GEORGE MACDONALD

THE SEABOARD PARISH, VOLUME 3

George MacDonald

The Seaboard Parish, Volume 3

MacDonald G.

The Seaboard Parish, Volume 3 / G. MacDonald — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

George MacDonald
The Seaboard Parish Volume 3

CHAPTER I.
A WALK WITH MY WIFE

The autumn was creeping up on the earth, with winter holding by its skirts behind; but before I loose my hold of the garments of summer, I must write a chapter about a walk and a talk I had one night with my wife. It had rained a good deal during the day, but as the sun went down the air began to clear, and when the moon shone out, near the full, she walked the heavens, not "like one that hath been led astray," but as "queen and huntress, chaste and fair."

"What a lovely night it is!" said Ethelwyn, who had come into my study—where I always sat with unblinded windows, that the night and her creatures might look in upon me—and had stood gazing out for a moment.

"Shall we go for a little turn?" I said.

"I should like it very much," she answered. "I will go and put on my bonnet at once."

In a minute or two she looked in again, all ready. I rose, laid aside my Plato, and went with her. We turned our steps along the edge of the down, and descended upon the breakwater, where we seated ourselves upon the same spot where in the darkness I had heard the voices of Joe and Agnes. What a different night it was from that! The sea lay as quiet as if it could not move for the moonlight that lay upon it. The glory over it was so mighty in its peacefulness, that the wild element beneath was afraid to toss itself even with the motions of its natural unrest. The moon was like the face of a saint before which the stormy people has grown dumb. The rocks stood up solid and dark in the universal aether, and the pulse of the ocean throbbed against them with a lapping gush, soft as the voice of a passionate child soothed into shame of its vanished petulance. But the sky was the glory. Although no breath moved below, there was a gentle wind abroad in the upper regions. The air was full of masses of cloud, the vanishing fragments of the one great vapour which had been pouring down in rain the most of the day. These masses were all setting with one steady motion eastward into the abysses of space; now obscuring the fair moon, now solemnly sweeping away from before her. As they departed, out shone her marvellous radiance, as calm as ever. It was plain that she knew nothing of what we called her covering, her obscuration, the dimming of her glory. She had been busy all the time weaving her lovely opaline damask on the other side of the mass in which we said she was swallowed up.

"Have you ever noticed, wifie," I said, "how the eyes of our minds—almost our bodily eyes—are opened sometimes to the cubicalness of nature, as it were?"

"I don't know, Harry, for I don't understand your question," she answered.

"Well, it was a stupid way of expressing what I meant. No human being could have understood it from that. I will make you understand in a moment, though. Sometimes—perhaps generally—we see the sky as a flat dome, spangled with star-points, and painted blue. *Now* I see it as an awful depth of blue air, depth within depth; and the clouds before me are not passing away to the left, but sinking away from the front of me into the marvellous unknown regions, which, let philosophers say what they will about time and space,—and I daresay they are right,—are yet very awful to me. Thank God, my dear," I said, catching hold of her arm, as the terror of mere space grew upon me, "for himself. He is deeper than space, deeper than time; he is the heart of all the cube of history."

"I understand you now, husband," said my wife.

"I knew you would," I answered.

"But," she said again, "is it not something the same with the things inside us? I can't put it in words as you do. Do you understand me now?"

"I am not sure that I do. You must try again."

"You understand me well enough, only you like to make me blunder where you can talk," said my wife, putting her hand in mine. "But I will try. Sometimes, after thinking about something for a long time, you come to a conclusion about it, and you think you have settled it plain and clear to yourself, for ever and a day. You hang it upon your wall, like a picture, and are satisfied for a fortnight. But some day, when you happen to cast a look at it, you find that instead of hanging flat on the wall, your picture has gone through it—opens out into some region you don't know where—shows you far-receding distances of air and sea—in short, where you thought one question was settled for ever, a hundred are opened up for the present hour."

"Bravo, wife!" I cried in true delight. "I do indeed understand you now. You have said it better than I could ever have done. That's the plague of you women! You have been taught for centuries and centuries that there is little or nothing to be expected of you, and so you won't try. Therefore we men know no more than you do whether it is in you or not. And when you do try, instead of trying to think, you want to be in Parliament all at once."

"Do you apply that remark to me, sir?" demanded Ethelwyn.

"You must submit to bear the sins of your kind upon occasion," I answered.

"I am content to do that, so long as yours will help mine," she replied.

"Then I may go on?" I said, with interrogation.

"Till sunrise if you like. We were talking of the cubicalness—I believe you called it—of nature."

"And you capped it with the cubicalness of thought. And quite right too. There are people, as a dear friend of mine used to say, who are so accustomed to regard everything in the *flat*, as dogma cut and—not *always* dried my moral olfactories aver—that if you prove to them the very thing they believe, but after another mode than that they have been accustomed to, they are offended, and count you a heretic. There is no help for it. Even St. Paul's chief opposition came from the Judaizing Christians of his time, who did not believe that God *could* love the Gentiles, and therefore regarded him as a teacher of falsehood. We must not be fierce with them. Who knows what wickedness of their ancestors goes to account for their stupidity? For that there are stupid people, and that they are, in very consequence of their stupidity, conceited, who can deny? The worst of it is, that no man who is conceited can be convinced of the fact."

"Don't say that, Harry. That is to deny conversion."

"You are right, Ethelwyn. The moment a man is convinced of his folly, he ceases to be a fool. The moment a man is convinced of his conceit, he ceases to be conceited. But there *must* be a final judgment, and the true man will welcome it, even if he is to appear a convicted fool. A man's business is to see first that he is not acting the part of a fool, and next, to help any honest people who care about the matter to take heed likewise that they be not offering to pull the mote out of their brother's eye. But there are even societies established and supported by good people for the express purpose of pulling out motes.—'The Mote-Pulling Society!'—That ought to take with a certain part of the public."

"Come, come, Harry. You are absurd. Such people don't come near you."

"They can't touch me. No. But they come near good people whom I know, brandishing the long pins with which they pull the motes out, and threatening them with judgment before their time. They are but pins, to be sure—not daggers."

"But you have wandered, Harry, into the narrowest underground, musty ways, and have forgotten all about 'the cubicalness of nature.'"

"You are right, my love, as you generally are," I answered, laughing. "Look at that great antlered elk, or moose—fit quarry for Diana of the silver bow. Look how it glides solemnly away into the unpastured depths of the aerial deserts. Look again at that reclining giant, half raised upon his arm,

with his face turned towards the wilderness. What eyes they must be under those huge brows! On what message to the nations is he borne as by the slow sweep of ages, on towards his mysterious goal?"

"Stop, stop, Harry," said my wife. "It makes me unhappy to hear grand words clothing only cloudy fancies. Such words ought to be used about the truth, and the truth only."

"If I could carry it no further, my dear, then it would indeed be a degrading of words. But there never was a vagary that uplifted the soul, or made the grand words flow from the gates of speech, that had not its counterpart in truth itself. Man can imagine nothing, even in the clouds of the air, that God has not done, or is not doing. Even as that cloudy giant yields, and is 'shepherded by the slow unwilling wind,' so is each of us borne onward to an unseen destiny—a glorious one if we will but yield to the Spirit of God that bloweth where it listeth—with a grand listing—coming whence we know not, and going whither we know not. The very clouds of the air are hung up as dim pictures of the thoughts and history of man."

"I do not mind how long you talk like that, husband, even if you take the clouds for your text. But it did make me miserable to think that what you were saying had no more basis than the fantastic forms which the clouds assume. I see I was wrong, though."

"The clouds themselves, in such a solemn stately march as this, used to make me sad for the very same reason. I used to think, What is it all for? They are but vapours blown by the wind. They come nowhence, and they go nowhither. But now I see them and all things as ever moving symbols of the motions of man's spirit and destiny."

A pause followed, during which we sat and watched the marvellous depth of the heavens, deep as I do not think I ever saw them before or since, covered with a stately procession of ever-appearing and ever-vanishing forms—great sculpturesque blocks of a shattered storm—the icebergs of the upper sea. These were not far off against a blue background, but floating near us in the heart of a blue-black space, gloriously lighted by a golden rather than silvery moon. At length my wife spoke.

"I hope Mr. Percivale is out to-night," she said. "How he must be enjoying it if he is!"

"I wonder the young man is not returning to his professional labours," I said. "Few artists can afford such long holidays as he is taking."

"He is laying in stock, though, I suppose," answered my wife.

"I doubt that, my dear. He said not, on one occasion, you may remember."

"Yes, I remember. But still he must paint better the more familiar he gets with the things God cares to fashion."

"Doubtless. But I am afraid the work of God he is chiefly studying at present is our Wynnie."

"Well, is she not a worthy object of his study?" returned Ethelwyn, looking up in my face with an arch expression.

"Doubtless again, Ethel; but I hope she is not studying him quite so much in her turn. I have seen her eyes following him about."

My wife made no answer for a moment. Then she said,

"Don't you like him, Harry?"

"Yes. I like him very much."

"Then why should you not like Wynnie to like him?"

"I should like to be surer of his principles, for one thing."

"I should like to be surer of Wynnie's."

I was silent. Ethelwyn resumed.

"Don't you think they might do each other good?"

Still I could not reply.

"They both love the truth, I am sure; only they don't perhaps know what it is yet. I think if they were to fall in love with each other, it would very likely make them both more desirous of finding it still."

"Perhaps," I said at last. "But you are talking about awfully serious things, Ethelwyn."

"Yes, as serious as life," she answered.

"You make me very anxious," I said. "The young man has not, I fear, any means of gaining a livelihood for more than himself."

"Why should he before he wanted it? I like to see a man who can be content with an art and a living by it."

"I hope I have not been to blame in allowing them to see so much of each other," I said, hardly heeding my wife's words.

"It came about quite naturally," she rejoined. "If you had opposed their meeting, you would have been interfering just as if you had been Providence. And you would have only made them think more about each other."

"He hasn't said anything—has he?" I asked in positive alarm.

"O dear no. It may be all my fancy. I am only looking a little ahead. I confess I should like him for a son-in-law. I approve of him," she added, with a sweet laugh.

"Well," I said, "I suppose sons-in-law are possible, however disagreeable, results of having daughters."

I tried to laugh, but hardly succeeded.

"Harry," said my wife, "I don't like you in such a mood. It is not like you at all. It is unworthy of you."

"How can I help being anxious when you speak of such dreadful things as the possibility of having to give away my daughter, my precious wonder that came to me through you, out of the infinite—the tender little darling!"

"'Out of the heart of God,' you used to say, Henry. Yes, and with a destiny he had ordained. It is strange to me how you forget your best and noblest teaching sometimes. You are always telling us to trust in God. Surely it is a poor creed that will only allow us to trust in God for ourselves—a very selfish creed. There must be something wrong there. I should say that the man who can only trust God for himself is not half a Christian. Either he is so selfish that that satisfies him, or he has such a poor notion of God that he cannot trust him with what most concerns him. The former is not your case, Harry: is the latter, then?—You see I must take my turn at the preaching sometimes. Mayn't I, dearest?"

She took my hand in both of hers. The truth arose in my heart. I never loved my wife more than at that moment. And now I could not speak for other reasons. I saw that I had been faithless to my God, and the moment I could command my speech, I hastened to confess it.

"You are right, my dear," I said, "quite right. I have been wicked, for I have been denying my God. I have been putting my providence in the place of his—trying, like an anxious fool, to count the hairs on Wynnie's head, instead of being content that the grand loving Father should count them. My love, let us pray for Wynnie; for what is prayer but giving her to God and his holy, blessed will?"

We sat hand in hand. Neither spoke aloud for some minutes, but we spoke in our hearts to God, talking to him about Wynnie. Then we rose together, and walked homeward, still in silence. But my heart and hand clung to my wife as to the angel whom God had sent to deliver me out of the prison of my faithlessness. And as we went, lo! the sky was glorious again. It had faded from my sight, had grown flat as a dogma, uninteresting as "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours;" the moon had been but a round thing with the sun shining upon it, and the stars were only minding their own business. But now the solemn march towards an unseen, unimagined goal had again begun. Wynnie's life was hid with Christ in God. Away strode the cloudy pageant with its banners blowing in the wind, which blew where it grandly listed, marching as to a solemn triumphal music that drew them from afar towards the gates of pearl by which the morning walks out of the New Jerusalem to gladden the nations of the earth. Solitary stars, with all their sparkles drawn in, shone, quiet as human eyes, in the deep solemn clefts of dark blue air. They looked restrained and still, as if they

knew all about it—all about the secret of this midnight march. For the moon—she saw the sun, and therefore made the earth glad.

"You have been a moon to me this night, my wife," I said. "You were looking full at the truth, while I was dark. I saw its light in your face, and believed, and turned my soul to the sun. And now I am both ashamed and glad. God keep me from sinning so again."

"My dear husband, it was only a mood—a passing mood," said Ethelwyn, seeking to comfort me.

"It was a mood, and thank God it is now past; but it was a wicked one. It was a mood in which the Lord might have called me a devil, as he did St. Peter. Such moods have to be grappled with and fought the moment they appear. They must not have their way for a single thought even."

"But we can't help it always, can we, husband?"

"We can't help it out and out, because our wills are not yet free with the freedom God is giving us as fast as we will let him. When we are able to will thoroughly, then we shall do what we will. At least, I think we shall. But there is a mystery in it God only understands. All we know is, that we can struggle and pray. But a mood is an awful oppression sometimes when you least believe in it and most wish to get rid of it. It is like a headache in the soul."

"What do the people do that don't believe in God?" said Ethelwyn.

The same moment Wynnie, who had seen us pass the window, opened the door of the bark-house for us, and we passed into Connie's chamber and found her lying in the moonlight, gazing at the same heavens as her father and mother had been revelling in.

CHAPTER II.
OUR LAST SHORE-DINNER

The next day was very lovely. I think it is the last of the kind of which I shall have occasion to write in my narrative of the Seaboard Parish. I wonder if my readers are tired of so much about the common things of Nature. I reason about it something in this way: We are so easily affected by the smallest things that are of the unpleasant kind, that we ought to train ourselves to the influence of those that are of an opposite nature. The unpleasant ones are like the thorns which make themselves felt as we scramble—for we often do scramble in a very undignified manner—through the thickets of life; and, feeling the thorns, we grumble, and are blind to all but the thorns. The flowers, and the lovely leaves, and the red berries, and the clusters of filberts, and the birds'-nests do not force themselves upon our attention as the thorns do, and the thorns make us forget to look for them. But a scratch would be forgotten—and that in mental hurts is often equivalent to a cure, for a forgotten scratch on the mind or heart will never fester—if we but allowed our being a moment's repose upon any of the quiet, waiting, unobtrusive beauties that lie around the half-trodden way, offering their gentle healing. And when I think how, not unfrequently, otherwise noble characters are anything but admirable when under the influence of trifling irritations, the very paltriness of which seems what the mind, which would at once rouse itself to a noble endurance of any mighty evil, is unable to endure, I would gladly help so with sweet antidotes to defeat the fly in the ointment of the apothecary that the whole pot shall send forth a pure savour. We ought for this to cultivate the friendships of little things. Beauty is one of the surest antidotes to vexation. Often when life looked dreary about me, from some real or fancied injustice or indignity, has a thought of truth been flashed into my mind from a flower, a shape of frost, or even a lingering shadow—not to mention such glories as angel-winged clouds, rainbows, stars, and sunrises. Therefore I hope that in my loving delay over such aspects of Nature as impressed themselves upon me in this most memorable part of my history I shall not prove wearisome to my reader, for therein I should utterly contravene my hope and intent in the recording of them.

This day there was to be an unusually low tide, and we had reckoned on enlarging our acquaintance with the bed of the ocean—of knowing a few yards more of the millions of miles lapt in the mystery of waters. It was to be low water about two o'clock, and we resolved to dine upon the sands. But all the morning the children were out playing on the threshold of old Neptune's palace; for in his quieter mood he will, like a fierce mastiff, let children do with him what they will. I gave myself a whole holiday—sometimes the most precious part of my life both for myself and those for whom I labour—and wandered about on the shore, now passing the children, and assailed with a volley of cries and entreaties to look at this one's castle and that one's ditch, now leaving them behind, with what in its ungraduated flatness might well enough personate an endless desert of sand between, over the expanse of which I could imagine them disappearing on a far horizon, whence however a faint occasional cry of excitement and pleasure would reach my ears. The sea was so calm, and the shore so gently sloping, that you could hardly tell where the sand ceased and the sea began—the water sloped to such a thin pellicle, thinner than any knife-edge, upon the shining brown sand, and you saw the sand underneath the water to such a distance out. Yet this depth, which would not drown a red spider, was the ocean. In my mind I followed that bed of shining sand, bared of its hiding waters, out and out, till I was lost in an awful wilderness of chasms, precipices, and mountain-peaks, in whose caverns the sea-serpent may dwell, with his breath of pestilence; the kraken, with "his skaly rind," may there be sleeping

"His ancient dreamless, uninvaded sleep,"

while

"faintest sunlights flee
About his shadowy sides,"

as he lies

"Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep."

There may lie all the horrors that Schiller's diver encountered—the frightful Molch, and that worst of all, to which he gives no name, which came creeping with a hundred knots at once; but here are only the gracious rainbow-woven shells, an evanescent jelly or two, and the queer baby-crabs that crawl out from the holes of the bordering rocks. What awful gradations of gentleness lead from such as these down to those cabins where wallow the inventions of Nature's infancy, when, like a child of untutored imagination, she drew on the slate of her fancy creations in which flitting shadows of beauty serve only to heighten the shuddering, gruesome horror. The sweet sun and air, the hand of man, and the growth of the ages, have all but swept such from the upper plains of the earth. What hunter's bow has twanged, what adventurer's rifle has cracked in those leagues of mountain-waste, vaster than all the upper world can show, where the beasts of the ocean "graze the sea-weed, their pasture"! Diana of the silver bow herself, when she descends into the interlunar caves of hell, sends no such monsters fleeing from her spells. Yet if such there be, such horrors too must lie in the undiscovered caves of man's nature, of which all this outer world is but a typical analysis. By equally slow gradations may the inner eye descend from the truth of a Cordelia to the falsehood of an Iago. As these golden sands slope from the sunlight into the wallowing abyss of darkness, even so from the love of the child to his holy mother slopes the inclined plane of humanity to the hell of the sensualist. "But with one difference in the moral world," I said aloud, as I paced up and down on the shimmering margin, "that everywhere in the scale the eye of the all-seeing Father can detect the first quiver of the eyelid that would raise itself heavenward, responsive to his waking spirit." I lifted my eyes in the relief of the thought, and saw how the sun of the autumn hung above the waters oppressed with a mist of his own glory; far away to the left a man who had been clambering on a low rock, inaccessible save in such a tide, gathering mussels, threw himself into the sea and swam ashore; above his head the storm-tower stood in the stormless air; the sea glittered and shone, and the long-winged birds knew not which to choose, the balmy air or the cool deep, now flitting like arrow-heads through the one, now alighting eagerly upon the other, to forsake it anew for the thinner element. I thanked God for his glory.

"O, papa, it's so jolly—so jolly!" shouted the children as I passed them again.

"What is it that's so jolly, Charlie?" I asked.

"My castle," screeched Harry in reply; "only it's tumbled down. The water *would* keep coming in underneath."

"I tried to stop it with a newspaper," cried Charlie, "but it wouldn't. So we were forced to let it be, and down it went into the ditch."

"We blew it up rather than surrender," said Dora. "We did; only Harry always forgets, and says it was the water did it."

I drew near the rock that held the bath. I had never approached it from this side before. It was high above my head, and a stream of water was flowing from it. I scrambled up, undressed, and plunged into its dark hollow, where I felt like one of the sea-beasts of which I had been dreaming, down in the caves of the unvisited ocean. But the sun was over my head, and the air with an edge of the winter was about me. I dressed quickly, descended on the other side of the rock, and wandered again on the sands to seaward of the breakwater, which lay above, looking dry and weary, and worn with years of contest with the waves, which had at length withdrawn defeated to their own country,

and left it as if to victory and a useless age of peace. How different was the scene when a raving mountain of water filled all the hollow where I now wandered, and rushed over the top of that mole now so high above me; and I had to cling to its stones to keep me from being carried off like a bit of floating sea-weed! This was the loveliest and strangest part of the shore. Several long low ridges of rock, of whose existence I scarcely knew, worn to a level with the sand, hollowed and channelled with the terrible run of the tide across them, and looking like the old and outworn cheek-teeth of some awful beast of prey, stretched out seawards. Here and there amongst them rose a well-known rock, but now so changed in look by being lifted all the height between the base on the waters, and the second base in the sand, that I wondered at each, walking round and viewing it on all sides. It seemed almost a fresh growth out of the garden of the shore, with uncouth hollows around its fungous root, and a forsaken air about its brows as it stood in the dry sand and looked seaward. But what made the chief delight of the spot, closed in by rocks from the open sands, was the multitude of fairy rivers that flowed across it to the sea. The gladness these streams gave me I cannot communicate. The tide had filled thousands of hollows in the breakwater, hundreds of cracked basins in the rocks, huge sponges of sand; from all of which—from cranny and crack, and oozing sponge—the water flowed in restricted haste back, back to the sea, tumbling in tiny cataracts down the faces of the rocks, bubbling from their roots as from wells, gathering in tanks of sand, and overflowing in broad shallow streams, curving and sweeping in their sandy channels, just like, the great rivers of a continent;—here spreading into smooth silent lakes and reaches, here babbling along in ripples and waves innumerable —flowing, flowing, to lose their small beings in the same ocean that met on the other side the waters of the Mississippi, the Orinoco, the Amazon. All their channels were of golden sand, and the golden sunlight was above and through and in them all: gold and gold met, with the waters between. And what gave an added life to their motion was, that all the ripples made shadows on the clear yellow below them. The eye could not see the rippling on the surface; but the sun saw it, and drew it in multitudinous shadowy motion upon the sand, with the play of a thousand fancies of gold burnished and dead, of sunlight and yellow, trembling, melting, curving, blending, vanishing ever, ever renewed. It was as if all the water-marks upon a web of golden silk had been set in wildest yet most graceful curvilinear motion by the breath of a hundred playful zephyrs. My eye could not be filled with seeing. I stood in speechless delight for a while, gazing at the "endless ending" which was "the humour of the game," and thinking how in all God's works the laws of beauty are wrought out in evanishment, in birth and death. There, there is no hoarding, but an ever-fresh creating, an eternal flow of life from the heart of the All-beautiful. Hence even the heart of man cannot hoard. His brain or his hand may gather into its box and hoard; but the moment the thing has passed into the box, the heart has lost it and is hungry again. If man would *have,* it is the giver he must have; the eternal, the original, the ever-outpouring is alone within his reach; the everlasting *creation* is his heritage. Therefore all that he makes must be free to come and go through the heart of his child; he can enjoy it only as it passes, can enjoy only its life, its soul, its vision, its meaning, not itself. To hoard rubies and sapphires is as useless and hopeless for the heart, as if I were to attempt to hoard this marvel of sand and water and sunlight in the same iron chest with the musty deeds of my wife's inheritance.

"Father," I murmured half aloud, "thou alone art, and I am because thou art. Thy will shall be mine."

I know that I must have spoken aloud, because I remember the start of consciousness and discomposure occasioned by the voice of Percivale greeting me.

"I beg your pardon," he added; "I did not mean to startle you, Mr. Walton. I thought you were only looking at Nature's childplay—not thinking."

"I know few things *more* fit to set one thinking than what you have very well called Nature's childplay," I returned. "Is Nature very heartless now, do you think, to go on with this kind of thing at our feet, when away up yonder lies the awful London, with so many sores festering in her heart?"

"You must answer your own question, Mr. Walton. You know I cannot. I confess I feel the difficulty deeply. I will go further, and confess that the discrepancy makes me doubt many things I would gladly believe. I know *you* are able to distinguish between a glad unbelief and a sorrowful doubt."

"Else were I unworthy of the humblest place in the kingdom—unworthy to be a doorkeeper in the house of my God," I answered, and recoiled from the sound of my own words; for they seemed to imply that I believed myself worthy of the position I occupied. I hastened to correct them: "But do not mistake my thoughts," I said; "I do not dream of worthiness in the way of honour—only of fitness for the work to be done. For that I think God has fitted me in some measure. The doorkeeper's office may be given him, not because he has done some great deed worthy of the honour, but because he can sweep the porch and scour the threshold, and will, in the main, try to keep them clean. That is all the worthiness I dare to claim, even to hope that I possess."

"No one who knows you can mistake your words, except wilfully," returned Percivale courteously.

"Thank you," I said. "Now I will just ask you, in reference to the contrast between human life and nature, how you will go back to your work in London, after seeing all this child's and other play of Nature? Suppose you had had nothing here but rain and high winds and sea-fogs, would you have been better fitted for doing something to comfort those who know nothing of such influences than you will be now? One of the most important qualifications of a sick-nurse is a ready smile. A long-faced nurse in a sickroom is a visible embodiment and presence of the disease against which the eager life of the patient is fighting in agony. Such ought to be banished, with their black dresses and their mourning-shop looks, from every sick-chamber, and permitted to minister only to the dead, who do not mind looks. With what a power of life and hope does a woman—young or old I do not care—with a face of the morning, a dress like the spring, a bunch of wild flowers in her hand, with the dew upon them, and perhaps in her eyes too (I don't object to that—that is sympathy, not the worship of darkness),—with what a message from nature and life does she, looking death in the face with a smile, dawn upon the vision of the invalid! She brings a little health, a little strength to fight, a little hope to endure, actually lapt in the folds of her gracious garments; for the soul itself can do more than any medicine, if it be fed with the truth of life."

"But are you not—I beg your pardon for interposing on your eloquence with dull objection," said Percivale—"are you not begging all the question? *Is* life such an affair of sunshine and gladness?"

"If life is not, then I confess all this show of nature is worse than vanity—it is a vile mockery. Life is gladness; it is the death in it that makes the misery. We call life-in-death life, and hence the mistake. If gladness were not at the root, whence its opposite sorrow, against which we arise, from which we recoil, with which we fight? We recognise it as death—the contrary of life. There could be no sorrow but for a recognition of primordial bliss. This in us that fights must be life. It is of the nature of light, not of darkness; darkness is nothing until the light comes. This very childplay, as you call it, of Nature, is her assertion of the secret that life is the deepest, that life shall conquer death. Those who believe this must bear the good news to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death. Our Lord has conquered death—yea, the moral death that he called the world; and now, having sown the seed of light, the harvest is springing in human hearts, is springing in this dance of radiance, and will grow and grow until the hearts of the children of the kingdom shall frolic in the sunlight of the Father's presence. Nature has God at her heart; she is but the garment of the Invisible. God wears his singing robes in a day like this, and says to his children, 'Be not afraid: your brothers and sisters up there in London are in my hands; go and help them. I am with you. Bear to them the message of joy. Tell them to be of good cheer: I have overcome the world. Tell them to endure hunger, and not sin; to endure passion, and not yield; to admire, and not desire. Sorrow and pain are serving my ends; for by them will I slay sin; and save my children.'"

"I wish I could believe as you do, Mr. Walton."

"I wish you could. But God will teach you, if you are willing to be taught."

"I desire the truth, Mr. Walton."

"God bless you! God is blessing you," I said.

"Amen," returned Percivale devoutly; and we strolled away together in silence towards the cliffs.

The recession of the tide allowed us to get far enough away from the face of the rocks to see the general effect. With the lisping of the inch-deep wavelets at our heels we stood and regarded the worn yet defiant, the wasted and jagged yet reposeful face of the guardians of the shore.

"Who could imagine, in weather like this, and with this baby of a tide lying behind us, low at our feet, and shallow as the water a schoolboy pours upon his slate to wash it withal, that those grand cliffs before us bear on their front the scars and dints of centuries, of chiliads of stubborn resistance, of passionate contest with this same creature that is at this moment unable to rock the cradle of an infant? Look behind you, at your feet, Mr. Percivale; look before you at the chasms, rents, caves, and hollows of those rocks."

"I wish you were a painter, Mr. Walton," he said.

"I wish I were," I returned. "At least I know I should rejoice in it, if it had been given me to be one. But why do you say so now?"

"Because you have always some individual predominating idea, which would give interpretation to Nature while it gave harmony, reality, and individuality to your representation of her."

"I know what you mean," I answered; "but I have no gift whatever in that direction. I have no idea of drawing, or of producing the effects of light and shade; though I think I have a little notion of colour—perhaps about as much as the little London boy, who stopped a friend of mine once to ask the way to the field where the buttercups grew, had of nature."

"I wish I could ask your opinion of some of my pictures."

"That I should never presume to give. I could only tell you what they made me feel, or perhaps only think. Some day I may have the pleasure of looking at them."

"May I offer you my address?" he said, and took a card from his pocket-book. "It is a poor place, but if you should happen to think of me when you are next in London, I shall be honoured by your paying me a visit."

"I shall be most happy," I returned, taking his card.—"Did it ever occur to you, in reference to the subject we were upon a few minutes ago, how little you can do without shadow in making a picture?"

"Little indeed," answered Percivale. "In fact, it would be no picture at all."

"I doubt if the world would fare better without its shadows."

"But it would be a poor satisfaction, with regard to the nature of God, to be told that he allowed evil for artistic purposes."

"It would indeed, if you regard the world as a picture. But if you think of his art as expended, not upon the making of a history or a drama, but upon the making of an individual, a being, a character, then I think a great part of the difficulty concerning the existence of evil which oppresses you will vanish. So long as a creature has not sinned, sin is possible to him. Does it seem inconsistent with the character of God that in order that sin should become impossible he should allow sin to come? that, in order that his creatures should choose the good and refuse the evil, in order that they might become such, with their whole nature infinitely enlarged, as to turn from sin with a perfect repugnance of the will, he should allow them to fall? that, in order that, from being sweet childish children, they should become noble, child-like men and women, he should let them try to walk alone? Why should he not allow the possible in order that it should become impossible? for possible it would ever have been, even in the midst of all the blessedness, until it had been, and had been thus destroyed. Thus sin is slain, uprooted. And the war must ever exist, it seems to me, where there is creation still going on. How could I be content to guard my children so that they should never have temptation, knowing that in all probability they would fail if at any moment it should cross their path? Would the deepest

communion of father and child ever be possible between us? Evil would ever seem to be in the child, so long as it was possible it should be there developed. And if this can be said for the existence of moral evil, the existence of all other evil becomes a comparative trifle; nay, a positive good, for by this the other is combated."

"I think I understand you," returned Percivale. "I will think over what you have said. These are very difficult questions."

"Very. I don't think argument is of much use about them, except as it may help to quiet a man's uneasiness a little, and so give his mind peace to think about duty. For about the doing of duty there can be no question, once it is seen. And the doing of duty is the shortest—in very fact, the only way into the light."

As we spoke, we had turned from the cliffs, and wandered back across the salt streams to the sands beyond. From the direction of the house came a little procession of servants, with Walter at their head, bearing the preparations for our dinner—over the gates of the lock, down the sides of the embankment of the canal, and across the sands, in the direction of the children, who were still playing merrily.

"Will you join our early dinner, which is to be out of doors, as you see, somewhere hereabout on the sands?" I said.

"I shall be delighted," he answered, "if you will let me be of some use first. I presume you mean to bring your invalid out."

"Yes; and you shall help me to carry her, if you will."

"That is what I hoped," said Percivale; and we went together towards the parsonage.

As we approached, I saw Wynnie sitting at the drawing-room window; but when we entered the room, she was gone. My wife was there, however.

"Where is Wynnie?" I asked.

"She saw you coming," she answered, "and went to get Connie ready; for I guessed Mr. Percivale had come to help you to carry her out."

But I could not help doubting there might be more than that in Wynnie's disappearance. "What if she should have fallen in love with him," I thought, "and he should never say a word on the subject? That would be dreadful for us all."

They had been repeatedly but not very much together of late, and I was compelled to allow to myself that if they did fall in love with each other it would be very natural on both sides, for there was evidently a great mental resemblance between them, so that they could not help sympathising with each other's peculiarities. And anyone could see what a fine couple they would make.

Wynnie was much taller than Connie—almost the height of her mother. She had a very fair skin, and brown hair, a broad forehead, a wise, thoughtful, often troubled face, a mouth that seldom smiled, but on which a smile seemed always asleep, and round soft cheeks that dimpled like water when she did smile. I have described Percivale before. Why should not two such walk together along the path to the gates of the light? And yet I could not help some anxiety. I did not know anything of his history. I had no testimony concerning him from anyone that knew him. His past life was a blank to me; his means of livelihood probably insufficient—certainly, I judged, precarious; and his position in society—but there I checked myself: I had had enough of that kind of thing already. I would not willingly offend in that worldliness again. The God of the whole earth could not choose that I should look at such works of his hands after that fashion. And I was his servant—not Mammon's or Belial's.

All this passed through my mind in about three turns of the winnowing-fan of thought. Mr. Percivale had begun talking to my wife, who took no pains to conceal that his presence was pleasant to her, and I went upstairs, almost unconsciously, to Connie's room.

When I opened the door, forgetting to announce my approach as I ought to have done, I saw Wynnie leaning over Connie, and Connie's arm round her waist. Wynnie started back, and Connie

gave a little cry, for the jerk thus occasioned had hurt her. Wynnie had turned her head away, but turned it again at Connie's cry, and I saw a tear on her face.

"My darlings, I beg your pardon," I said. "It was very stupid of me not to knock at the door."

Connie looked up at me with large resting eyes, and said—

"It's nothing, papa, Wynnie is in one of her gloomy moods, and didn't want you to see her crying. She gave me a little pull, that was all. It didn't hurt me much, only I'm such a goose! I'm in terror before the pain comes. Look at me," she added, seeing, doubtless, some perturbation on my countenance, "I'm all right now." And she smiled in my face perfectly.

I turned to Wynnie, put my arm about her, kissed her cheek, and left the room. I looked round at the door, and saw that Connie was following me with her eyes, but Wynnie's were hidden in her handkerchief.

I went back to the drawing-room, and in a few minutes Walter came to announce that dinner was about to be served. The same moment Wynnie came to say that Connie was ready. She did not lift her eyes, or approach to give Percivale any greeting, but went again as soon as she had given her message. I saw that he looked first concerned and then thoughtful.

"Come, Mr. Percivale," I said; and he followed me up to Connie's room.

Wynnie was not there; but Connie lay, looking lovely, all ready for going. We lifted her, and carried her by the window out on the down, for the easiest way, though the longest, was by the path to the breakwater, along its broad back and down from the end of it upon the sands. Before we reached the breakwater, I found that Wynnie was following behind us. We stopped in the middle of it, and set Connie down, as if I wanted to take breath. But I had thought of something to say to her, which I wanted Wynnie to hear without its being addressed to her.

"Do you see, Connie," I said, "how far off the water is?"

"Yes, papa; it is a long way off. I wish I could get up and run down to it."

"You can hardly believe that all between, all those rocks, and all that sand, will be covered before sunset."

"I know it will be. But it doesn't *look* likely, does it, papa!"

"Not the least likely, my dear. Do you remember that stormy night when I came through your room to go out for a walk in the dark?"

"Remember it, papa? I cannot forget it. Every time I hear the wind blowing when I wake in the night I fancy you are out in it, and have to wake myself up' quite to get rid of the thought."

"Well, Connie, look down into the great hollow there, with rocks and sand at the bottom of it, stretching far away."

"Yes, papa."

"Now look over the side of your litter. You see those holes all about between the stones?"

"Yes, papa."

"Well, one of those little holes saved my life that night, when the great gulf there was full of huge mounds of roaring water, which rushed across this breakwater with force enough to sweep a whole cavalry regiment off its back."

"Papa!" exclaimed Connie, turning pale.

Then first I told her all the story. And Wynnie listened behind.

"Then I *was* right in being frightened, papa!" cried Connie, bursting into tears; for since her accident she could not well command her feelings.

"You were right in trusting in God, Connie."

"But you might have been drowned, papa!" she sobbed.

"Nobody has a right to say that anything might have been other than what has been. Before a thing has happened we can say might or might not; but that has to do only with our ignorance. Of course I am not speaking of things wherein we ought to exercise will and choice. That is *our* department. But this does not look like that now, does it? Think what a change—from the dark night

and the roaring water to this fulness of sunlight and the bare sands, with the water lisping on their edge away there in the distance. Now, I want you to think that in life troubles will come which look as if they would never pass away; the night and the storm look as if they would last for ever; but the calm and the morning cannot be stayed; the storm in its very nature is transient. The effort of Nature, as that of the human heart, ever is to return to its repose, for God is Peace."

"But if you will excuse me, Mr. Walton," said Percivale, "you can hardly expect experience to be of use to any but those who have had it. It seems to me that its influences cannot be imparted."

"That depends on the amount of faith in those to whom its results are offered. Of course, as experience, it can have no weight with another; for it is no longer experience. One remove, and it ceases. But faith in the person who has experienced can draw over or derive—to use an old Italian word—some of its benefits to him who has the faith. Experience may thus, in a sense, be accumulated, and we may go on to fresh experience of our own. At least I can hope that the experience of a father may take the form of hope in the minds of his daughters. Hope never hurt anyone, never yet interfered with duty; nay, always strengthens to the performance of duty, gives courage, and clears the judgment. St. Paul says we are saved by hope. Hope is the most rational thing in the universe. Even the ancient poets, who believed it was delusive, yet regarded it as an antidote given by the mercy of the gods against some, at least, of the ills of life."

"But they counted it delusive. A wise man cannot consent to be deluded."

"Assuredly not. The sorest truth rather than a false hope! But what is a false hope? Only one that ought not to be fulfilled. The old poets could give themselves little room for hope, and less for its fulfilment; for what were the gods in whom they believed—I cannot say in whom they trusted? Gods who did the best their own poverty of being was capable of doing for men when they gave them the *illusion* of hope. But I see they are waiting for us below. One thing I repeat—the waves that foamed across the spot where we now stand are gone away, have sunk and vanished."

"But they will come again, papa," faltered Wynnie.

"And God will come with them, my love," I said, as we lifted the litter.

In a few minutes more we were all seated on the sand around a table-cloth spread upon it. I shall never forgot the peace and the light outside and in, as far as I was concerned at least, and I hope the others too, that afternoon. The tide had turned, and the waves were creeping up over the level, soundless almost as thought; but it would be time to go home long before they had reached us. The sun was in the western half of the sky, and now and then a breath of wind came from the sea, with a slight saw-edge in it, but not enough to hurt. Connie could stand much more in that way now. And when I saw how she could move herself on her couch, and thought how much she had improved since first she was laid upon it, hope for her kept fluttering joyously in my heart. I could not help fancying even that I saw her move her legs a little; but I could not be in the least sure; and she, if she did move them, was clearly unconscious of it. Charles and Harry were every now and then starting up from their dinner and running off with a shout, to return with apparently increased appetite for the rest of it; and neither their mother nor I cared to interfere with the indecorum. Dora alone took it upon her to rebuke them. Wynnie was very silent, but looked more cheerful. Connie seemed full of quiet bliss. My wife's face was a picture of heavenly repose. The old nurse was walking about with the baby, occasionally with one hand helping the other servants to wait upon us. They, too, seemed to have a share in the gladness of the hour, and, like Ariel, did their spiriting gently.

"This is the will of God," I said, after the things were removed, and we had sat for a few moments in silence.

"What is the will of God, husband?" asked Ethelwyn.

"Why, this, my love," I answered; "this living air, and wind, and sea, and light, and land all about us; this consenting, consorting harmony of Nature, that mirrors a like peace in our souls. The perfection of such visions, the gathering of them all in one was, is, I should say, in the face of Christ Jesus. You will say that face was troubled sometimes. Yes, but with a trouble that broke not the music,

but deepened the harmony. When he wept at the grave of Lazarus, you do not think it was for Lazarus himself, or for his own loss of him, that he wept? That could not be, seeing he had the power to call him back when he would. The grief was for the poor troubled hearts left behind, to whom it was so dreadful because they had not faith enough in his Father, the God of life and love, who was looking after it all, full of tenderness and grace, with whom Lazarus was present and blessed. It was the aching, loving heart of humanity for which he wept, that needed God so awfully, and could not yet trust in him. Their brother was only hidden in the skirts of their Father's garment, but they could not believe that: they said he was dead—lost—away—all gone, as the children say. And it was so sad to think of a whole world full of the grief of death, that he could not bear it without the human tears to help his heart, as they help ours. It was for our dark sorrows that he wept. But the peace could be no less plain on the face that saw God. Did you ever think of that wonderful saying: 'Again a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father'? The heart of man would have joined the 'because I go to the Father' with the former result—the not seeing of him. The heart of man is not able, without more and more light, to understand that all vision is in the light of the Father. Because Jesus went to the Father, therefore the disciples saw him tenfold more. His body no longer in their eyes, his very being, his very self was in their hearts—not in their affections only—in their spirits, their heavenly consciousness."

As I said this, a certain hymn, for which I had and have an especial affection, came into my mind, and, without prologue or introduction, I repeated it:

"If I Him but have,
If he be but mine,
If my heart, hence to the grave,
Ne'er forgets his love divine—
Know I nought of sadness,
Feel I nought but worship, love, and gladness.

If I Him but have,
Glad with all I part;
Follow on my pilgrim staff
My Lord only, with true heart;
Leave them, nothing saying,
On broad, bright, and crowded highways straying.

If I Him but have,
Glad I fall asleep;
Aye the flood that his heart gave
Strength within my heart shall keep,
And with soft compelling
Make it tender, through and through it swelling.

If I Him but have,
Mine the world I hail!
Glad as cherub smiling grave,
Holding back the virgin's veil.
Sunk and lost in seeing,
Earthly fears have died from all my being.

Where I have but Him

Is my Fatherland;
And all gifts and graces come
Heritage into my hand:
Brothers long deplored
I in his disciples find restored."

"What a lovely hymn, papa!" exclaimed Connie. She could always speak more easily than either her mother or sister. "Who wrote it?"

"Friedrich von Hardenberg, known, where he is known, as Novalis."

"But he must have written it in German. Did you translate it?"

"Yes. You will find, I think, that I have kept form, thought, and feeling, however I may have failed in making an English poem of it."

"O, you dear papa, it is lovely! Is it long since you did it?"

"Years before you were born, Connie."

"To think of you having lived so long, and being one of us!" she returned. "Was he a Roman Catholic, papa?"

"No, he was a Moravian. At least, his parents were. I don't think he belonged to any section of the church in particular."

"But oughtn't he, papa?"

"Certainly not, my dear, except he saw good reason for it. But what is the use of asking such questions, after a hymn like that?"

"O, I didn't think anything bad, papa, I assure you. It was only that I wanted to know more about him."

The tears were in her eyes, and I was sorry I had treated as significant what was really not so. But the constant tendency to consider Christianity as associated of necessity with this or that form of it, instead of as simply obedience to Christ, had grown more and more repulsive to me as I had grown myself, for it always seemed like an insult to my brethren in Christ; hence the least hint of it in my children I was too ready to be down upon like a most unchristian ogre. I took her hand in mine, and she was comforted, for she saw in my face that I was sorry, and yet she could see that there was reason at the root of my haste.

"But," said Wynnie, who, I thought afterwards, must have strengthened herself to speak from the instinctive desire to show Percivale how far she was from being out of sympathy with what he might suppose formed a barrier between him and me—"But," she said, "the lovely feeling in that poem seems to me, as in all the rest of such poems, to belong only to the New Testament, and have nothing to do with this world round about us. These things look as if they were only for drawing and painting and being glad in, not as if they had relations with all those awful and solemn things. As soon as I try to get the two together, I lose both of them."

"That is because the human mind must begin with one thing and grow to the rest. At first, Christianity seemed to men to have only to do with their conscience. That was the first relation, of course. But even with art it was regarded as having no relation except for the presentment of its history. Afterwards, men forgot the conscience almost in trying to make Christianity comprehensible to the understanding. Now, I trust, we are beginning to see that Christianity is everything or nothing. Either the whole is a lovely fable setting forth the loftiest longing of the human soul after the vision of the divine, or it is such a fact as is the heart not only of theology so called, but of history, politics, science, and art. The treasures of the Godhead must be hidden in him, and therefore by him only can be revealed. This will interpret all things, or it has not yet been. Teachers of men have not taught this, because they have not seen it. If we do not find him in nature, we may conclude either that we do not understand the expression of nature, or have mistaken ideas or poor feelings about him. It is one great business in our life to find the interpretation which will render this harmony visible. Till

we find it, we have not seen him to be all in all. Recognising a discord when they touched the notes of nature and society, the hermits forsook the instrument altogether, and contented themselves with a partial symphony—lofty, narrow, and weak. Their example, more or less, has been followed by almost all Christians. Exclusion is so much the easier way of getting harmony in the orchestra than study, insight, and interpretation, that most have adopted it. It is for us, and all who have hope in the infinite God, to widen its basis as we may, to search and find the true tone and right idea, place, and combination of instruments, until to our enraptured ear they all, with one voice of multiform yet harmonious utterance, declare the glory of God and of his Christ."

"A grand idea," said Percivale.

"Therefore likely to be a true one," I returned. "People find it hard to believe grand things; but why? If there be a God, is it not likely everything is grand, save where the reflection of his great thoughts is shaken, broken, distorted by the watery mirrors of our unbelieving and troubled souls? Things ought to be grand, simple, and noble. The ages of eternity will go on showing that such they are and ever have been. God will yet be victorious over our wretched unbeliefs."

I was sitting facing the sea, but with my eyes fixed on the sand, boring holes in it with my stick, for I could talk better when I did not look my familiar faces in the face. I did not feel thus in the pulpit; there I sought the faces of my flock, to assist me in speaking to their needs. As I drew to the close of my last monologue, a colder and stronger blast from the sea blew in my face. I lifted my head, and saw that the tide had crept up a long way, and was coming in fast. A luminous fog had sunk down over the western horizon, and almost hidden the sun, had obscured the half of the sea, and destroyed all our hopes of a sunset. A certain veil as of the commonplace, like that which so often settles down over the spirit of man after a season of vision and glory and gladness, had dropped over the face of Nature. The wind came in little bitter gusts across the dull waters. It was time to lift Connie and take her home.

This was the last time we ate together on the open shore.

CHAPTER III.
A PASTORAL VISIT

The next morning rose neither "cherchef't in a comely cloud" nor "roab'd in flames and amber light," but covered all in a rainy mist, which the wind mingled with salt spray torn from the tops of the waves. Every now and then the wind blew a blastful of larger drops against the window of my study with an angry clatter and clash, as if daring me to go out and meet its ire. The earth was very dreary, for there were no shadows anywhere. The sun was hustled away by the crowding vapours; and earth, sea, and sky were possessed by a gray spirit that threatened wrath. The breakfast-bell rang, and I went down, expecting to find my Wynnie, who was always down first to make the tea, standing at the window with a sad face, giving fit response to the aspect of nature without, her soul talking with the gray spirit. I did find her at the window, looking out upon the restless tossing of the waters, but with no despondent answer to the trouble of nature. On the contrary, her cheek, though neither rosy nor radiant, looked luminous, and her eyes were flashing out upon the ebb-tide which was sinking away into the troubled ocean beyond. Does my girl-reader expect me to tell her next that something had happened? that Percivale had said something to her? or that, at least, he had just passed the window, and given her a look which she might interpret as she pleased? I must disappoint her. It was nothing of the sort. I knew the heart and feeling of my child. It was only that kind nature was in sympathy with her mood. The girl was always more peaceful in storm than in sunshine. I remembered that now. A movement of life instantly began in her when the obligation of gladness had departed with the light. Her own being arose to provide for its own needs. She could smile now when nature required from her no smile in response to hers. And I could not help saying to myself, "She must marry a poor man some day; she is a creature of the north, and not of the south; the hot sun of prosperity would wither her up. Give her a bleak hill-side, and a glint or two of sunshine between the hailstorms, and she will live and grow; give her poverty and love, and life will be interesting to her as a romance; give her money and position, and she will grow dull and haughty. She will believe in nothing that poet can sing or architect build. She will, like Cassius, scorn her spirit for being moved to smile at anything."

I had stood regarding her for a moment. She turned and saw me, and came forward with her usual morning greeting.

"I beg your pardon, papa: I thought it was Walter."

"I am glad to see a smile on your face, my love."

"Don't think me very disagreeable, papa. I know I am a trouble to you. But I am a trouble to myself first. I fear I have a discontented mind and a complaining temper. But I do try, and I will try hard to overcome it."

"It will not get the better of you, so long as you do the duty of the moment. But I think, as I told you before, that you are not very well, and that your indisposition is going to do you good by making you think about some things you are ready to think about, but which you might have banished if you had been in good health and spirits. You are feeling as you never felt before, that you need a presence in your soul of which at least you haven't enough yet. But I preached quite enough to you yesterday, and I won't go on the same way to-day again. Only I wanted to comfort you. Come and give me my breakfast."

"You do comfort me, papa," she answered, approaching the table. "I know I don't show what I feel as I ought, but you do comfort me much. Don't you like a day like this, papa?"

"I do, my dear. I always did. And I think you take after me in that, as you do in a good many things besides. That is how I understand you so well."

"Do I really take after you, papa? Are you sure that you understand me so well?" she asked, brightening up.

"I know I do," I returned, replying to her last question.

"Better than I do myself?" she asked with an arch smile.

"Considerably, if I mistake not," I answered.

"How delightful! To think that I am understood even when I don't understand myself!"

"But even if I am wrong, you are yet understood. The blessedness of life is that we can hide nothing from God. If we could hide anything from God, that hidden thing would by and by turn into a terrible disease. It is the sight of God that keeps and makes things clean. But as we are both, by mutual confession, fond of this kind of weather, what do you say to going out with me? I have to visit a sick woman."

"You don't mean Mrs. Coombes, papa?"

"No, my dear. I did not hear she was ill."

"O, I daresay it is nothing much. Only old nursey said yesterday she was in bed with a bad cold, or something of that sort."

"We'll call and inquire as we pass,—that is, if you are inclined to go with me."

"How can you put an *if* to that, papa?"

"I have just had a message from that cottage that stands all alone on the corner of Mr. Barton's farm—over the cliff, you know—that the woman is ill, and would like to see me. So the sooner we start the better."

"I shall have done my breakfast in five minutes, papa. O, here's mamma!—Mamma, I'm going out for a walk in the rain with papa. You won't mind, will you?"

"I don't think it will do you any harm, my dear. That's all I mind, you know. It was only once or twice when you were not well that I objected to it. I quite agree with your papa, that only lazy people are *glad* to stay in-doors when it rains."

"And it does blow so delightfully!" said Wynnie, as she left the room to put on her long cloak and her bonnet.

We called at the sexton's cottage, and found him sitting gloomily by the low window, looking seaward.

"I hope your wife is not *very* poorly, Coombes," I said.

"No, sir. She be very comfortable in bed. Bed's not a bad place to be in in such weather," he answered, turning again a dreary look towards the Atlantic. "Poor things!"

"What a passion for comfort you have, Coombes! How does that come about, do you think?"

"I suppose I was made so, sir."

"To be sure you were. God made you so."

"Surely, sir. Who else?"

"Then I suppose he likes making people comfortable if he makes people like to be comfortable."

"It du look likely enough, sir."

"Then when he takes it out of your hands, you mustn't think he doesn't look after the people you would make comfortable if you could."

"I must mind my work, you know, sir."

"Yes, surely. And you mustn't want to take his out of his hands, and go grumbling as if you would do it so much better if he would only let you get *your* hand to it."

"I daresay you be right, sir," he said. "I must just go and have a look about, though. Here's Agnes. She'll tell you about mother."

He took his spade from the corner, and went out. He often brought his tools into the cottage. He had carved the handle of his spade all over with the names of the people he had buried.

"Tell your mother, Agnes, that I will call in the evening and see her, if she would like to see me. We are going now to see Mrs. Stokes. She is very poorly, I hear."

"Let us go through the churchyard, papa," said Wynnie, "and see what the old man is doing."

"Very well, my dear. It is only a few steps round."

"Why do you humour the sexton's foolish fancy so much, papa? It is such nonsense! You taught us it was, surely, in your sermon about the resurrection?"

"Most certainly, my dear. But it would be of no use to try to get it out of his head by any argument. He has a kind of craze in that direction. To get people's hearts right is of much more importance than convincing their judgments. Right judgment will follow. All such fixed ideas should be encountered from the deepest grounds of truth, and not from the outsides of their relations. Coombes has to be taught that God cares for the dead more than he does, and *therefore* it is unreasonable for him to be anxious about them."

When we reached the churchyard we found the old man kneeling on a grave before its headstone. It was a very old one, with a death's-head and cross-bones carved upon the top of it in very high relief. With his pocket-knife he was removing the lumps of green moss out of the hollows of the eyes of the carven skull. We did not interrupt him, but walked past with a nod.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.