

**BUCHANAN
ROBERT
WILLIAMS**

FOXGLOVE MANOR,
VOLUME I (OF III)

Robert Buchanan

Foxglove Manor, Volume I (of III)

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Robert W. Buchanan

Foxglove Manor, Volume I (of III) / A Novel

PREFATORY NOTE

The following attempt at a tragedy in fiction (a tragedy, however, without a tragic ending) must not be construed into an attack on the English priesthood generally. I have simply pictured, in the Rev. Charles Santley, a type of man which exists, and of which I have had personal experience. Fortunately, such men are uncommon; still more fortunately, the clergymen of, the English Establishment are for the most part sane and healthy men, too unimaginative for morbid deviations.

ROBERT BUCHANAN

CHAPTER I. ST. CUTHBERT'S

As the sweet, clear voices of the surpliced choristers rose in the closing verse of the hymn, and the vicar, in his white robe and violet hood, ascended the pulpit steps, old Gabriel Ware, sexton and doorkeeper of St. Cuthbert's, limped across the pavement and slipped into the porch, as his custom was at sermon-time on Sunday afternoons.

He waited till the singing had ceased and the congregation had settled in their pews; and while he listened to the vicar announcing his text – “For in Him we live, and move, and have our being” – he fumbled in the pockets beneath his black gown of office, and then limped noiselessly out into the sunshine, where, after a glance round him, he pulled out a short clay pipe, well seasoned, filled it with twist, and began his usual after-dinner smoke.

It was a hot, shimmering July afternoon, and it was much pleasanter to sit out of doors on a tombstone, listening to the vicars voice as it came though the dark lancets like a sound of running water.

Half a mile or so away, nestled in trees, was the village of Omerley, with its glimpses of white walls and tiled or slated roofs. Then there were soft, hazy stretches of pasture, with idyllic groupings of cattle and sheep and trees. The fields of wheat and barley, turnips and potatoes, lay out idle and warm, growing and taking no care, and apparently causing none. The sight and smell of the land filled Gabriel with a stolid satisfaction at the order of nature and the providential gift of tobacco.

There was but the faintest breeze stirring, and it wafted all manner of sweet odours and lulling whispers about the graveyard. Everywhere there was evidence of a fervent throbbing vitality and joyousness. The soft green turf which spread all round the church to the limits of the churchyard, here billowing over a nameless grave, here crusting with moss the base of a tombstone or a marble cross or a pillared urn, here edging round an oblong plot brilliant with flowers and hothouse plants, – the very turf seemed stirred by glad impulses, and quivering with a crush of hurrying insect life. Daisies and buttercups and little blue and pink eyed flowers danced among the restless spears of grass with a merry hardihood. Laburnums and sycamores stood drowsing in the hot shining air, but they were not asleep, and were not silent, A persistent undertone came from among their shadowy boughs, as if the sap were buzzing through every leaf and stalk. Up their trunks, toiling through the rugged ravines of the rough bark, travelling along the branches, flitting from one cool leaf to another, myriads of nameless winged and creeping things went to and fro, and added their murmurs to the vast, vague resonance of life. A soft, ceaseless whispering was diffused from the tall green spires of a row of poplars which went along the iron railing that separated the enclosure from the high-road. Blue and yellow butterflies fluttered from one ‘flowery grave to another; the big booming humble-bee went blundering among the blossoms; a grasshopper was: singing shrilly in the bushes near the railing; a laborious caravan of ants was crossing the stony wilderness of the gravel path; a dragon-fly hawked to and fro beneath the sycamores; small birds dropped twittering on cross or urn for an instant, flashed away up into a tree, and then darted off into the fields, as though too full of excitement and gamesomeness to rest more than a moment anywhere. Soft fleecy masses of luminous cloud slumbered in the hot blue sky overhead, and only in its remote deeps did there seem to be unimpassioned quietude and a sabbath stillness – only there and in the church.

Notwithstanding the dazzling sunshine and the heat, the church was cool and dim and fragrant. The black and red tiles of the pavement, the brown massive; pillars and airy arches of sandstone, the oaken pews, the spacious, sanctuary with, its wide, stone steps, affected one with a refreshing sense of coolness and comfort. The light entered soft and subdued through richly stained glass, for the windows looked, not on familiar breadths, of English landscape glowing and ripening in the July sun, but seemed rather to open into the strangely coloured world of nineteen centuries ago. The blessing of the little children, the raising of Lazarus, the interview at the well with the woman of Samaria, the

minstrel rout about the house of the ruler whose little maid lay not dead but sleeping, took the place of the mundane scenes beheld through unhallowed windows. Even the unpictured lancets were filled with leaded panes of crimson and blue and gold. Then there was a faint, pleasant odour of incense about the building, emphasizing the contrast between the mood of nature and the mood of man. St. Cuthberts was floridly ritualistic, and the vicar was one of those who felt that, in an age of spiritual disquiet and unbelief, a man cannot cling with too many hands to the great Revelation which appeared to be daily growing more elusive, and who believed that if the soul may be lost, it may also be, in a measure, saved through the senses. Feigned devotions and the absence of any appeal to the physical nature of man had, he was convinced, drawn innumerable souls into indifference on the one hand, and into Catholicism on the other. If there was a resurrection of the body as well as of the soul, surely the body ought not to be abandoned as a thing accursed, from which no good can come. The vicar encountered no difficulty in realizing his views of the dignity of flesh and blood at St. Cuthbert's.

A thick, softly toned carpet lay on the broad stone steps which led up to the communion table. Behind the communion table, and for some distance to right and left, the sanctuary walls were hung with richly coloured tapestry. The table itself – or the altar, as it was usually called – was draped with violet silk, embroidered with amber crosses, and upon it stood a large crucifix of brass, with vases of flowers, and massive brazen candlesticks on either side. In the centre a large brass gasalier was suspended from a large ring, containing an enamelled cross, and beneath it hung an oil-lamp, which was kept perpetually burning. Amid all the coolness and fragrance and mystical flush of colour, that little leaf of flame floating in its glass cup attracted the attention of the stranger most singularly. It piqued the imagination, and added an indescribable feeling of hallowed sorcery to the general effect, which was that of an influence too spiritual not to excite reverence, but too sensuous to be considered sacred. Stepping out of the churchyard, with its throbbing warmth and glad undertones of commotion, into the cool, soft-lighted, artificially coloured atmosphere of the church, one might have felt as if dropped into the Middle Ages, but for the modern appearance of the congregation.

St. Cuthbert's was the fashionable place of worship at Omberley, and its afternoon service was always well attended, though at a glance one perceived, from the chromatic effect of the pews, that the large majority of the congregation were of the more emotional sex. As the vicar gave out his text, his taste for the bright and beautiful must have been gratified by the flowers and feathers and dainty dresses, and still more by the rows of young and pretty faces which were raised towards the pulpit with such varied expression of interest, affection, and admiration.

The Rev. Charles Santley had been Vicar of St. Cuthbert's for little less than a year. He was unmarried, just turned thirty, a little over the middle height, and remarkably handsome. It was not to be wondered at that, with such recommendations, the new vicar had at the very outset fascinated the maids and matrons of his congregation. A bright shapely face, with soft dark eyes, a complexion almost feminine in its clear flush, a broad scholarly forehead, black hair slightly thinned with study on the brow and at the temples, black moustache and short curling black beard, – such was the face of the vicar as he stood uncovered before you. His voice was musical and sympathetic; the pressure of his hand invited confidence and trust; his soft dark eyes not only looked into your heart, but conveyed the warmth and eagerness of his own; you felt instinctively that here you might turn for help which would never be found wanting, and seek advice that would never lead you astray, appeal for sympathy with a certainty that you would be understood, obey the prompting to transfer the burthen of spiritual distress with a sure knowledge that your self-esteem would never be wounded. Of course there were ladies of a critical and censorious disposition among his flock, but even these were forced to acknowledge the charm of his presence and the kindness of his disposition. Among the men he was less enthusiastically popular, as was natural enough; but he was still greatly liked for his frankness and cordiality, and his keen intellect and sterling common sense commanded their respect.

On one thing you might always reckon at St. Cuthbert's – a thoughtful, eloquent sermon, delivered in a voice full of exquisite modulations. It happened often enough that the preacher forgot

the capacities of his hearers, and became dreamy and mystical; but, though you failed to comprehend, you were conscious that the fault lay less with him than with your own smaller spiritual nature. This, too, happened only in certain passages, and never throughout an entire discourse. He began on the grass, as the lark does, and gradually rose higher and higher in the brightening heavens till your vision failed; but, if you waited patiently, he descended again to earth, still singing.

On this Sunday afternoon, preaching from the text in the Acts, he held his hearers spell-bound at the outset. Referring to the memorable discourse in which the text occurs, he conjured up before them Athens – glittering, garrulous, luxurious, profligate – the Athens St. Paul had seen. The vivid picture was crowded with magnificent temples, countless altars, innumerable shapes of mortal loveliness. Here was the Agora, with its altar of the Twelve Gods, and its painted cloisters, and its plane trees, beneath whose shade were disputing groups of philosophers, in the garb of their various sects. Gods and goddesses, in shining marble, in gold and ivory, caught the eye wherever it fell. There were altars to Fame and Health and Energy, to Modesty and Persuasion, to Pity and to Oblivion. On the ledges of the precipitous Acropolis glittered the shrines of Bacchus and Æsculapius, Venus, Earth, and Ceres. Over all towered the splendid statue of Pallas, cast from the brazen spoils of Marathon, visible, as it flashed in the sun, to the sailor doubling the distant promontory of Sunium. Every divinity that it had entered into the imagination of man to, conceive or the heart of man to yearn for, every deified attribute of human nature, had here its shrine or its voluptuous image. “Ye men of Athens, all things which I behold bear witness to your carefulness in religion.” It was easier, said the Roman satirist, to find a god than a man in Athens. And yet these men, with all their civilization, with all their art and poetry and philosophy, had not found God, and, notwithstanding all the statues and altars they had erected, were aware that they had not found Him; for St. Paul, as he traversed their resplendent city, and beheld their devotions, had found an altar with this inscription, “*To the Unknown God.*” Referring then to those “certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoics,” who encountered the apostle, he briefly sketched the two great systems of Greek speculation, and their influence on the morality of the age: the pantheism of the Stoics, who recognized in the universe a rational, organizing soul which produced all things and absorbed all things, – who perceived in pleasure no good, in pain no evil, – who judged virtue to be virtue and vice vice, according as they conformed to reason; the materialism of the Epicureans, who perceived in creation a fortuitous concourse of atoms, acknowledged no Godhead, or, at best, an unknowable, irresponsible Godhead, throned in happy indifference far beyond human imputation, – taught that the soul perished as the body perished, and was dissipated like a streak of morning cloud into the infinite azure of the inane. Following Paul as the philosophers “took him and brought him unto Areopagus,” where from immemorial time the judges, seated on benches hewn out of the rock, had sat under the witnessing heavens, passing sentence on the greatest criminals and deciding the most solemn questions of religion, he glanced down once more at the city glittering with temples and thronged with gods and goddesses, and bringing into broad contrast the radiant Apollo and the voluptuous Aphrodite, with the scourged and thorn-crowned figure on the cross, he read the message of the apostle to the pagan world. On how many altars to-day might not the words “To the Unknown God” be fittingly inscribed! “In Him we live, and move, and have our being;” but how few of us have “felt after” and found Him! In a strain of impassioned eloquence the preacher spoke of that unseen sustaining presence, which brooded over and encompassed us; of the yearning of the human heart for communion with the Creator; of the cry of anguish which rose from the depths of our being, when our eyes ached with straining into the night and saw nothing, when our quivering hands were reached out into the infinite and clasped but darkness; of the intense need we felt for a personal, tangible, sympathetic Being, for an incarnation of the divinity; of those ecstatic ascensions of the soul, in which man “felt after” and actually touched God; and, as he spoke, his glowing words gradually ceased to convey any definite meaning to the great majority of his hearers: but one face, flushed with joyous intelligence, one young beautiful face, with large, liquid blue eyes of worship, and with eager tremulous lips, was all the while turned fixedly up to his.

Seated in a little curtained nook near the organ, a slim, fair girl of two and twenty watched the preacher with almost breathless earnestness. She was a bright little fragile-looking blossom of a being, who seemed scarcely to have yet slipped out of her girlhood. Her face was of that delicate white, tinged with a spot of pink, which so often indicates a consumptive constitution, but in her case this delicacy of complexion was owing rather to the fineness of the material of which nature had moulded her. Light fine hair, in silky confusion rather than curls, clustered about her forehead and temples. Her little hands still clasped the music-book from which she had been playing the accompaniment of the hymn – for Edith Dove was the organist of St. Cuthbert’s – as though from the outset she had been too absorbed to remember that she was holding it.

Occasionally the vicar turned towards the aisle in which she sat, and his glance rested on her for a moment, and each time their eyes met Edith’s heart beat more rapidly, and a deeper tinge of rose-colour brightened her cheeks. But Mr. Santley showed no sign of kindred emotion; he was wholly absorbed in the fervid thoughts which flowed from his lips in such strains of exaltation. As his eyes wandered over the congregation, however, he suddenly saw another face which was turned attentively towards him, and which made him pause abruptly. He stopped in the midst of a sentence. He felt the action of his heart cease, and he knew that the blood was driven from his cheeks. He looked dazedly down at his manuscript, but was unable to find the place where his memory had failed him. For a few seconds there was dead silence in the church, and the eyes of the congregation were turned inquiringly towards the pulpit. Then, stammering and flushing, he resumed almost at haphazard. But the enthusiasm of the preacher had deserted him; his attention was distracted by a rush of recollections and feelings which he could not banish; the words he had written seemed to him foreign and purposeless, and it was only with a resolute effort that he constrained himself to read the parallel he had drawn between the pantheism and materialism of the days of St. Paul and those of our own time. To the close of his sermon he never once ventured to turn his eyes again in the direction of that face, but kept them fixed resolutely upon his manuscript. Not till he had descended the pulpit steps and was crossing the chancel, did he hazard a glance across the church towards that disquieting apparition.

When the service was ended, and the choristers, headed by the cross-bearer, had passed in procession down the nave to the vestry, the vicar hastily disrobed and issued into the churchyard. As with a strange fluttering hopefulness he had half anticipated, he was being waited for. A lady was moving slowly about among the graves, pausing now and again to read an inscription on a stone, but keeping a constant observation on the church doors. As he came out of the porch, she advanced to meet him, with a smile upon the face which had so terribly disconcerted him. She was a most beautiful, starry-looking creature – a tall, graceful, supple figure, with the exquisitely moulded head of a Greek statue; a ripe rich complexion suffused with a blush-rose tint; large lovely black eyes full of fire and softness; long, curved, black eyelashes; a profusion of silky black hair parted in little waves on a broad, bright forehead; and a pair of sweet, red lips.

She held out a little white hand to him, and, as he took it, their first words were uttered simultaneously.

“Ellen!”

“Mr. Santley!”

“I never dreamed,” said the vicar, excitedly, “I never dared to hope, to see you again!”

“Oh, the world is very small,” she replied gaily, “and people keep crossing each other at the most unexpected times and in the oddest of places. But I am so glad to see you. Are you doing well? You can scarcely imagine how curious it was when I recognized you to-day. Of course I had heard your name as our vicar, but I had no idea it could be *you*.”

“I am sure you are not more glad than I am,” rejoined the vicar. “Are you staying at Omberley? Have you friends here?”

She regarded him for a moment with a mixed expression of surprise and amusement.

“Do you not know that I am one of your parishioners now?” she asked, with a pleasant laugh.

He looked wonderingly into her dark, joyous eyes, and felt a sudden sense of chill and darkness within him, as a quick intelligence of who and what she now was flashed into his mind.

“Are you at the Manor?” he asked, in a low, agitated voice.

“Yes,” she answered, without noticing his emotion. “We arrived only yesterday, and have hardly had time yet to feel that we are at home; but I could not resist the inclination to see what sort of a church, and what sort of a vicar,” she added, with a glance of sly candour, “we had at St. Cuthbert’s. I am really so glad I came. Of course you will call and see us as soon and as often as you can, will you not? Mr. Haldane will be delighted, I know.”

“You are very kind,” said the vicar, scarcely aware of what he was saying.

“Indeed, I wish to be so,” she replied, smiling. “Of course you know Mr. Haldane?”

“No; I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting him. He – you had gone abroad before I came to Omberley.”

“Then you have not been here long?”

“Not quite a year yet.”

“And do you like the place – and the people?”

“Both, very much indeed!”

“You are not married yet, I think Mr. Haldane said?”

The vicar looked at her with a sadness that was almost reproachful as he answered, “No; I have my sister living with me.”

“How pleasant! You *must* bring Miss Santley with you when you come, will you not?”

As she spoke she moved slowly towards the gateway opening on to the road, where a little basket-carriage was awaiting her. He accompanied her, and for a few seconds there was silence between them. Then they shook hands again before she got into the carriage, and she repeated her assurance —

“I am so glad to have met you, Mr. Santley!”

She took the reins, and, lightly flicking the ponies with the whip, flashed upon him a farewell smile from those dark, spiritual eyes and laughing lips.

The vicar turned back into the churchyard, and following a narrow path that led across the sward through a wicket and a small beech plantation, entered the Vicarage with a pale, troubled face.

CHAPTER II. AT THE VICARAGE

When he reached the house he found that his presence was needed at the bedside of a labourer, who had met with a serious accident a day or two before, and who was now sinking rapidly. Mr. Santley was a man who never begrudged time or trouble in the interests of his parishioners; and, though he had yet another service to attend, and was already fatigued by the work of the day, he readily signified his willingness to comply with the request of the dying man, and at once started for the village.

He felt at the moment that the duty placed before him would be a relief from the thronging recollections and the wild promptings which had set his heart and brain in a turmoil. As he went down the road, however, the face of the dying man who had sent to seek his priestly aid, and the face of the beautiful wife of the owner of Foxglove Manor, seemed to be striving for mastery over him; he was unable to concentrate his attention on any subject. His will was in abeyance, and he appeared to himself to be in a sort of waking nightmare, in which the most distorted thoughts of marriage and death, of a lost love and of a lost God, of the mockery of life, the mockery of youth, the mockery of religion, presented themselves before him in a hideous masquerade, till the function he was about to fulfil appeared to him at one moment a sacrilege and at another a degrading folly.

To understand in some degree the vicars mental condition, it is necessary to glance back on his past life. In early manhood Charles Santley had been seriously impressed with the sense of a special vocation to a religious life. He was the son of a wealthy merchant, whose entire fortune had perished in one of our great commercial crises, and whose death had followed close upon his ruin. Up to that period Charles had been undecided as to his choice of a pursuit; but the necessity of making an immediate selection resulted in his devoting himself to the Church. Barely sufficient had been saved from the wreck of their property to support his widowed mother and his sister. For himself, he was endowed with a splendid physique, a keen intellect, and indomitable energy; and he at once flung himself into his new career. He supported himself by teaching until he was admitted to orders, when he obtained a curacy, and eventually, through the interest of some old friends of his father, he was presented with the living of St. Cuthbert's. In the course of these years of struggle, however, there was gradually developing within the man a spirit which threatened to render his success worse than useless to him. Ardent, emotional, profoundly convinced of the eternal truths of revelation and of the glorious mission of the Church, the young clergyman was at the same time boldly speculative and keenly alive to the grandiose developments of the modern schools of thought. It was not till he stood on the extreme verge of science and looked beyond that he fully realized his position. He then perceived with horror that it was no longer impossible – that it was even no longer difficult – to regard the great message of redemption as a dream of the world, the glorious faith of Christendom as a purely ethnic mythology, morality as a merely natural growth of a natural instinct of self-preservation. Indeed, the difficulty consisted in believing otherwise. The Fatherhood of a personal God was slipping away from his soul; the Sonship of a Saviour was melting into a fantastic unreality; the conviction of a personal immortality was dissipating into mental mist and darkness. The mystery of evil was growing into a fiendish enigma; virtue passed him, and showed herself to be a hollow mask.

His whole nature rose in revolt against this horrible scientific travesty of Gods universe. He shrank back alike from the new truths and from the theories evolved from them. His faith could not stand the test of the wider knowledge. If God were indeed a myth, immortality but a dream, virtue an unprofitable delusion, man simply a beast gifted with speech, better the old faith concerning all these – accepted though it were in despite of reason and in outrage of immortal truth – than the hideous simulacra of the new philosophy. He cast himself back upon the bosom of the Church; he clung to her as to the garment of God; but he was powerless to exorcise the spirit of scepticism. It rose before him in sacred places, it scoffed at his most earnest and impassioned utterances; he seemed to

hear within himself cynical laughter as he stood at the bedside of the dying; when he knelt to pray it stood at his ear and suggested blasphemy; it converted the solemn light of the Church into a motley atmosphere of superstition; it stimulated his strong animal nature to the very bounds of self-restraint. Still, if he was unable to exorcise it, he had yet the strength to contend with and to master it. Precisely because he was sceptical he was rigid in outward doctrine, zealous for forms, and indefatigable in the discharge of his clerical functions. In his passionate endeavour to convince himself, he convinced his hearers and confirmed them in the faith in which he was himself unable to trust.

To-day the old conflict between the sacerdotal and the sceptical was complicated by new elements of spiritual discord. After seven years of hopeless separation, Charles Santley had once more stood face to face with the embodied dream and inspiration of his early manhood, and had found her, in the full lustre of her peerless womanhood, another man's wife. During those years he had, it was true, reconciled himself to what then had been forced upon him as the inevitable, and he had sternly set himself to master the problem of his existence, without any secret hope that in the coming years his success might bring her within his reach; but he had never forgotten her. She was to him the starry poetry of his youth. He looked back to the time when he had first known and loved her, as a sadder and a wiser world looks back to the Golden Age. The memory of her was the ghost of an ancient worship, flitting in a dim rosy twilight about the Elysian fields of memory, and, it being twilight, the fields were touched with a hallowed feeling of loss and a divine sentiment of regret. And now – oh, bitter irony of time and fortune! – now that, he had achieved success, now that all the old gulfs which had separated them were spanned with golden bridges, now that he might have claimed her and she might have been proud to acknowledge the claim, she once more crossed his life – a vision of beauty, a star of inspiration – and once, more he knew that she was hopelessly, infinitely more hopelessly than ever, raised beyond his seeking.

He was detained so long at the bedside of the dying man that, by the time he had again reached the Vicarage, the bells were ringing for evening service and the western sky was ablaze with sunset. In the church the light streamed through the lancets and the painted casements, filling the air with motley breadths of glowing colour, and painting pillar and arch and the brown sandstone with glorious blazonry. Even in the curtained nook near the organ the space was flooded with enchanted lights, and Edith Dove sat beside the tall gilded instrument like a picture of St. Cecilia in an illuminated missal. In the pulpit the vicar stood as if transfigured. He spoke, too, as though he felt that this was the splendour of a new heaven opening upon a new earth, and the glad rustle of the trees in the cool breeze outside was the murmur of paradise.

“We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,” were the words of his text, and throughout the fervid exposition of the apostle's faith in the resurrection the sweet, blue eyes and the eager lips of the organist were turned towards the preacher. He seemed this evening, however, to be unconscious of her presence. He addressed himself entirely to the listeners in the pews in front of him, and never cast even a solitary glance towards the aisle where she sat.

At the close of the service Edith found Miss Santley waiting for her at the entrance. It had now been customary for several weeks past for Miss Dove to go over to the Vicarage on Sunday evening and remain to supper with Mr. Santley and his sister. They went slowly through the churchyard together, and took the little path which led to the house. They remained chatting at the wicket for a few moments, expecting the appearance of the vicar. When Mr. Santley issued from the church, however, he passed quickly down the gravelled walk to the high-road. He had thrown a rapid look towards the plantation, and had seen the young women, but he gave no indication of having observed them.

“Why, Charles is not coming!” exclaimed Miss Santley, with surprise, as she saw her brother; “he surely cannot be going down to Omberley again.”

“He is not going to Omberley, dear,” said Edith, who had been watching for the vicar, and had been keen enough to notice the hasty glance he had cast in their direction; “he is going up the road.”

“Then wherever can he be going to? And he had not had tea yet, poor fellow!”

Miss Santley stepped a few paces back into the churchyard, and stood on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of him over the hedge; but the vicar had already passed out of sight.

“Never mind, dear,” she said to Edith. “Shall we go in and have a little chat by ourselves? He may have some sick call or other, and he is sure to be back soon, or he would have told me where he was going. Come, you needn’t look so sad,” Miss Santley continued, as she observed the expression of her companion’s face.

“I didn’t think I was looking sad,” replied Edith, blushing.

“Oh yes, you were; dreadfully,” said Miss Santley, laughing in a bantering manner.

“You don’t think Mr. Santley is – is not quite well?” asked Edith, timidly.

“Oh no; Charles is quite well, I am sure.”

“Perhaps he is displeased with something,” said Edith, as if speaking to herself rather than to Miss Santley.

“What a little fidget you are!” said her companion, taking the girl’s arm. “I know what you are thinking of. I am sure he has no cause to be displeased with *you*, at any rate.”

“I hope not,” replied Miss Dove, brightening a little. “Only I felt a misgiving. You do feel misgivings about all sorts of things, don’t you, Mary, without knowing why – a sort of presentiment and an uneasy feeling that something is going to happen?”

“Young people in love, I believe, experience feelings of that kind,” said Miss Santley, with mock gravity, “Come in, you dear little goose, and don’t vex your poor wee heart like that. He will be back before we have got half our talk over.”

The vicar strode rapidly along the road until he reached the summit of a rising ground, from which he could see two counties spread out before him in fruitful undulations of field and meadow and woodland. The sunset was burning down in front of him. Far away in the distant landscape were soft mists of blue smoke rising from half-hidden villages, and here and there flashed points of brightness where the sun struck on the windows of a farmstead. On either hand were great expanses of yellowing corn swaying in the cool breeze and reddening in the low crimson light. He left the road, and passed through a gate into one of the fields. Following a footpath, he went along the hedge till he reached a stile. Here he was alone and concealed in a vast sea of rustling corn. He sat down on the top of the stile, and resting his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, gazed abstractedly into the glowing west.

A single word which escaped him betrayed the workings of his mind: “Married!”

Seven years ago, when Charles Santley began his struggle in life, he obtained through a clerical friend a position as teacher of classics in a seminary for young ladies in a small sea-side town in a southern county. He found his new labour especially congenial. A handsome young professor, whose attention was fixed on the Church, and who purposed to devote himself to her service, was cordially-welcomed by the devout ladies who conducted the establishment. They were three sisters who had been overlooked in the wide yearning crowd of unloved womanhood, and who had turned for consolation to the mystical passions of religion. Under their care a bevy of bright young creatures were brought up as in the chaste seclusion of a convent. Their impressionable natures were surrounded by a strange artificial atmosphere of spiritual emotion; life shone in upon them, as it were, through the lancets of a-mediaeval ecclesiasticism, and their young hearts, breaking into blossom, were coloured once and for ever with those deep glowing tints.

It was here that the young man, in the first dawn of the romance of manhood, met the beautiful girl who was now the wife of the owner of Foxglove Manor. She was then turned of seventeen, and had become aware of the first shy longings and sweet impulses of her nature. She was his favourite pupil, and sat at his right hand at the long table when he gave his lessons. He used her pen and pencil, referred to her books, touched her hand with his in the ordinary work of the lesson. Her clothes touched his clothes beneath the table. At times their feet met accidentally. She regularly put a flower in a glass of water before his place. All these trifles were the thrilling incidents of a delicious romance

which the school-girl was making in her flurried little heart. He, too, was not insensible to the trifles which affected his passionate pupil. Her great dark eyes sent electric flashes through him. Her breath reached him sweeter than roses. Her beautiful dark hair rubbed against his shoulder or his cheek, and he tried to prevent the hot blood from flushing into his face. When their hands touched he could have snatched hers and kissed it.

Ellen Derwent was happily not a boarder at the establishment, but resided with her aunt. Her family were wealthy country people, and Ellen, who had been ailing for a little while, had been ordered to the sea-side for change of air. Early in the bright mornings, and after the day's schooling was over, Ellen wandered about the sea-shore or took long walks along the cliffs. Santley met her first by accident, and after that, though the meetings might still be called accidental, each knew that to-morrow and to-morrow and yet again to-morrow the same instinctive feeling – call it a divine chance or love's premonition – would bring them together.

Ah! happy, radiant days by that glad sea and in the wild loveliness of those romantic cliffs! Oh, vision of flushed cheek and shining eyes, and sweet red lips and throbbing bosom! Oh, dim heavenly summer dawns, when the sea mists were just brightening, and the little birds were singing, and the sea-side town was still half asleep, and only two lovers were walking hand in hand along the green brow of the cliffs! Oh, sweet autumn twilights which the shining eyes seemed to fill with dark burning lustre! Oh, kisses, sweeter than ever pressed by woman's lips before or since! Oh, thrill of clasped hands and mad palpitations of loving bosoms!

The swaying corn sounded like the sea as the breeze passed over it, and the-murmur broke the vicars reverie.

“Married!”

Married? yes, married! The sweet secret could not be kept for ever, and when Miss Lilburn, Ellen's aunt, discovered it, she at once spoke to Mr. Santley. She did not oppose his suit – indeed, she liked him greatly, but love, after all, was no mere school-girl's dream. Was he in a position to make Ellen his wife? In any case, they must know about it at home. If Mr. Derwent approved, she would be most happy that Mr. Santley should visit her; but, in the meantime, it was only prudent that Ellen should discontinue these pleasant rambles.

He had never seen Ellen since, until her face made his heart stand still in the midst of his sermon.

The vicar rose from the stipe with clenched hands and set teeth.

“Bitter, bitter!” he said, raising his face to the sky and shaking his head as though he saw above him an invisible face, and spoke half in exquisite pain, half in stoical endurance.

CHAPTER III. "THERE IS A CHANGE!"

When Edith and Miss Santley reached the Vicarage, they went into the parlour, which, besides having a western exposure, commanded to a considerable distance a view of the high-road along which the vicar had passed.

"I always think this is the pleasantest room in the house," said Miss Santley, as she drew an armchair into the recess of the open window, and Edith seated herself on the couch. "Charles prefers an eastern frontage, for the sake of the early morning, he says; but I am always busy in the morning, so I suppose I like the afternoon light best, when I have a little time to sit and bask."

"Isn't it natural, too," suggested Edith, "that men should prefer sunrise and women sunset? Men are so active and sanguine, and have so many interests to engage their attention, and women – well, as a rule – are such dreamers! Is it not almost constitutional?"

"And when did you ever see me dreaming, may I ask?" inquired Miss Santley.

"Oh no; you are not one of the dreamers," replied Edith, quickly. "You should have been called Martha instead of Mary."

"Insinuating that I am a bit of a busybody, eh?" said Miss Santley, with a sly twinkle of humour.

"You know I did not mean to insinuate that."

"Or that you had yourself chosen the better part, eh?" she continued gaily.

Edith coloured deeply, and cast her eyes on the floor, while an expression of pain passed across her face.

"Nay, my dear, do not look hurt. You know that was only said in jest."

"You cannot tell how such jests hurt me," replied the girl, her lips beginning to tremble.

"Even between our two selves?" asked Miss Santley, taking Edith's hand gently and stroking it with both of hers. "You know, my dear little girl, how I love you, and how pleased I was when I discovered the way in which that poor little heart of yours was beating. You know that there is no one in the world whom I would more gladly – ay, or a thousandth part so gladly – take for a sister. Don't you, Edith? Answer me, dear."

"Yes," replied the girl, letting her head hang upon her bosom, and feeling her face on flame.

"And have I not tried to help you? I know Charles is fond of you – I am sure of that. I have eyes in my head, my dear, though they are not so young and pretty as yours. And I know, too, that a little while ago he was anxious to know what I would say if he should propose to take a wife. I shall be only too pleased when he makes up his mind. It will relieve me of a great deal of care and anxiety. And he could not in the wide world choose a better or a dearer little girl."

Miss Santley was not ordinarily of a demonstrative disposition, but as she uttered those last words she drew Edith towards her and kissed her on the forehead.

The vicar's sister was some twelve years his senior. A stout, homely, motherly little woman, with plain but pleasing features, brown hair, a shrewd but kindly expression, clear grey eyes, and a firm mouth and chin, she was as unlike the Vicar in personal appearance as she was unlike him in character and temperament. This family unlikeness, however, had had no prejudicial effect on their mutual affection, though in Miss Santley's case it was the source of much secret uneasiness on her brother's account. As unimaginative as she was practical, she was at a loss to understand her brother's emotional mysticism and dreamy idealism; but her knowledge of human nature made her timorously aware of the dangers which beset the combination of a splendid physique with a glowing temperament which was almost febrile in its sensuous impulsiveness. She was spared the torture of sharing that darker secret of unbelief; but she was sufficiently conscious of the strong fervid nature of the vicar, to feel thankful that Edith had made a deep impression on him, and that when he did marry it would be a bright and congenial young creature who would be worthy of him and attached to herself.

“So why should it hurt you, if I do jest a little?” asked Miss Santley, as she kissed Edith. “Love cannot always be transcendental, otherwise two people will never come closely together. The best gift a couple of lovers can possess in common, is a capacity for a little fun and affectionate wit. Your solemn lovers are always misunderstanding each other, and quarrelling and making it up again.”

“But we are not lovers yet, Mary,” said Edith in a timid whisper.

“Not yet, perhaps; but you will be soon, if I am capable of forming any opinion.”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Edith replied with a sigh; and her soft blue eyes filled with tears. Then raising her eyes imploringly to Miss Santley, and nervously taking her hand, she continued: “Oh, Mary, do not think me too forward and eager and unwomanly. Do not judge me too hardly. I know a girl should not give her heart away till she is asked for it. But I cannot help it – I love him – I love him so! I have done all I could to prevent myself from loving him, but it is no use – oh! it is no use.”

She burst into a paroxysm of passionate sobbing, and Miss Santley, without saying a word, put her arms about her and softly caressed her soft flaxen hair.

The outburst was gradually subdued, and Edith, with a hot glowing face hidden on her friend’s shoulder, was too ashamed to change her position.

“Do you feel better now, dear?” asked Miss Santley in a kindly voice.

“Oh, Mary, are you not ashamed of me – disgusted?”

Miss Santley replied in a woman’s way with another kiss, and again fondled the girl’s head.

After a pause of a few moments, she gently raised her face and regarded it affectionately.

“You must come upstairs and wash away those tell-tales before he returns. And” – she added a little hesitatingly – “will you not trust me with the cause of all this trouble?”

“I am afraid you will laugh at me, dear, it must seem such a foolish cause to you. And I know you will say it was all simply my fancy.”

“What was it?”

“You know, dear, where I sit in church?” Edith began, nervously playing with the lace on Miss Santley’s dress. “Well, he always used to turn twice or thrice in my direction during the sermon. I used to think he did it because he knew I was there. And he did it this afternoon. But in the evening he never looked once during the whole time.”

Miss Santley began to smile in spite of herself.

“Then when he came out of the church he saw you and me waiting for him – I saw him give one single sharp look – and then he went on as if he had not perceived us. He would not have gone away like that, Mary, if I had not been with you.”

“And is that all?” inquired Mary as Edith paused.

“I think it is quite enough,” the latter replied sorrowfully. “It means that he is tired of me; he was displeased that I was with you; he did not want to speak to me.”

“My dear girl, all this is simply silly fancy; you will make your whole life miserable if you imagine things in this way.”

“I knew you would say that; but you do not understand. I hardly understand myself; but I know what I say is true. You remember old Harry Wilson down in the village – he has a wooden leg, you know, but when there is going to be a bad change of weather, he says he can feel it in the foot he has lost; and he is always right. I think I am like him, dear; I have lost something, and it makes me feel when there is a change, long before the storm breaks.”

“All this is nothing but nonsense, my little woman!” said Miss Santley reassuringly. “Come with me upstairs, and let us make ourselves presentable.” When Edith had bathed her face, the two came downstairs again, but instead of returning to the parlour they went into the library. This was specially the vicar’s room, and, more than any other, it indicated the tastes and character of its occupant. The whole house, indeed, was tinged with the mediaeval colouring of the church, and in all parts of it you came upon indications of the ecclesiastical spirit of the owner; but here the vicar had given fullest expression to his fancy, and the room had as much the appearance of an oratory as of a library. At

one end a small alcove jutted out into the plantation, and the windows were filled with stained glass. On the walls hung several of Raphael's cartoons; on the mantelpiece stood, under glass, a marble group of The Dead Christ; the furniture, which was of carved oak, suggested the stalls in the chancel; the brass gasalier and brackets were of ecclesiastical design; and, lastly, the library shelves were solemnly weighted with long rows of theology, sermons, and Biblical literature in several languages. In a separate bookcase, which was kept locked, were gathered together a number of scientific works and volumes of modern speculative philosophy. A third bookcase was devoted to history, poetry, travels, and miscellaneous works. The great bulk of the library, however, was clerical, and the vicar had within arm's reach a fair epitome of all that the good men of all ages and many countries had discovered regarding the mystery of the world and the relationship of man.

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