back, the mother and son were no longer in the bright hall with its newly cleaned wainscot and whitened floor. When she followed them up-stairs with the water, it was the minister who had dropped into the easy-chair with his face hidden on the table, and his mother was standing beside him. Mrs. Vincent looked up when the girl came in and said, "Thank you—that will do," looking in her face, and not at what she carried. She was of a dreadful paleness, and looked with eyes that were terrible to that wondering observer upon the little attendant. "Perhaps there have been some letters or messages," said Mrs. Vincent. "We—we expected somebody to come; think! a young lady came here?—and when she found we were gone —"

"Only Miss Phœbe!" said the girl, in amazement—"to say as her Ma——"

"Only Miss Phœbe!" repeated the widow, as if she did not comprehend the words. Then she turned to her son, and smoothed down the ruffled locks on his head; then held out her hand again to arrest the girl as she was going away. "Has your mistress got anything in the house," she asked—"any soup or cold meat, or anything? Would you bring it up, please, directly?—soup would perhaps be best—or a nice chop. Ask what she has got, and bring it up on a tray. You need not lay the cloth—only a tray with a napkin. Yes, I see you know what I mean."

"Mother!" cried Vincent, raising his head in utter fright as the maid left the room. He thought in the shock his mother's gentle wits had gone.

"You have eaten nothing, dear, since we left," she said, with a heartbreaking smile. "I am not going crazy, Arthur. O no, no, my dear boy! I will not go crazy; but you must eat something, and not be killed too. Susan is not here," said Mrs. Vincent, with a ghastly, wistful look round the room; "but we are not going to distrust her at the very first moment, far less her Maker, Arthur. Oh, my dear, I must not speak, or something will happen to me; and nothing must happen to you or me till we have found your sister. You must eat when it comes, and then you must go away. Perhaps," said Mrs. Vincent, sitting down and looking her son direct in the eyes, as if to read any suggestion that could

arise there, “she has lost her way:—perhaps she missed one of these dreadful trains—perhaps she got on the wrong railway, Arthur. Oh, my dear boy, you must take something to eat, and then you must go and bring Susan home. She has nobody to take care of her but you.”

Vincent returned his mother’s look with a wild inquiring gaze, but with his lips he said “Yes,” not daring to put in words the terrible thoughts in his heart. The two said nothing to each other of the horror that possessed them both, or of the dreadful haze of uncertainty in which that Susan whom her brother was to go and bring home as if from an innocent visit, was now enveloped. Their eyes spoke differently as they looked into each other, and silently withdrew again, each from each, not daring to communicate further. Just then a slight noise came below, to the door. Mrs. Vincent stood up directly in an agony of listening, trembling all over. To be sure it was nothing. When nothing came of it, the poor mother sank back again with a piteous patience, which it was heartbreaking to look at; and Vincent returned from the window which he had thrown open in time to see Phœbe Tozer disappear from the door. They avoided each other’s eyes now; one or two heavy sobs broke forth from Mrs. Vincent’s breast, and her son walked with a dreadful funereal step from one end of the room to the other. Not even the consolation of consulting together what was to be done, or what might have happened, was left them. They dared not put their position into words—dared not so much as inquire in their thoughts where Susan was, or what had befallen her. She was to be brought home; but whence or from what abyss neither ventured to say.

Upon their misery the little maid entered again with her tray, and the hastily prepared refreshment which Mrs. Vincent had ordered for her son. The girl’s eyes were round and staring with wonder and curiosity; but she was aware, with female instinct, that the minister’s mother, awful little figure, with lynx eyes, which nothing escaped, was watching her, and her observations were nervous accordingly. “Please, sir, it’s a chop,” said the girl—“please, sir, missus sent to know was the other gentleman a-coming?—and please, if he is, there ain’t nowhere as missus knows of, as he can sleep—with the lady, and you, and all; and the other lodgers as well”—said the handmaiden with a sigh, as she set down her tray and made a desperate endeavour to turn her back upon Mrs. Vincent, and to read some interpretation of all this in the unguarded countenance of the minister; “and please, am I to bring up the Wooster sauce, and would the lady like some tea or anythink? And missus would be particklar obliged if you would say. Miss Phœbe’s been to ask the gentleman to tea, but where he’s to sleep, missus says——”

“Yes, yes, to be sure,” said Vincent, impatiently; “he can have my room, tell your mistress—that will do—we don’t want anything more.”

“Mr. Vincent is going to leave town again this afternoon,” said his mother.

“Tell your mistress that I shall be glad to have a little conversation with her after my son goes away—and you had better bring the sauce—but it would have saved you trouble and been more sensible, if you had put it on the tray in the first place. Oh, Arthur,” cried his mother again, when she had seen the little maid fairly out—“do be a little prudent, my dear! When a minister lodges with one of his flock, he must think of appearances—and if it were only for my dear child’s sake, Arthur! Susan must not be spoken of through our anxiety; oh, my child!—Where can she be?—Where can she be?”

“Mother dear, you must keep up, or everything is lost!” cried Vincent, for the first time moved to the depths of his heart by that outcry of despair. He came to her and held her trembling hands, and laid his face upon them without any kiss or caress, that close clinging touch of itself expressing best the fellowship of their wretchedness. But Mrs. Vincent put her son away from her, when the door again bounced open. “My dear boy, here is the sauce, and you must eat your chop,” she said, getting up and drawing forward a chair for him; her hands, which trembled so, grew steady as she put everything in order, cut the bread, and set his plate before him. “Oh, eat something, Arthur dear—you must, or you cannot go through it,” said the widow, with her piteous smile. Then she sat down at the table by him in her defensive armour. The watchful eyes of “the flock” were all around spying upon the dreadful calamity which had overwhelmed them; at any moment the college companion whom Vincent had sent for might come in upon them in all the gaiety of his holiday. What they said had to be said with this consciousness—and the mother, in the depth of her suspense and terror, sat like a queen inspected on all sides, and with possible traitors round her, but resolute and self-commanding in her extremity, determined at least to be true to herself.

“Arthur, can you think where to go?” she said, after a little interval, almost under her breath.

“To London first,” said Vincent—“to inquire after—him, curse him! don’t say anything, mother—I am only a man after all. Then, according to the information I get.—God help us!—if I don’t get back before another Sunday _____”

Mrs. Vincent gave a convulsive start, which shook the table against which she was leaning, and fell to shivering as if in a fit of ague. “Oh, Arthur, Arthur, what are you saying? Another Sunday!” she exclaimed, with a cry of despair. To live another day seemed impossible in that horror. But self-restraint was natural to the woman who had been, as she said, a minister’s wife for thirty years. She clasped her hands tight, and took up her burden again. “I will see Mr. Beecher when he comes, dear, and—and speak to him,” she said, with a sigh, “and I will see the Tozers and—and your people, Arthur; and if it should be God’s will to keep us so long in suspense, if—if—I can keep alive, dear, I

may be of some use. Oh, Arthur, Arthur, the Lord have pity upon us! if my darling comes back, will she come here or will she go home? Don't you think she will come here? If I go back to Lonsdale, I will not be able to rest for thinking she is at Carlingford; and if I stay—oh, Arthur, where do you think Susan will go to? She might be afraid to see you, and think you would be angry, but she never could distrust her poor mother, who was the first to put her in danger; and to think of my dear child going either there or here, and not finding me, Arthur! My dear, you are not eating anything. You can never go through it all without some support. For my sake, try to eat a little, my own boy; and oh, Arthur, what must I do?"

"These Tozers and people will worry you to death if you stay here," said the minister, with an impatient sigh, as he thought of his own difficulties; "but I must not lose time by going back with you to Lonsdale, and you must not travel by yourself, and this is more in the way, whatever happens. Send word to Lonsdale that you are to have a message by telegraph immediately—without a moment's loss of time—if she comes back."

"You might say when, Arthur, not if," said his mother, with a little flash of tender resentment—then she gave way for the moment, and leaned her head against his arm and held him fast with that pressure and close clasp which spoke more than any words. When she raised her pale face again, it was to entreat him once more to eat. "Try to take something, if it were only a mouthful, for Susan's sake," pleaded the widow. Her son made a dismal attempt as she told him. Happy are the houses that have not seen such dreadful pretences of meals where tears were the only possible food! When she saw him fairly engaged in this desperate effort to take "some support," the poor mother went away and wrote a crafty female letter, which she brought to him to read. He would have smiled at it had the occasion been less tragic. It was addressed to the minister of "the connection" at Lonsdale, and set forth how she was detained at Carlingford by some family affairs—how Susan was visiting friends and travelling, and her mother was not sure where to address her—and how it would be the greatest favour if he would see Williams at the cottage, and have a message despatched to Mrs. Vincent the moment her daughter returned. "Do you not think it would be better to confide in him a little, and tell him what anxiety we are in?" said Vincent, when he read this letter. His mother took it out of his hands with a little cry. "Oh, Arthur, though you are her brother, you are only a man, and don't understand," cried Mrs. Vincent. "Nobody must have anything to say about my child. If she comes to-night, she will come here," continued the poor mother, pausing instinctively once more to listen; "she might have been detained somewhere; she may come at any moment—at any moment, Arthur dear! Though these telegraphs frighten me, and look as if they must bring bad news, I will send you word directly when my darling girl comes; but oh, my dear, though it is dreadful to

send you away, and to think of your travelling to-morrow and breaking the Sunday, and very likely your people hearing it—oh, Arthur, God knows better, and will not blame you: and if you will not take anything more to eat, you should not lose time, my dearest boy! Don't look at me, Arthur—don't say good-bye. Perhaps you may meet her before you leave—perhaps you may not need to go away. Oh, Arthur dear, don't lose any more time!”

“It is scarcely time for the train yet,” said the minister, getting up slowly; “the world does not care, though our hearts are breaking; it keeps its own time. Mother, good-bye. God knows what may have happened before I see you again.”

“Oh, Arthur, say nothing—say nothing! What can happen but my child to come home?” cried his mother, as he clasped her hands and drew her closer to him. She leaned against her son's breast, which heaved convulsively, for one moment, and no more. She did not look at him as he went slowly out of the room, leaving her to the unspeakable silence and solitude in which every kind of terror started up and crept about. But before Vincent had left the house his mother's anxiety and hope were once more excited to passion. Some one knocked and entered; there was a sound of voices and steps on the stair audibly approaching this room in which she sat with her fears. But it was not Susan; it was a young man of Arthur's own age, with his travelling-bag in his hand, and his sermons in his pocket. He had no suspicion that the sight of him brought the chill of despair to her heart as he went up to shake hands with his friend's mother. “Vincent would not come back to introduce me,” said Mr. Beecher, “but he said I should find you here. I have known him many years, and it is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. Sometimes he used to show me your letters years ago. Is Miss Vincent with you? It is pleasant to get out of town for a little, even though one has to preach; and they will all be interested in 'Omerton to hear how Vincent is getting on. Made quite a commotion in the world, they say, with these lectures of his. I always knew he would make an 'it if he had fair-play.”

“I am very glad to see you,” said Mrs. Vincent. “I have just come up from Lonsdale, and everything is in a confusion. When people grow old,” said the poor widow, busying herself in collecting the broken pieces of bread which Arthur had crumbled down by way of pretending to eat, “they feel fatigue and being put out of their way more than they ought. What can I get for you? will you have a glass of wine, and dinner as soon as it can be ready? My son had to go away.”

“Preaching somewhere?” asked the lively Mr. Beecher.

“N-no; he has some—private business to attend to,” said Mrs. Vincent, with a silent groan in her heart.

“Ah!—going to be married, I suppose?” said the man from ’Omerton; “that’s the natural consequence after a man gets a charge. Miss Vincent is not with you, I think you said? I’ll take a glass of wine, thank you; and I hear one of the flock has sent over to ask me to tea—Mr. Tozer, a leading man, I believe, among our people here,” added Mr. Beecher, with a little complacence. “It’s very pleasant when a congregation is hospitable and friendly. When a pastor’s popular, you see, it always reacts upon his brethren. May I ask if you are going to Mr. Tozer’s to tea to-night?”

“Oh, no,” faltered poor Mrs. Vincent, whom prudence kept from adding, “heaven forbid!” “They—did not know I was here,” she continued, faintly, turning away to ring the bell. Mr. Beecher, who flattered himself on his penetration, nodded slightly when her back was turned. “Jealous that they’ve asked me,” said the preacher, with a lively thrill of human satisfaction. How was he to know the blank of misery, the wretched feverish activity of thought, that possessed that mild little woman, as she gave her orders about the removal of the tray, and the dinner which already was being prepared for the stranger? But the lively young man from ’Omerton perceived that there was something wrong. Vincent’s black looks when he met him at the door, and the exceeding promptitude of that invitation to tea, were two and two which he could put together. He concluded directly that the pastor, though he had made “an ’it,” was not found to suit the connection in Carlingford; and that possibly another candidate for Salem might be required ere long. “I would not injure Vincent for the world,” he said to himself, “but if he does not ’it it, I might.” The thought was not unpleasant. Accordingly, while Vincent’s mother kept her place there in the anguish of her heart, thinking that perhaps, even in this dreadful extremity, she might be able to do something for Arthur with his people, and conciliate the authorities, her guest was thinking, if Vincent were to leave Carlingford, what a pleasant distance from town it was, and how very encouraging of the Tozers to ask him to tea. It might come to something more than preaching for a friend; and if Vincent did not “’it it,” and a change were desirable, nobody could tell what might happen. All this smiling fabric the stranger built upon the discomposed looks of the Vincents and Phœbe’s invitation to tea.

To sit by him and keep up a little attempt at conversation—to superintend his dinner, and tell him what she knew of Salem and her son’s lectures, and his success generally, as became the minister’s mother—was scarcely so hard as to be left afterwards, when he went out to Tozer’s, all alone once more with the silence, with the sounds outside, with the steps that seem to come to the door, and the carriages that paused in the street, all sending dreadful thrills of hope through poor Mrs. Vincent’s worn-out heart. Happily, her faculties were engaged by those frequent and oft-repeated tremors. In the fever of her anxiety, always startled with an expectation that at last this was Susan, she did

not enter into the darker question where Susan might really be, and what had befallen the unhappy girl. Half an hour after Mr. Beecher left her, Phœbe Tozer came in, affectionate and anxious, driving the wretched mother almost wild by the sound of her step and the apparition of her young womanhood, to beg and pray that Mrs. Vincent would join them at their “friendly tea.” “And so this is Mr. Vincent’s room,” said Phœbe, with a bashful air; “it feels so strange to be here! and you must be so dull when he is gone. Oh, do come, and let us try to amuse you a little; though I am sure none of us could ever be such good company as the minister—oh, not half, nor quarter!” cried Phœbe. Even in the midst of her misery, the mother was woman enough to think that Phœbe showed too much interest in the minister. She declined the invitation with gentle distinctness. She did not return the enthusiastic kiss which was bestowed upon her. “I am very tired, thank you,” said Mrs. Vincent. “On Monday, if all is well, I will call to see your mamma. I hope you will not catch cold coming out in this thin dress. I am sure it was very kind of you; but I am very tired to-night. On—Monday.” Alas, Monday! could this horror last so long, and she not die? or would all be well by that time, and Susan in her longing arms? The light went out of her eyes, and the breath from her heart, as that dreadful question stared her in the face. She scarcely saw Phœbe’s withdrawal; she lay back in her chair in a kind of dreadful trance, till those stumbling steps and passing carriages began again, and roused her back into agonised life and bootless hope.

CHAPTER XIX.

VINCENT had shaken hands with his friend at the door, and hurried past, saying something about losing the train, in order to escape conversation; but, with the vivid perceptions of excitement, he heard the delivery of Phœbe’s message, and saw the complacency with which the Homerton man regarded the invitation which had anticipated his arrival. The young Nonconformist had enough to think of as he took his way once more to the railway, and tea at Mrs. Tozer’s was anything but attractive to his own fancy; yet in the midst of his wretchedness he could not overcome the personal sense of annoyance which this trifling incident produced. It came like a prick of irritating pain, to aggravate the dull horror which throbbed through him. He despised himself for being able to think of it at all, but at the same time it came back to him, darting unawares again and again into his thoughts. Little as he cared for the entertainments and attention of his flock, he was conscious of a certain exasperation in discovering their eagerness to entertain another. He was disgusted with Phœbe for bringing the message, and disgusted with Beecher for looking pleased to receive it. “Probably he thinks he will supersede me,”

Vincent thought, in sudden gusts of disdain now and then, with a sardonic smile on his lip, waking up afterwards with a thrill of deeper self-disgust, to think that anything so insignificant had power to move him. When he plunged off from Carlingford at last, in the early falling darkness of the winter afternoon, and looked back upon the few lights struggling red through the evening mists, it was with a sense of belonging to the place where he had left an interloper who might take his post over his head, which, perhaps, no other possible stimulant could have given him. He thought with a certain pang of Salem, and that pulpit which was his own, but in which another man should stand to-morrow, with a quickened thrill of something that was almost jealousy; he wondered what might be the sentiments of the connection about his deputy—perhaps Brown and Pigeon would prefer that florid voice to his own—perhaps Phœbe might find the substitute more practicable than the incumbent. Nothing before had ever made Salem so interesting to the young pastor as Beecher's complacency over that invitation to tea.

But he had much more serious matters to consider in his rapid journey. Vincent was but a man, though he was Susan's brother. He did not share those desperate hopes which afforded a kind of forlorn comfort and agony of expectation to his mother's heart. No thought that Susan would come home either to Carlingford or Lonsdale was in his mind. In what way soever the accursed villain, whom his face blanched with deadly rage to think of, had managed to get her in his power, Susan's sweet life was lost, her brother knew. He gave her up with unspeakable anguish and pity; but he did give her up, and hoped for no deliverance. Shame had taken possession of that image which fancy kept presenting in double tenderness and brightness to him as his heart burned in the darkness. He might find her indeed; he might snatch her out of these polluting arms, and bring home the sullied lily to her mother, but never henceforward could hope or honour blossom about his sister's name. He made up his mind to this in grim misery, with his teeth clenched, and a desperation of rage and horror in his heart. But in proportion to his conviction that Susan would not return, was his eagerness to find her, and snatch her away. To think of her in horror and despair was easier than to think of her deluded and happy, as might be—as most probably was the case. This latter possibility made Vincent frantic. He could scarcely endure the slowness of the motion which was the highest pitch of speed that skill and steam had yet made possible. No express train could travel so fast as the thoughts which went before him, dismal pioneers penetrating the most dread abysses. To think of Susan happy in her horrible downfall and ruin was more than flesh or blood could bear.

When Vincent reached town, he took his way without a moment's hesitation to the street in Piccadilly where he had once sought Mr. Fordham. He approached the place now with no precautions; he had his cab driven up to the door, and boldly entered as soon as it was opened. The house was dark and silent but for

the light in the narrow hall; nobody there at that dead hour, while it was still too early for dinner. And it was not the vigilant owner of the place, but a drowsy helper in a striped jacket who presented himself at the door, and replied to Vincent's inquiry for Colonel Mildmay, that the Colonel was not at home—never was at home at that hour—but was not unwilling to inquire, if the gentleman would wait. Vincent put up the collar of his coat about his ears, and stood back with eager attention, intently alive to everything. Evidently the ruler of the house was absent as well as the Colonel. The man lounged to the staircase and shouted down, leaning upon the bannisters. No aside or concealment was possible in this perfectly easy method of communication. With an anxiety strongly at variance with the colloquy thus going on, and an intensification of all his faculties which only the height of excitement could give, Vincent stood back and listened. He heard every step that passed outside; the pawing of the horse in the cab that waited for him, the chance voices of the passengers, all chimed in, without interrupting the conversation between the man who admitted him and his fellow-servant down-stairs.

“Jim, is the Colonel at home?—he ain't, to be sure, but we wants to know particklar. Here,” in a slightly lowered voice, “his mother's been took bad, and the parson's sent for him. When is he agoing to be in to dinner? Ask Cookie; she'll be sure to know.”

“The Colonel ain't coming in to dinner, stoopid,” answered the unseen interlocutor; “he ain't been here all day. Out o' town. Couldn't you say so, instead of jabbering? Out o' town. It's allays safe to say, and this time it's true.”

“What's he adoing of, in case the gen'leman should want to know?” said the fellow at the head of the stair.

“After mischief,” was the brief and emphatic answer. “You come along down to your work, and let the Colonel alone.”

“Any mischief in particklar?” continued the man, tossing a dirty napkin in his hand, and standing in careless contempt, with his back to the minister. “It's a pleasant way the Colonel's got, that is: any more particklars, Jim?—the gen'leman 'll stand something if you'll let him know.”

“Hold your noise, stoopid—it ain't no concern o' yours—my master's my master, and I ain't agoing to tell his secrets,” said the voice below. Vincent had made a step forward, divided between his impulse to kick the impertinent fellow who had admitted him down-stairs, and the equally strong impulse which prompted him to offer any bribe to the witness who knew his master's secrets; but he was suddenly arrested in both by a step on the street outside, and the grating of a latch-key in the door. A long light step, firm and steady, with a certain sentiment of rapid silent progress in it. Vincent could not tell

what strange fascination it was that made him turn round to watch this new-comer. The stranger's approach thrilled him vaguely, he could not tell how. Then the door opened, and a man appeared like the footstep—a very tall slight figure, stooping forward a little; a pale oval face, too long to be handsome, adorned with a long brown beard; thoughtful eyes, with a distant gleam in them, now and then flashing into sudden penetrating glances—a loose dress too light for the season, which somehow carried out all the peculiarities of the long light step, the thin sinewy form, the thoughtful softness and keenness of the eye. Even in the height of his own suspense and excitement, Vincent paused to ask himself who this could be. He came in with one sudden glance at the stranger in the hall, passed him, and calling to the man, who became on the moment respectful and attentive, asked if there were any letters. "What name, sir?—beg your pardon—my place ain't up-stairs," said the fellow. What was the name? Vincent rushed forward when he heard it, and seized the new-comer by the shoulder with the fierceness of a tiger. "Fordham!" cried the young man, with boiling rage and hatred. Next moment he had let go his grasp, and was gazing bewildered upon the calm stranger, who looked at him with merely a thoughtful inquiry in his eyes. "Fordham—at your service—do you want anything with me?" he asked, meeting with undiminished calm the young man's excited looks. This composure put a sudden curb on Vincent's passion.

"My name is Vincent," he said, restraining himself with an effort; "do you know now what I want with you? No? Am I to believe your looks or your name? If you are the man," cried the young Nonconformist, with a groan out of his distracted heart, "whom Lady Western could trust with life, to death—or if you are a fiend incarnate, making misery and ruin, you shall not escape me till I know the truth. Where is Susan? Here is where her innocent letters came—they were addressed to your name. Where is she now? Answer me! For you, as well as the rest of us, it is life or death."

"You are raving," said the stranger, keeping his awakened eyes fixed upon Vincent; "but this is easily settled. I returned from the East only yesterday. I don't know you. What was that you said about Lady—Lady—what lady? Come in: and my name?—my name has been unheard in this country, so far as I know, for ten years. Lady——?—come in and explain what you mean."

The two stood together confronting each other in the little parlour of the house, where the striped jacket quickly and humbly lighted the gas. Vincent's face, haggard with misery and want of rest, looked wild in that sudden light. The stranger stood opposite him, leaning forward with a strange eagerness and inquiry. He did not care for Vincent's anxiety, who was a stranger to him; he cared only to hear again that name—Lady——? He had heard it already, or he would have been less curious; he wanted to understand this wonderful

message wafted to him out of his old life. What did it matter to Herbert Fordham, used to the danger of the deserts and mountains, whether it was a maniac who brought this chance seed of a new existence to his wondering heart?

“A man called Fordham has gone into my mother’s house,” said Vincent, fixing his eyes upon those keen but visionary orbs which were fixed on him—“and won the love of my sister. She wrote to him here—to this house; yesterday he carried her away, to her shame and destruction. Answer me,” cried the young man, making another fierce step forward, growing hoarse with passion, and clenching his hands in involuntary rage—“was it you?”

“There are other men called Fordham in existence besides me,” cried the stranger, with a little irritation; then seizing his loose coat by its pockets, he shook out, with a sudden impatient motion, a cloud of letters from these receptacles. “Because you seem in great excitement and distress, and yet are not, as far as I can judge,” said Mr. Fordham, with another glance at Vincent, “mad, I will take pains to satisfy you. Look at my letters; their dates and post-marks will convince you that what you say is simply impossible, for that I was not here.”

Vincent clutched and took them up with a certain blind eagerness, not knowing what he did. He did not look at them to satisfy himself that what Fordham said was true. A wild, half-conscious idea that there must be something in them about Susan possessed him; he saw neither dates nor post-mark, though he held them up to the light, as if they were proofs of something. “No,” he said at last, “it was not you—it was that fiend Mildmay, Rachel Russell’s husband. Where is he? he has taken your name, and made you responsible for his devilish deeds. Help me, if you are a Christian! My sister is in his hands, curse him! Help me, for the sake of your name, to find them out. I am a stranger, and they will give me no information; but they will tell you. For God’s sake, ask and let me go after them. If ever you were beholden to the help of Christian men, help me! for it is life and death!”

“Mildmay! Rachel Russell’s husband? under my name?” said Mr. Fordham, slowly. “I have been beholden to Christian men, and that for very life. You make a strong appeal: who are you that are so desperate? and what was that you said?”

“I am Susan Vincent’s brother,” said the young Nonconformist; “that is enough. This devil has taken your name; help me, for heaven’s sake, to find him out!”

“Mildmay?—devil? yes, he is a devil! you are right enough: I owe him no love,” said Fordham; then he paused and turned away, as if in momentary perplexity. “To help that villain to his reward would be a man’s duty; but,”

said the stranger, with a heavy sigh, upon which his words came involuntarily, spoken to himself, breathing out of his heart—"he is her brother, devil though he is!"

"Yes!" cried Vincent, with passion, "he is her brother." When he had said the words, the young man groaned aloud. Partly he forgot that this man, who looked upon him with so much curiosity, was the man who had brought tears and trembling to Her; partly he remembered it, and forgot his jealousy for the moment in a bitter sense of fellow-feeling. In his heart he could see her, waving her hand to him out of her passing carriage, with that smile for which he would have risked his life. Oh, hideous fate! it was her brother whom he was bound to pursue to the end of the world. He buried his face in his hands, in a momentary madness of anguish and passion. Susan floated away like a mist from that burning personal horizon. The love and the despair were too much for Vincent. The hope that had always been impossible was frantic now. When he recovered himself, the stranger whom he had thus unawares taken into his confidence was regarding him haughtily from the other side of the table, with a fiery light in his thoughtful eyes. Suspicion, jealousy, resentment, had begun to sparkle in those orbs, which in repose looked so far away and lay so calm. Mr. Fordham measured the haggard and worn-out young man with a look of rising dislike and animosity. He was at least ten years older than the young Nonconformist, who stood there in his wretchedness and exhaustion entirely at disadvantage, looking, in his half-clerical dress, which he had not changed for four-and-twenty hours, as different as can be conceived from the scrupulously dressed gentleman in his easy morning habiliments, which would not have been out of place in the rudest scene, yet spoke of personal nicety and high-breeding in every easy fold. Vincent himself felt the contrast with an instant flush of answering jealousy and passion. For a moment the two glanced at each other, conscious rivals, though not a word of explanation had been spoken. It was Mr. Fordham who spoke first, and in a somewhat hasty and imperious tone.

"You spoke of a lady—Lady Western, I think. As it was you yourself who sought this interview, I may be pardoned if I stumble on a painful subject," he said, with some bitterness. "I presume you know that lady by your tone—was it she who sent you to me? No? Then I confess your appeal to a total stranger seems to me singular, to say the least of it. Where is your proof that Colonel Mildmay has used my name?"

"Proof is unnecessary," said Vincent, firing with kindred resentment; "I have told you the fact, but I do not press my appeal, though it was made to your honour. Pardon me for intruding on you so long. I have now no time to lose."

He turned away, stung in his hasty youthfulness by the appearance of contempt. He would condescend to ask no farther. When he was once more

outside the parlour, he held up the half-sovereign, which he had kept ready in his hand, to the slovenly fellow in the striped jacket. "Twice as much if you will tell where Colonel Mildmay is gone," he said, hurriedly. The man winked and nodded and pointed outside, but before Vincent could leave the room a hasty summons came from the parlour which he had just left. Then Mr. Fordham appeared at the door.

"If you will wait I will make what inquiries I can," said the stranger, with distant courtesy and seriousness. "Excuse me—I was taken by surprise: but if you have suffered injury under my name, it is my business to vindicate myself. Come in. If you will take my advice, you will rest and refresh yourself before you pursue a man with all his wits about him. Wait for me here and I will bring you what information I can. You don't suppose I mean to play you false?" he added, with prompt irritation, seeing that Vincent hesitated and did not at once return to the room. It was no relenting of heart that moved him to make this offer. It was with no softening of feeling that the young Nonconformist went back again and accepted it. They met like enemies, each on his honour. Mr. Fordham hastened out to acquit himself of that obligation. Vincent threw himself into a chair, and waited for the result.

It was the first moment of rest and quiet he had known since the morning of the previous day, when he and his mother, alarmed but comparatively calm, had gone to see Mrs. Hilyard, who was now, like himself, wandering, with superior knowledge and more desperate passion, on the same track. To sit in this house in the suspicious silence, hearing the distant thrill of voices which might guide or foil him in his search; to think who it was whom he had engaged to help him in his terrible mission; to go over again in distracted gleams and snatches the brief little circle of time which had brought all this about, the group of figures into which his life had been absorbed,—rapt the young man into a maze of excited musing, which his exhausted frame at once dulled and intensified. They seemed to stand round him, with their faces so new, yet so familiar—that needle-woman with her emphatic mouth—Mildmay—Lady Western—last of all, this man, who was not Susan's lover—not Susan's destroyer—but a man to be trusted "with life—to death!" Vincent put up his hands to put away from him that wonderful circle of strangers who shut out everything else in the world—even his own life—from his eyes. What were they to him? he asked, with an unspeakable bitterness in his heart. Heaven help him! they were the real creatures for whom life and the world were made—he and his poor Susan the shadows to be absorbed into, and under them; and then, with a wild, bitter, hopeless rivalry, the mind of the poor Dissenting minister came round once more to the immediate contact in which he stood—to Fordham, in whose name his sister's life had been shipwrecked, and by whom, as he divined with cruel foresight, his own hopeless love and dreams were to be made an end of. Well! what better could they come to? but

it was hard to think of him, with his patrician looks, his negligent grace, his conscious superiority, and to submit to accept assistance from him even in his sorest need. These thoughts were in his mind when Mr. Fordham hastily re-entered the room. A thrill of excitement now was in the long, lightly-falling step, which already Vincent, with the keen ear of rivalry almost as quick as that of love, could recognise as it approached. The stranger was disturbed out of his composure. He shut the door and came up to the young man, who rose to meet him, with a certain excited repugnance and attraction much like Vincent's own feelings.

"You are quite right," he said, hastily; "I find letters have been coming here for some months, addressed as if to me, which Mildmay has had. The man of the house is absent, or I should never have heard of it. I don't know what injury he may have done you; but this is an insult I don't forgive. Stop! I have every reason to believe that he has gone," said Fordham, growing darkly red, "to a house of mine, to confirm this slander upon me. To prove that I am innocent of all share of it—I don't mean to you—you believe me, I presume?" he said, with a haughty sudden pause, looking straight in Vincent's face—"I will go ——" Here Mr. Fordham stopped again, and once more looked at Vincent with that indescribable mixture of curiosity, dislike, resentment, and interest, which the eyes of the young Nonconformist repaid him fully,—“with you—if you choose. At all events, I will go to-night—to Fordham, where the scoundrel is. I cannot permit it to be believed for an hour that it is I who have done this villany. The lady you mentioned, I presume, knows?”—he added, sharply—“knows what has happened, and whom you suspect? This must be set right at once. If you choose, we can go together.”

"Where is the place?" asked Vincent, without any answer to this proposition.

Fordham looked at him with a certain haughty offence: he had made the offer as though it were a very disagreeable expedient, but resented instantly the tacit neglect of it shown by his companion.

"In Northumberland—seven miles from the railway," he said, with a kind of gratification. "Once more, I say, you can go with me if you will, which may serve us both. I don't pretend to be disinterested. My object is to have my reputation clear of this, at all events. Your object, I presume, is to get to your journey's end as early as may be. Choose for yourself. Fordham is between Durham and Morpeth—seven miles from Lamington station. You will find difficulty in getting there by yourself, and still greater difficulty in getting admission; and I repeat, if you choose it, you can go with me—or I will accompany you, if that pleases you better. Either way, there is little time to consider. The train goes at eight or nine o'clock—I forget which. I have not dined. What shall you do?"

"Thank you," said Vincent. It was perhaps a greater effort to him to overcome

his involuntary repugnance than it was to the stranger beside him, who had all the superior ease of superior rank and age. The Nonconformist turned away his eyes from his new companion, and made a pretence of consulting his watch. "I will take advantage of your offer," he said, coldly, withdrawing a step with instinctive reserve. On these diplomatic terms their engagement was made. Vincent declined to share the dinner which the other offered him, as one duellist might offer hospitality to another. He drove away in his hansom, with a restrained gravity of excitement, intent upon the hour's rest and the meal which were essential to make him anything like a match for this unexpected travelling companion. Every morsel he attempted to swallow when in Carlingford under his mother's anxious eyes, choked the excited young man, but now he ate with a certain stern appetite, and even snatched an hour's sleep and changed his dress, under this novel stimulant. Poor Susan, for whom her mother sat hopelessly watching with many a thrill of agony at home! Poor lost one, far away in the depths of the strange country in the night and darkness! Whether despair and horror enveloped her, or delirious false happiness and delusion, again she stood secondary even in her brother's thoughts. He tried to imagine it was she who occupied his mind, and wrote a hurried note to his mother to that purport; but with guilt and self-disgust, knew in his own mind how often another shadow stood between him and his lost sister—a shadow bitterly veiled from him, turning its sweetness and its smiles upon the man who was about to help him, against whom he gnashed his teeth in the anguish of his heart.

CHAPTER XX.

THEY were but these two in the railway-carriage; no other passenger broke the silent conflict of their companionship. They sat in opposite corners, as far apart as their space would permit, but on opposite sides of the carriage as well, so that one could not move without betraying his every movement to the other's keen observation. Each of them kept possession of a window, out of which he gazed into the visible blackness of the winter night. Two or three times in the course of the long darksome chilly journey, a laconic remark was made by one or the other with a deadly steadiness, and gravity, and facing of each other, as they spoke; but no further intercourse took place between them. When they first met, Fordham had made an attempt to draw his fellow-traveller into some repetition of that first passionate speech which had secured his own attention to Vincent; but the young Nonconformist perceived the attempt, and resented it with sullen offence and gloom. He took the stranger's indifference to his trouble, and undisguised and simple purpose of acquitting himself, as somehow an affront, though he could not have explained how it

was so; and this notwithstanding his own consciousness of realising this silent conflict and rivalry with Fordham, even more deeply in his own person than he did the special misery which had befallen his house. Through the sullen silent midnight the train dashed on, the faint light flickering in the unsteady carriage, the two speechless figures, with eyes averted, watching each other through all the ice-cold hours. It was morning when they got out, cramped and frozen, at the little station, round which miles and miles of darkness, a black unfathomable ocean, seemed to lie—and which shone there with its little red sparkle of light among its wild waste of moors like the one touch of human life in a desert. They had a dreary hour to wait in the little wooden room by the stifling fire, divided between the smothering atmosphere within and the thrilling cold without, before a conveyance could be procured for them, in which they set out shivering over the seven darkling miles between them and Fordham. Vincent stood apart in elaborate indifference and carelessness, when the squire was recognised and done homage to; and Fordham's eye, even while lighted up by the astonished delight of the welcome given him by the driver of the vehicle who first found him out, turned instinctively to the Mordecai in the corner who took no heed. No conversation between them diversified the black road along which they drove. Mr. Fordham took refuge in the driver, whom he asked all those questions about the people of the neighbourhood which are so interesting to the inhabitants of a district and so wearisome to strangers. Vincent, who sat in the dog-cart with his face turned the other way, suffered himself to be carried through the darkness by the powerful horse, which made his own seat a somewhat perilous one, with nothing so decided in his thoughts as a dumb sense of opposition and resistance. The general misery of his mind and body—the sense that all the firmament around him was black as this sky—the restless wretchedness that oppressed his heart—all concentrated into conscious rebellion and enmity. He seemed to himself at war, not only with Mr. Fordham who was helping him, but with God and life.

Morning was breaking when they reached the house. The previous day, as it dawned chilly over the world, had revealed his mother's ashy face to Vincent as they came up from Lonsdale with sickening thrills of hope that Susan might still be found unharmed. Here was another horror of a new day rising, the third since Susan disappeared into that darkness which was now lifting in shuddering mists from the bleak country round. Was she here in her shame, the lost creature? As he began to ask himself that question, what cruel spirit was it that drew aside a veil of years, and showed to the unhappy brother that prettiest dancing figure, all smiles and sunshine, sweet honour and hope? Poor lost child! what sweet eyes, lost in an unfathomable light of joy and confidence—what truthful looks, which feared no evil! Just as they came in sight of that hidden house, where perhaps the hidden, stolen creature lay in the

darkness, the brightest picture flashed back upon Vincent's eyes with an indescribably subtle anguish of contrast; how he had come up to her once—the frank, fair Saxon girl—in the midst of a group of gypsies—how he found she had done a service to one of them, and the whole tribe did homage—how he had asked, “Were you not afraid, Susan?” and how the girl had looked up at him with undoubting eyes, and answered, “Afraid, Arthur?—yes, of wild beasts if I saw them, not of men and women.” Oh Heaven!—and here he was going to find her in shame and ruin, hidden away in this secret place! He sprang to the ground before the vehicle had stopped, jarring his frozen limbs. He could not bear to be second now, and follow to the dread discovery which should be his alone. He rushed through the shrubbery without asking any question, and began to knock violently at the door. What did it matter to him though its master was there, looking on with folded arms and unsympathetic face? Natural love rushed back upon the young man's heart. He settled with himself, as he stood waiting, how he would wrap her in his coat, and hurry her away without letting any cold eye fall upon the lost creature. Oh, hard and cruel fate! oh, wonderful heart-breaking indifference of Heaven! The Innocents are murdered, and God looks on like a man, and does not interfere. Such were the broken thoughts of misery—half-thought, half-recollection—that ran through Vincent's mind as he knocked at the echoing door.

“Eugh! you may knock, and better knock, and I'se undertake none comes at the ca',” said the driver, not without a little complacence. “I tell the Squire, as there han't been man nor woman here for ages; but he don't believe me. She's deaf as a post, is the housekeeper; and her daughter, she's more to do nor hear when folks is wanting in—and this hour in the morning! But canny, canny, man! he'll have the door staved in if we all stand by and the Squire don't interfere.”

Vincent paid no attention to the remonstrance—which, indeed, he only remembered afterwards, and did not hear at the moment. The house was closely shut in with trees, which made the gloom of morning darker here than in the open road, and increased the aspect of secrecy which had impressed the young man's excited imagination. While he went on knocking, Fordham alighted and went round to another entrance, where he too began to knock, calling at the same time to the unseen keepers of the place. After a while some answering sounds became audible—first the feeble yelping of an asthmatic dog, then a commotion up-stairs, and at last a window was thrown up, and a female head enveloped in a shawl looked out. “Eh, whae are ye? vagabond villains,—and this a gentleman's house,” cried a cracked voice. “I'll let the Squire know—I'll rouse the man-servants. Tramps! what are you wanting here?” The driver of the dog-cart took up the response well pleased. He announced the arrival of the Squire, to the profound agitation of the house, which showed itself in a variety of scuffling sounds and the wildest

exclamations of wonder. Vincent leaned his throbbing head against the door, and waited in a dull fever of impatience and excitement, as these noises gradually came nearer. When the door itself was reached and hasty hands began to unfasten its bolts, Susan's brother pressed alone upon the threshold, forgetful and indifferent that the master of the house stood behind, watching him with close and keen observation. He forgot whose house it was, and all about his companion. What were such circumstances to him, as he approached the conclusion of his search, and thought every moment to hear poor Susan's cry of shame and terror? He made one hasty stride into the hall when the door was open, and looked round him with burning eyes. The wonder with which the women inside looked at him, their outcry of disappointment and anger when they found him a stranger, coming first as he did, and throwing the Squire entirely into the shade, had no effect upon the young man, who was by this time half frantic. He went up to the elder woman and grasped her by the arm. "Where is she? show me the way!" he said, hoarsely, unable to utter an unnecessary word. He held the terrified woman fast, and thrust her before him, he could not tell where, into the unknown house, all dark and miserable in the wretchedness of the dawn. "Show me the way!" he cried, with his broken hoarse voice. A confused and inarticulate scene ensued, which Vincent remembered afterwards only like a dream; the woman's scream—the interference of Fordham, upon whom his fellow-traveller turned with sudden fury—the explanation to which he listened without understanding it, and which at first roused him to wild rage as a pretence and falsehood. But even Vincent at last, struggling into soberer consciousness as the day broadened ever chiller and more grey over the little group of strange faces round him, came to understand and make out that both Fordham and he had been deceived. Nobody had been there—letters addressed both to Fordham himself, and to Colonel Mildmay, had been for some days received; but these, it appeared, were only a snare laid to withdraw the pursuers from the right scent. Not to be convinced, in the sullen stupor of his excitement, Vincent followed Fordham into all the gloomy corners of the neglected house—seeing everything without knowing what he saw. But one thing was plain beyond the possibility of doubt, that Susan was not there.

"I am to blame for this fruitless journey," said Fordham, with a touch of sympathy more than he had yet exhibited; "perhaps personal feeling had too much share in it; now I trust you will have some breakfast before you set out again. So far as my assistance can be of any use to you——"

"I thank you," said Vincent, coldly; "it is a business in which a stranger can have no interest. You have done all you cared to do," continued the young man, hastily gathering up the overcoat which he had thrown down on entering; "you have vindicated yourself—I will trouble you no further. If I encounter any one interested in Mr. Fordham," he concluded, with difficulty and

bitterness, but with a natural generosity which, even in his despair, he could not belie, "I will do him justice." He made an abrupt end, and turned away, not another word being possible to him. Fordham, not without a sentiment of sympathy, followed him to the door, urging refreshment, rest, even his own society, upon his companion of the night. Vincent's face, more and more haggard—his exhausted excited air—the poignant wretchedness of his youth, on which the older man looked, not without reminiscences, awoke the sympathy and compassion of the looker-on, even in the midst of less kindly emotions. But Fordham's sympathy was intolerable to poor Vincent. He took his seat with a sullen weariness once more by the talkative driver, who gave him an unheeded history of all the Fordhams. As they drove along the bleak moorland road, an early church-bell tingled into the silence, and struck, with horrible iron echoes, upon the heart of the minister of Salem. Sunday morning! Life all disordered, incoherent, desperate—all its usages set at nought and duties left behind. Nothing could have added the final touch of conscious derangement and desperation like the sound of that bell; all his existence and its surroundings floated about him in feverish clouds, as it came to his mind that this wild morning, hysterical with fatigue and excitement, was the Sunday—the day of his special labours—the central point of all his former life. Chaos gloomed around the poor minister, who, in his misery, was human enough to remember Beecher's smile and Phœbe Tozer's invitation, and to realise how all the "Chapel folks" would compare notes, and contrast their own pastor, to whom they had become accustomed, with the new voice from Homerton, which, half in pride and half in disgust, Vincent acknowledged to be more in their way. He fancied he could see them all collecting into their mean pews, prepared to inaugurate the "coorse" for which Tozer had struggled, and the offence upon their faces when the minister's absence was known, and the sharp stimulus which that offence would give to their appreciation of the new preacher—all this, while he was driving over the bleak Northumberland wilds, with the cutting wind from the hills in his face, and the church-bell in his distracted ear, breaking the Sunday! Not a bright spot, so far as he could perceive, was anywhere around him, in earth, or sky, or sea.

Sunday night!—once more the church-bells, the church-going groups, the floating world, which he had many a time upbraided from the pulpit seeking its pleasure. But it was in London now, where he stood in utter exhaustion, but incapable of rest, not knowing where to turn. Then the thought occurred to him that something might be learned at the railway stations of a party which few people could see without remarking it. He waited till the bustle of arrival was over, and then began to question the porters. One after another shook his head, and had nothing to say. But the men were interested, and gathered in a little knot round him, trying what they could recollect, with the ready humanity of their class. "I'd speak to the detective police, sir, if I was you,"

suggested one; “it’s them as finds out all that happens nowadays.” Then a little gleam of light penetrated the darkness. One man began to recall a light-haired gentleman with a mustache, and two ladies, who “went off sudden in a cab, with no luggage.” “An uncommon swell he did look,” said the porter, instinctively touching his cap to Vincent, on the strength of the connection; “and, my eyes! she was a beauty, that one in the blue veil. It was—let me see—Wednesday night; no—not Wednesday—that day as the up-train was an hour late—Friday afternoon, to be sure. It was me as called the cab, and I won’t deny as the gen’leman was a gen’leman. Went to the London Bridge station, sir; Dover line; no luggage; I took particular notice at the time, though it went out o’ my head first minute as you asked me.—Cab, sir? Yes. Here you are—here’s the last on the stand.—London Bridge Station, Dover line.”

Vincent took no time to inquire further. In the impatience of his utter weariness and wretchedness, he seized on this slight clue, and went off at once to follow it out. London Bridge station!—what a world swarmed in those streets through which the anxious minister took his way, far too deeply absorbed in himself to think of the flood of souls that poured past him. The station was in wild bustle and commotion; a train just on the eve of starting, and late passengers dashing towards it with nervous speed. Vincent followed the tide instinctively, and stood aside to watch the long line of carriages set in motion. He was not thinking of what he saw; his whole mind was set upon the inquiry, which, as soon as that object of universal interest was gone, he could set on foot among the officials who were clanging the doors, and uttering all the final shrieks of departure. Now the tedious line glides into gradual motion. Good Heaven! what was that? the flash of a match, a sudden gleam upon vacant cushions, the profile of a face, high-featured, with the thin light locks and shadowy mustache he knew so well, standing out for a moment in aquiline distinctness against the moving space. Vincent rushed forward with a hoarse shout, which scared the crowd around him. He threw himself upon the moving train with a desperate attempt to seize and stop it; but only to be himself seized by the frantic attendants, who caught him with a dozen hands. The travellers in the later carriages were startled by the commotion. Some of them rose and looked out with surprised looks; he saw them all as they glided past, though the passage was instantaneous. Saw them all! Yes; who was that, last of all, at the narrow window of a second-class carriage, who looked out with no surprise, but with a horrible composure in her white face, and recognised him with a look which chilled him to stone. He stood passive in the hands of the men, who had been struggling to hold him, after he encountered those eyes; he shuddered with a sudden horror, which made the crowd gather closer, believing him a maniac. Now it was gone into the black night, into the chill space, carrying a hundred innocent souls and light hearts, and among them deadly crime and vengeance—the doomed man and his executioner. His very

heart shuddered in his breast as he made a faltering effort to explain himself, and get free from the crowd which thought him mad. That sight quenched the curses on his own lips, paled the fire in his heart. To see her dogging his steps, with her dreadful relentless promise in her eyes, overwhelmed Vincent, who a moment before had thrilled with all the rage of a man upon whom this villain had brought the direst shame and calamity. He could have dashed him under those wheels, plunged him into any mad destruction, in the first passionate whirl of his thoughts on seeing him again; but to see Her behind following after—pale with her horrible composure, a conscious Death tracking his very steps—drove Vincent back with a sudden paralysing touch. He stood chilled and horror-stricken in the crowd, which watched and wondered at him: he drew himself feebly out of their detaining circle, and went and sat down on the nearest seat he could find, like a man who had been stunned by some unexpected blow. He was not impatient when he heard how long he must wait before he could follow them. It was a relief to wait, to recover his breath, to realise his own position once more. That dreadful sight, diabolical and out of nature, had driven the very life-blood out of his heart.

As he sat, flung upon his bench in utter exhaustion and feebleness, stunned and stupified, leaning his aching head in his hands, and with many curious glances thrown at him by the bystanders, some of whom were not sure that he ought to be suffered to go at large, Vincent became sensible that some one was plucking at his sleeve, and sobbing his name. It was some time before he became aware that those weeping accents were addressed to him; some time longer before he began to think he had heard the voice before, and was so far moved as to look up. When he did raise his head it was with a violent start that he saw a little rustic figure, energetically, but with tears, appealing to him, whom his bewildered faculties slowly made out to be Mary, his mother's maid, whom Susan had taken with her when she left Lonsdale. As soon as he recognised her he sprang up, restored to himself with the first gleam of real hope which had yet visited him. "My sister is here!" he cried, almost with joy. Mary made no answer but by a despairing outbreak of tears.

"Oh no, Mr. Arthur; no—oh no, no! never no more!" cried poor Mary, when she found her voice. "It's all been deceitfulness and lyin' and falsehood, and it ain't none o' her doing—oh no, no, Mr. Arthur, no!—but now she's got nobody to stand by her, for he took and brought me up this very day; oh, don't lose no time!—he took and brought me up, pretending it was to show me the way, and he sent me right off, Mr. Arthur, and she don't know no more nor a baby, and he'll take her off over the seas this very night—he will; for I had it of his own man. She's written letters to her Ma, Mr. Arthur, but I don't think as they were ever took to the post; and he makes believe they're a-going to be married, and he'll have her off to France to-night. Oh, Mr. Arthur, Mr. Arthur, don't lose no time. They're at a 'otel. Look you here—here's the name as I

wrote down on a bit o' paper to make sure; and oh, Mr. Arthur, mind what I say, and don't lose no time!"

"But Susan—Susan—what of her?" cried her brother, unconsciously clutching at the girl's arm.

Mary burst into another flood of tears. She hid her face, and cried with storms of suppressed sobs. The young man rose up pale and stern from his seat, without asking another question. He took the crumpled paper out of her hand, put some money into it, and in few words directed her to go to his mother at Carlingford. What though the sight of her would break his mother's heart—what did it matter? Hearts were made to be broken, trodden on, killed—so be it! Pale and fierce, with eyes burning red in his throbbing head, he too went on, a second Murder, after the first which had preceded him in the shape of the Carlingford needlewoman. The criminal who escaped two such avengers must bear a charmed life.

END OF VOL. I.



Liked This Book?

For More FREE e-Books visit Freeditorial.com