GEORGE MACDONALD

ADELA CATHCART, VOLUME 1

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MacDonald G.

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Содержание

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Chapter I

Christmas Eve

It was the afternoon of Christmas Eve, sinking towards the night. All day long the wintry light had been diluted with fog, and now the vanguard of the darkness coming to aid the mist, the dying day was well nigh smothered between them. When I looked through the window, it was into a vague and dim solidification of space, a mysterious region in which awful things might be going on, and out of which anything might come; but out of which nothing came in the meantime, except small sparkles of snow, or rather ice, which as we swept rapidly onwards, and the darkness deepened, struck faster and faster against the weather-windows. For we, that is, myself and a fellow-passenger, of whom I knew nothing yet but the waistcoat and neckcloth, having caught a glimpse of them as he searched for an obstinate railway-ticket, were in a railway-carriage, darting along, at an all but frightful rate, northwards from London.

Being, the sole occupants of the carriage, we had made the most of it, like Englishmen, by taking seats diagonally opposite to each other, laying our heads in the corners, and trying to go to sleep. But for me it was of no use to try any longer. Not that I had anything particular on my mind or spirits; but a man cannot always go to sleep at spare moments. If anyone can, let him consider it a great gift, and make good use of it accordingly; that is, by going to sleep on every such opportunity.

As I, however, could not sleep, much as I should have enjoyed it, I proceeded to occupy my very spare time with building, up what I may call a conjectural mould, into which the face, dress, carriage, &c., of my companion would fit. I had already discovered that he was a clergyman; but this added to my difficulties in constructing the said mould. For, theoretically, I had a great dislike to clergymen; having, hitherto, always found that the *clergy* absorbed the *man*; and that the *cloth*, as they called it even themselves, would be no bad epithet for the individual, as well as the class. For all clergymen whom I had yet met, regarded mankind and their interests solely from the clerical point of view, seeming far more desirous that a man should be a good church man, as they called it, than that he should love God. Hence, there was always an indescribable and, to me, unpleasant odour of their profession about them. If they knew more concerning the *life* of the world than other men, why should everything they said remind one of mustiness and mildew? In a word, why were they not men at worst, when at best they ought to be more of men than other men?—And here lay the difficulty: by no effort could I get the face before me to fit into the clerical mould which I had all ready in my own mind for it. That was, at all events, the face of a man, in spite of waistcoat and depilation. I was not even surprised when, all at once, he sat upright in his seat, and asked me if I would join him in a cigar. I gladly consented. And here let me state a fact, which added then to my interest in my fellow-passenger, and will serve now to excuse the enormity of smoking in a railway carriage. We were going to the same place—we must be; and nobody would enter that carriage to-night, but the man who had to clean it. For, although we were shooting along at a terrible rate, the train would not stop to set us down, but would cast us loose a mile from our station; and some minutes after it had shot by like an infernal comet of darkness, our carriage would trot gently up to the platform, as if it had come from London all on its own hook—and thought nothing of it.

We were a long way yet, however, from our destination. The night grew darker and colder, and after the necessary unmuffling occasioned by the cigar process, we drew our wraps closer about us,

leaned back in our corners, and smoked away in silence; the red glow of our cigars serving to light the carriage nearly as well as the red nose of the neglected and half-extinguished lamp. For we were in a second-class carriage, a fact for which I leave the clergyman to apologize: it is nothing to me, for I am nobody.

But, after all, I fear I am unjust to the Railway Company, for there was light enough for me to see, and in some measure scrutinize, the face of my fellow-passenger. I could discern a strong chin, and good, useful jaws; with a firm-lipped mouth, and a nose more remarkable for quantity than disposition of mass, being rather low, and very thick. It was surmounted by two brilliant, kindly, black eyes. I lay in wait for his forehead, as if I had been a hunter, and he some peculiar animal that wanted killing right in the middle of it. But it was some time before I was gratified with a sight of it. I did see it, however, and I *was* gratified. For when he wanted to throw away the end of his cigar, finding his window immovable (the frosty wind that bore the snow-flakes blowing from that side), and seeing that I opened mine to accommodate him, he moved across, and, in so doing, knocked his hat against the roof. As he displaced, to replace it, I had my opportunity. It was a splendid forehead for size every way, but chiefly for breadth. A kind of rugged calm rested upon it—a suggestion of slumbering power, which it delighted me to contemplate. I felt that that was the sort of man to make a friend of, if one had the good luck to be able. But I did not yet make any advance towards further acquaintance.

My reader may, however, be desirous of knowing what kind of person is making so much use of the pronoun *I*. He may have the same curiosity to know his fellow-traveller over the region of these pages, that I had to see the forehead of the clergyman. I can at least prevent any further inconvenience from this possible curiosity, by telling him enough to destroy his interest in me.

I am an–; well, I suppose I *am* an old bachelor; not very far from fifty, in fact; old enough, at all events, to be able to take pleasure in watching without sharing; yet ready, notwithstanding, when occasion offers, to take any necessary part in what may be going on, I am able, as it were, to sit quietly alone, and look down upon life from a second-floor window, delighting myself with my own speculations, and weaving the various threads I gather, into webs of varying kind and quality. Yet, as I have already said in another form, I am not the last to rush down stairs and into the street, upon occasion of an accident or a row in it, or a conflagration next door. I may just mention, too, that having many years ago formed the Swedenborgian resolution of never growing old, I am as yet able to flatter myself that I am likely to keep it.

In proof of this, if further garrulity about myself can be pardoned, I may state that every year, as Christmas approaches, I begin to grow young again. At least I judge so from the fact that a strange, mysterious pleasure, well known to me by this time, though little understood and very varied, begins to glow in my mind with the first hint, come from what quarter it may, whether from the church service, or a bookseller's window, that the day of all the year is at hand—is climbing up from the under-world. I enjoy it like a child. I buy the Christmas number of every periodical I can lay my hands on, especially those that have pictures in them; and although I am not very fond of plum-pudding, I anticipate with satisfaction the roast beef and the old port that ought always to accompany it. And above all things, I delight in listening to stories, and sometimes in telling them.

It amuses me to find what a welcome nobody I am amongst young people; for they think I take no heed of them, and don't know what they are doing; when, all the time, I even know what they are thinking. They would wonder to know how often I feel exactly as they do; only I think the feeling is a more earnest and beautiful thing to me than it can be to them yet. If I see a child crowing in his mother's arms, I seem to myself to remember making precisely the same noise in my mother's arms. If I see a youth and a maiden looking into each other's eyes, I know what it means perhaps better than they do. But I say nothing. I do not even smile; for my face is puckered, and I have a weakness about the eyes. But all this will be proof enough that I have not grown very old, in any bad and to-be-avoided sense, at least.

And now all the glow of the Christmas time was at its height in my heart. For I was going to spend the Day, and a few weeks besides, with a very old friend of mine, who lived near the town at which we were about to arrive like a postscript.—Where could my companion be going? I wanted to know, because I hoped to meet him again somehow or other.

I ought to have told you, kind reader, that my name is Smith—actually *John* Smith; but I'm none the worse for that; and as I do not want to be distinguished much from other people, I do not feel it a hardship.

But where was my companion going? It could not be to my friend's; else I should have known something about him. It could hardly be to the clergyman's, because the vicarage was small, and there was a new curate coming with his wife, whom it would probably have to accommodate until their own house was ready. It could not be to the lawyer's on the hill, because there all were from home on a visit to their relations. It might be to Squire Vernon's, but he was the last man likely to ask a clergyman to visit him; nor would a clergyman be likely to find himself comfortable with the swearing old fox-hunter. The question must, then, for the present, remain unsettled.—So I left it, and, looking out of the window once more, buried myself in Christmas fancies.

It was now dark. We were the under half of the world. The sun was scorching and glowing on the other side, leaving us to night and frost. But the night and the frost wake the sunshine of a higher world in our hearts; and who cares for winter weather at Christmas?—I believe in the proximate correctness of the date of our Saviour's birth. I believe he always comes in winter. And then let Winter reign without: Love is king within; and Love is lord of the Winter.

How the happy fires were glowing everywhere! We shot past many a lighted cottage, and now and then a brilliant mansion. Inside both were hearts like our own, and faces like ours, with the red coming out on them, the red of joy, because it was Christmas. And most of them had some little feast *toward*. Is it vulgar, this feasting at Christmas? No. It is the Christmas feast that justifies all feasts, as the bread and wine of the Communion are the essence of all bread and wine, of all strength and rejoicing. If the Christianity of eating is lost—I will not say *forgotten*—the true type of eating is to be found at the dinner-hour in the Zoological Gardens. Certain I am, that but for the love which, ever revealing itself, came out brightest at that first Christmas time, there would be no feasting—nay no smiling; no world to go careering in joy about its central fire; no men and women upon it, to look up and rejoice.

"But you always look on the bright side of things."

No one spoke aloud; I heard the objection in my mind. Could it come from the mind of my friend—for so I already counted him—opposite to me? There was no need for that supposition—I had heard the objection too often in my ears. And now I answered it in set, though unspoken form.

"Yes," I said, "I do; for I keep in the light as much as I can. Let the old heathens count Darkness the womb of all things. I count Light the older, from the tread of whose feet fell the first shadow—and that was Darkness. Darkness exists but by the light, and for the light."

"But that is all mysticism. Look about you. The dark places of the earth are the habitations of cruelty. Men and women blaspheme God and die. How can this then be an hour for rejoicing?"

"They are in God's hands. Take from me my rejoicing, and I am powerless to help them. It shall not destroy the whole bright holiday to me, that my father has given my brother a beating. It will do him good. He needed it somehow.—He is looking after them."

Could I have spoken some of these words aloud? For the eyes of the clergyman were fixed upon me from his corner, as if he were trying to put off his curiosity with the sop of a probable conjecture about me.

"I fear he would think me a heathen," I said to myself. "But if ever there was humanity in a countenance, there it is."

It grew more and more pleasant to think of the bright fire and the cheerful room that awaited me. Nor was the idea of the table, perhaps already beginning to glitter with crystal and silver, altogether uninteresting to me. For I was growing hungry.

But the speed at which we were now going was quite comforting. I dropped into a reverie. I was roused from it by the sudden ceasing of the fierce oscillation, which had for some time been threatening to make a jelly of us. We were loose. In three minutes more we should be at Purleybridge.

And in three minutes more, we were at Purleybridge—the only passengers but one who arrived at the station that night. A servant was waiting for me, and I followed him through the booking-office to the carriage destined to bear me to *The Swanspond*, as my friend Colonel Cathcart's house was called.

As I stepped into the carriage, I saw the clergyman walk by, with his carpet-bag in his hand.

Now I knew Colonel Cathcart intimately enough to offer the use of his carriage to my late companion; but at the moment I was about to address him, the third passenger, of whom I had taken no particular notice, came between us, and followed me into the carriage. This occasioned a certain hesitation, with which I am only too easily affected; the footman shut the door; I caught one glimpse of the clergyman turning the corner of the station into a field-path; the horses made a scramble; and away I rode to the Swanspond, feeling as selfish as ten Pharisees. It is true, I had not spoken a word to him beyond accepting his invitation to smoke with him; and yet I felt almost sure that we should meet again, and that when we did, we should both be glad of it. And now he was carrying a carpet-bag, and I was seated in a carriage and pair!

It was far too dark for me to see what my new companion was like; but when the light from the colonel's hall-door flashed upon us as we drew up, I saw that he was a young man, with a certain expression in his face which a first glance might have taken for fearlessness and power of some sort, but which notwithstanding, I felt to be rather repellent than otherwise. The moment the carriage-door was opened, he called the servant by his name, saying,

"When the cart comes with the luggage, send mine up directly. Take that now."

And he handed him his dressing-bag.

He spoke in a self-approving tone, and with a drawl which I will not attempt to imitate, because I find all such imitation tends to caricature; and I want to be believed. Besides, I find the production of caricature has unfailingly a bad moral reaction upon myself. I daresay it is not so with others, but with that I have nothing to do: it is one of my weaknesses.

My worthy old friend, the colonel, met us in the hall—straight, broad-shouldered, and tall, with a severe military expression underlying the genuine hospitality of his countenance, as if he could not get rid of a sense of duty even when doing what he liked best. The door of the dining-room was partly open, and from it came the red glow of a splendid fire, the chink of encountering glass and metal, and, best of all, the pop of a cork.

"Would you like to go up-stairs, Smith, or will you have a glass of wine first?—How do you do, Percy?"

"Thank you; I'll go to my room at once," I said.

"You'll find a fire there, I know. Having no regiment now, I look after my servants. Mind you make use of them. I can't find enough of work for them."

He left me, and again addressed the youth, who had by this time got out of his great-coat, and, cold as it was, stood looking at his hands by the hall-lamp. As I moved away, I heard him say, in a careless tone,

"And how's Adela, uncle?"

The reply did not reach me, but I knew now who the young fellow was.

Hearing a kind of human grunt behind me, I turned and saw that I was followed by the butler; and, by a kind of intuition, I knew that this grunt was a remark, an inarticulate one, true, but not the

less to the point on that account. I knew that he had been in the dining-room by the pop I had heard; and I knew by the grunt that he had heard his master's observation about his servants.

"Come, Beeves," I said, "I don't want your help. You've got plenty to do, you know, at dinner-time; and your master is rather hard upon you—isn't he?"

I knew the man, of course.

"Well, Mr. Smith, master is the best master in the country, *he is*. But he don't know what work is, *he don't*."

"Well, go to your work, and never mind me. I know every turn in the house as well as yourself, Beeves."

"No, Mr. Smith; I'll attend to you, if *you* please. Mr. Percy will take care of *his*-self. There's no fear of him. But you're my business. You are sure to give a man a kind word who does his best to please you."

"Why, Beeves, I think that is the least a man can do."

"It's the most too, sir; and some people think it's too much."

I saw that the man was hurt, and sought to soothe him.

"You and I are old friends, at least, Beeves."

"Yes, Mr. Smith. Money won't do't, sir. My master gives good wages, and I'm quite independing of visitors. But when a gentleman says to me, 'Beeves, I'm obliged to you,' why then, Mr. Smith, you feels at one *and* the same time, that he's a gentleman, and that you aint a boot-jack or a coal-scuttle. It's the sentiman, Mr. Smith. If he despises us, why, we despises him. And we don't like waiting on a gentleman as aint a gentleman. Ring the bell, Mr. Smith, when you want anythink, and *I'll* attend to you."

He had been twenty years in the colonel's service. He was not an old soldier, yet had a thorough *esprit de corps*, looking, upon service as an honourable profession. In this he was not only right, but had a vast advantage over everybody whose profession is not sufficiently honourable for his ambition. All such must *feel* degraded. Beeves was fifty; and, happily for his opinion of his profession, had never been to London.

And the colonel was the best of masters; for because he ruled well, every word of kindness told. It is with servants as with children and with horses—it is of no use caressing them unless they know that you mean them to go.

When the dinner-bell rang, I proceeded to the drawing-room. The colonel was there, and I thought for a moment that he was alone. But I soon saw that a couch by the fire was occupied by his daughter, the Adela after whose health I had heard young Percy Cathcart inquiring. She was our hostess, for Mrs. Cathcart had been dead for many years, and Adela had been her only child. I approached to pay my respects, but as soon as I got near enough to see her face, I turned involuntarily to her father, and said,

"Cathcart, you never told me of this!"

He made me no reply; but I saw the long stern upper lip twitching convulsively. I turned again to Adela, who tried to smile—with precisely the effect of a momentary gleam of sunshine upon a cold, leafless, and wet landscape.

"Adela, my dear, what is the matter?"

"I don't know, uncle."

She had called me uncle, since ever she had begun to speak, which must have been nearly twenty years ago.

I stood and looked at her. Her face was pale and thin, and her eyes were large, and yet sleepy. I may say at once that she had dark eyes and a sweet face; and that is all the description I mean to give of her. I had been accustomed to see that face, if not rosy, yet plump and healthy; and those eyes with plenty of light for themselves, and some to spare for other people. But it was neither her wan

look nor her dull eyes that distressed me: it was the expression of her face. It was very sad to look at; but it was not so much sadness as utter and careless hopelessness that it expressed.

"Have you any pain, Adela?" I asked.

"No," she answered.

"But you feel ill?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I don't know."

And as she spoke, she tapped with one finger on the edge of the *couvre-pied* which was thrown over her, and gave a sigh as if her very heart was weary of everything.

"Shall you come down to dinner with us?"

"Yes, uncle; I suppose I must."

"If you would rather have your dinner sent up, my love—" began her father.

"Oh! no. It is all the same to me. I may as well go down."

My young companion of the carriage now entered, got up expensively.

He, too, looked shocked when he saw her.

"Why, Addie!" he said.

But she received him with perfect indifference, just lifting one cold hand towards his, and then letting it fall again where it had lain before. Percy looked a little mortified; in fact, more mortified now than sorry; turned away, and stared at the fire.

Every time I open my mouth in a drawing-room before dinner, I am aware of an amount of self-denial worthy of a forlorn hope. Yet the silence was so awkward now, that I felt I must make an effort to say something; and the more original the remark the better I felt it would be for us all. But, with the best intentions, all I could effect was to turn towards Mr. Percy and say,

"Rather cold for travelling, is it not?"

"Those foot-warmers are capital things, though," he answered. "Mine was jolly hot. Might have roasted a potato on it, by Jove!"

"I came in a second-class carriage," I replied; "and they are too cold to need a foot-warmer."

He gave a shrug with his shoulders, as if he had suddenly found himself in low company, and must make the best of it. But he offered no further remark.

Beeves announced dinner.

"Will you take Adela, Mr. Smith?" said the colonel.

"I think I won't go, after all, papa, if you don't mind. I don't want any dinner."

"Very well, my dear," began her father, but could not help showing his distress; perceiving which, Adela rose instantly from her couch, put her arm in his, and led the way to the dining-room. Percy and I followed.

"What can be the matter with the girl?" thought I. "She used to be merry enough. Some love affair, I shouldn't wonder. I've never heard of any. I know her father favours that puppy Percy; but I don't think she is dying for *him*."

It was the dreariest Christmas Eve I had ever spent. The fire was bright; the dishes were excellent; the wine was thorough; the host was hospitable; the servants were attentive; and yet the dinner was as gloomy as if we had all known it to be the last we should ever eat together. If a ghost had been sitting in its shroud at the head of the table, instead of Adela, it could hardly have cast a greater chill over the guests. She did her duty well enough; but she did not look it; and the charities which occasioned her no pleasure in the administration, could hardly occasion us much in the reception.

As soon as she had left the room, Percy broke out, with more emphasis than politeness:

"What the devil's the matter with Adela, uncle?"

"Indeed, I can't tell, my boy," answered the colonel, with more kindness than the form of the question deserved.

"Have you no conjecture on the subject?" I asked.

"None. I have tried hard to find out; but I have altogether failed. She tells me there is nothing the matter with her, only she is so tired. What has she to tire her?"

"If she is tired inside first, everything will tire her."

"I wish you would try to find out, Smith."

"I will."

"Her mother died of a decline."

"I know. Have you had no advice?"

"Oh, yes! Dr. Wade is giving her steel-wine, and quinine, and all that sort of thing. For my part, I don't believe in their medicines. Certainly they don't do her any good."

"Is her chest affected—does he say?"

"He says not; but I believe he knows no more about the state of her chest than he does about the other side of the moon. He's a stupid old fool. He comes here for his fees, and he has them."

"Why don't you call in another, if you are not satisfied?"

"Why, my dear fellow, they're all the same in this infernal old place. I believe they've all embalmed themselves, and are going by clockwork. They and the clergy make sad fools of us. But we make worse fools of ourselves to have them about us. To be sure, they see that everything is proper. The doctor makes sure that we are dead before we are buried, and the parson that we are buried after we are dead. About the resurrection I suspect he knows as much as we do. He goes by book."

In his perplexity and sorrow, the poor colonel was irritable and unjust. I saw that it would be better to suggest than to reason. And I partly took the homoeopathic system—the only one on which mental distress, at least, can be treated with any advantage.

"Certainly," I said, "the medical profession has plenty of men in it who live on humanity, like the very diseases they attempt to cure. And plenty of the clergy find the Church a tolerably profitable investment. The reading of the absolution is as productive to them now, as it was to the pardon-sellers of old. But surely, colonel, you won't huddle them all up together in one shapeless mass of condemnation?"

"You always were right, Smith, and I'm a fool, as usual.—Percy, my boy, what's going on at Somerset House?"

"The river, uncle."

"Nothing else?"

"Well—I don't know. Nothing much. It's horribly slow!"

"I'm afraid you won't find this much better. But you must take care of yourself."

"I've made that a branch of special study, uncle. I flatter myself I *can* do that."

Colonel Cathcart laughed. Percy was the son of his only brother, who had died young, and he had an especial affection for him. And where the honest old man loved, he could see no harm; for he reasoned something in this way: "He must be all right, or how could I like him as I do?" But Percy was a common-place, selfish fellow—of that I was convinced—whatever his other qualities, good or bad, might be; and I sincerely hoped that any designs he might have of marrying his cousin, might prove as vain as his late infantile passion for the moon. For I beg to assure my readers that the circumstances in which I have introduced Adela Cathcart, are no more fair to her real character, than my lady readers would consider the effect of a lamp-shade of bottle-green true in its presentation of their complexion.

We did not sit long over our wine. When we went up to the drawing-room, Adela was not there, nor did she make her appearance again that evening. For a little while we tried to talk; but, after many failures, I yielded and withdrew on the score of fatigue; no doubt relieving the mind of my old friend by doing so, for he had severe ideas of the duty of a host as well as of a soldier, and to these ideas he found it at present impossible to elevate the tone of his behaviour.

When I reached my own room, I threw myself into the easiest of arm-chairs, and began to reflect.

"John Smith," I said, "this is likely to be as uncomfortable a Christmas-tide, as you, with your all but ubiquity, have ever had the opportunity of passing. Nevertheless, please to remember a resolution you came to once upon a time, that, as you were nobody, so you would be nobody; and see if you can make yourself useful.—What can be the matter with Adela?"

I sat and reflected for a long time; for during my life I had had many opportunities of observation, and amongst other cases that had interested me, I had seen some not unlike the present. The fact was that, as everybody counted me nobody, I had taken full advantage of my conceded nonentity, which, like Jack the Giant-killer's coat of darkness, enabled me to learn much that would otherwise have escaped me. My reflections on my observations, however, did not lead me to any further or more practical conclusion just yet, than that other and better advice ought to be called in.

Having administered this sedative sop to my restless practicalness, I went to bed and to sleep.

Chapter II

Church

Adela did not make her appearance at the breakfast-table next morning, although it was the morning of Christmas Day. And no one who had seen her at dinner on Christmas Eve, would have expected to see her at breakfast on Christmas-morn. Yet although her absence was rather a relief, such a gloom occupied her place, that our party was anything but cheerful. But the world about us was happy enough, not merely at its unseen heart of fire, but on its wintered countenance—evidently to all men. It was not "to hide her guilty front," as Milton says, in the first two—and the least worthy—stanzas on the Nativity, that the earth wooed the gentle air for innocent snow, but to put on the best smile and the loveliest dress that the cold time and her suffering state would allow, in welcome of the Lord of the snow and the summer. I thought of the lines from Crashaw's *Hymn of the Nativity*—Crashaw, who always suggested to me Shelley turned a Catholic Priest:

"I saw the curled drops, soft and slow,
Come hovering o'er the place's head,
Offering their whitest sheets of snow,
To furnish the fair infant's bed.
Forbear, said I, be not too bold:
Your fleece is white, but 'tis too cold."

And as the sun shone rosy with mist, I naturally thought of the next following stanza of the same hymn:

"I saw the obsequious seraphim
Their rosy fleece of fire bestow;
For well they now can spare their wings,
Since Heaven itself lies here below.
Well done! said I; but are you sure
Your down, so warm, will pass for pure?"

Adela, pale face and all, was down in time for church; and she and the colonel and I walked to it together by the meadow path, where, on each side, the green grass was peeping up through the glittering frost. For the colonel, notwithstanding his last night's outbreak upon the clergy, had a profound respect for them, and considered church-going one of those military duties which belonged to every honest soldier and gentleman. Percy had found employment elsewhere.

It was a blessed little church that, standing in a little meadow church-yard, with a low strong ancient tower, and great buttresses that put one in mind of the rock of ages, and a mighty still river that flowed past the tower end, and a picturesque, straggling, well-to-do parsonage at the chancel end. The church was nearly covered with ivy, and looked as if it had grown out of the churchyard, to be ready for the poor folks, as soon as they got up again, to praise God in. But it had stood a long time, and none of them came, and the praise of the living must be a poor thing to the praise of the dead, notwithstanding all that the Psalmist says. So the church got disheartened, and drooped, and now looked very old and grey-headed. It could not get itself filled with praise enough.—And into

this old, and quaint, and weary but stout-hearted church, we went that bright winter morning, to hear about a baby. My heart was full enough before I left it.

Old Mr. Venables read the service with a voice and manner far more memorial of departed dinners than of joys to come; but I sat—little heeding the service, I confess—with my mind full of thoughts that made me glad.

Now all my glad thoughts came to me through a hole in the tower-door. For the door was far in a shadowy retreat, and in the irregular lozenge-shaped hole in it, there was a piece of coarse thick glass of a deep yellow. And through this yellow glass the sun shone. And the cold shine of the winter sun was changed into the warm glory of summer by the magic of that bit of glass.

Now when I saw the glow first, I thought without thinking, that it came from some inner place, some shrine of old, or some ancient tomb in the chancel of the church—forgetting the points of the compass—where one might pray as in the *penetralia* of the temple; and I gazed on it as the pilgrim might gaze upon the lamp-light oozing from the cavern of the Holy Sepulchre. But some one opened the door, and the clear light of the Christmas morn broke upon the pavement, and swept away the summer splendour.—The door was to the outside.—And I said to myself: All the doors that lead inwards to the secret place of the Most High, are doors outwards—out of self—out of smallness—out of wrong. And these were some of the thoughts that came to me through the hole in the door, and made me forget the service, which Mr. Venables mumbled like a nicely cooked sweetbread.

But another voice broke the film that shrouded the ears of my brain, and the words became inspired and alive, and I forgot my own thoughts in listening to the Holy Book. For is not the voice of every loving spirit a fresh inspiration to the dead letter? With a voice other than this, does it not kill? And I thought I had heard the voice before, but where I sat I could not see the Communion Table.—At length the preacher ascended the pulpit stairs, and, to my delight and the rousing of an altogether unwonted expectation, who should it be but my fellow-traveller of last night!

He had a look of having something to say; and I immediately felt that I had something to hear. Having read his text, which I forget, the broad-browed man began with something like this:

"It is not the high summer alone that is God's. The winter also is His. And into His winter He came to visit us. And all man's winters are His—the winter of our poverty, the winter of our sorrow, the winter of our unhappiness—even 'the winter of our discontent.'"

I stole a glance at Adela. Her large eyes were fixed on the preacher.

"Winter," he went on, "does not belong to death, although the outside of it looks like death. Beneath the snow, the grass is growing. Below the frost, the roots are warm and alive. Winter is only a spring too weak and feeble for us to see that it is living. The cold does for all things what the gardener has sometimes to do for valuable trees: he must half kill them before they will bear any fruit. Winter is in truth the small beginnings of the spring."

I glanced at Adela again; and still her eyes were fastened on the speaker.

"The winter is the childhood of the year. Into this childhood of the year came the child Jesus; and into this childhood of the year must we all descend. It is as if God spoke to each of us according to our need: My son, my daughter, you are growing old and cunning; you must grow a child again, with my son, this blessed birth-time. You are growing old and selfish; you must become a child. You are growing old and careful; you must become a child. You are growing old and distrustful; you must become a child. You are growing old and petty, and weak, and foolish; you must become a child—my child, like the baby there, that strong sunrise of faith and hope and love, lying in his mother's arms in the stable.

"But one may say to me: 'You are talking in a dream. The Son of God is a child no longer. He is the King of Heaven.' True, my friends. But He who is the Unchangeable, could never become anything that He was not always, for that would be to change. He is as much a child now as ever he was. When he became a child, it was only to show us by itself, that we might understand it better, what he was always in his deepest nature. And when he was a child, he was not less the King of

Heaven; for it is in virtue of his childhood, of his sonship, that he is Lord of Heaven and of Earth —'for of such'—namely, of children—'is the kingdom of heaven.' And, therefore, when we think of the baby now, it is still of the Son of man, of the King of men, that we think. And all the feelings that the thought of that babe can wake in us, are as true now as they were on that first Christmas day, when Mary covered from the cold his little naked feet, ere long to be washed with the tears of repentant women, and nailed by the hands of thoughtless men, who knew not what they did, to the cross of fainting, and desolation, and death."

Adela was hiding her face now.

"So, my friends, let us be children this Christmas. Of course, when I say to anyone, 'You must be like a child,' I mean a good child. A naughty child is not a child as long as his naughtiness lasts. He is not what God meant when He said, 'I will make a child.' Think of the best child you know—the one who has filled you with most admiration. It is his child-likeness that has so delighted you. It is because he is so true to the child-nature that you admire him. Jesus is like that child. You must be like that child. But you cannot help knowing some faults in him—some things that are like ill-grown men and women. Jesus is not like him, there. Think of the best child you can imagine; nay, think of a better than you can imagine—of the one that God thinks of when he invents a child in the depth of his fatherhood: such child-like men and women must you one day become; and what day better to begin, than this blessed Christmas Morn? Let such a child be born in your hearts this day. Take the child Jesus to your bosoms, into your very souls, and let him grow there till he is one with your every thought, and purpose, and hope. As a good child born in a family will make the family good; so Jesus, born into the world, will make the world good at last. And this perfect child, born in your hearts, will make your hearts good; and that is God's best gift to you.

"Then be happy this Christmas Day; for to you a child is born. Childless women, this infant is yours—wives or maidens. Fathers and mothers, he is your first-born, and he will save his brethren. Eat and drink, and be merry and kind, for the love of God is the source of all joy and all good things, and this love is present in the child Jesus.—Now, to God the Father, &c."

"O my baby Lord!" I said in my heart; for the clergyman had forgotten me, and said nothing about us old bachelors.

Of course this is but the substance of the sermon; and as, although I came to know him well before many days were over, he never lent me his manuscript—indeed, I doubt if he had any—my report must have lost something of his nervous strength, and be diluted with the weakness of my style.

Although I had been attending so well to the sermon, however, my eyes had now and then wandered, not only to Adela's face, but all over the church as well; and I could not help observing, a few pillars off, and partly round a corner, the face of a young man—well, he was about thirty, I should guess—out of which looked a pair of well-opened hazel eyes, with rather notable eyelashes. Not that I, with my own weak pair of washed-out grey, could see the eyelashes at that distance, but I judged it must be their length that gave a kind of feminine cast to the outline of the eyes. Nor should I have noticed the face itself much, had it not seemed to me that those eyes were pursuing a very thievish course; for, by the fact that, as often as I looked their way, I saw the motion of their withdrawal, I concluded that they were stealing glances at, certainly not from, my adopted niece, Adela. This made me look at the face more attentively. I found it a fine, frank, brown, country-looking face.—Could it have anything to do with Adela's condition? Absurd! How could such health and ruddy life have anything to do with the worn pallor of her countenance? Nor did a single glance on the part of Adela reveal that she was aware of the existence of the neighbouring observatory. I dismissed the idea. And I was right, as time showed.

We remained to the Communion. When that was over, we walked out of the old dark-roofed church, Adela looking as sad as ever, into the bright cold sunshine, which wrought no change on her demeanour. How could it, if the sun of righteousness, even, had failed for the time? And there, in the churchyard, we found Percy, standing astride of an infant's grave, with his hands in his trowser-

pockets, and an air of condescending satisfaction on his countenance, which seemed to say to the dead beneath him:

"Pray, don't apologize. I know you are disagreeable; but you can't help it, you know;"

–and to the living coming out of church:

"Well, have you had your little whim out?"

But what he did say, was to Adela:

"A merry Christmas to you, Addie! Won't you lean on me? You don't look very stunning."

But her sole answer was to take my arm; and so we walked towards the Swanspond.

"I suppose that's what they call *Broad Church,*" said the colonel.

"Generally speaking, I prefer breadth," I answered, vaguely. "Do you think that's *Broad Church?*"

"Oh! I don't know. I suppose it's all right. He ran me through, anyhow."

"I hope it *is* all right," I answered. "It suits me."

"Well, I'm sure you know ten times better than I do. He seems a right sort of man, whatever sort of clergyman he may be."

"Who is he—can you tell me?"

"Why, don't you know? That's our new curate, Mr. Armstrong."

"Curate!" I exclaimed. "A man like that! And at his years too! He must be forty. You astonish me!"

"Well, I don't know. He may be forty. He is our curate; that is all I can answer for."

"He was my companion in the train last night."

"Ah! that accounts for it. You had some talk with him, and found him out? I believe he is a superior sort of man, too. Old Mr. Venables seems to like him."

"All the talk I have had with him passed between pulpit and pew this morning," I replied; "for the only words that we exchanged last night were, 'Will you join me in a cigar?' from him, and 'With much pleasure,' from me."

"Then, upon my life, I can't see what you think remarkable in his being a curate. Though I confess, as I said before, he ran me through the body. I'm rather soft-hearted, I believe, since Addie's illness."

He gave her a hasty glance. But she took no notice of what he had said; and, indeed, seemed to have taken no notice of the conversation—to which Percy had shown an equal amount of indifference. A very different indifference seemed the only bond between them.

When we reached home, we found lunch ready for us, and after waiting a few minutes for Adela, but in vain, we seated ourselves at the table.

"Awfully like Sunday, and a cold dinner, uncle!" remarked Percy.

"We'll make up for that, my boy, when dinner-time comes."

"You don't like Sunday, then, Mr. Percy?" I said.

"A horrid bore," he answered. "My old mother made me hate it. We had to go to church twice; and that was even worse than her veal-broth. But the worst of it is, I can't get it out of my head that I ought to be there, even when I'm driving tandem to Richmond."

"Ah! your mother will be with us on Sunday, I hope, Percy."

"Good heavens, uncle! Do you know what you are about? My mother here! I'll just ring the bell, and tell James to pack my traps. I won't stand it. I can't. Indeed I can't."

He rose as he spoke. His uncle caught him by the arm, laughing, and made him sit down again; which he did with real or pretended reluctance.

"We'll take care of you, Percy. Never mind.—Don't be a fool," he added, seeing the evident annoyance of the young fellow.

"Well, uncle, you ought to have known better," said Percy, sulkily, as, yielding, he resumed his seat, and poured himself out a bumper of claret, by way of consolation.

He had not been much of a companion before: now he made himself almost as unpleasant as a young man could be, and that is saying a great deal. One, certainly, had need to have found something beautiful at church, for here was the prospect of as wretched a Christmas dinner as one could ever wish to avoid.

When Percy had drunk another bumper of claret, he rose and left the room; and my host, turning to me, said:

"I fear, Smith, you will have anything but a merry Christmas, this year. I hoped the sight of you would cheer up poor Adela, and set us all right. And now Percy's out of humour at the thought of his mother coming, and I'm sure I don't know what's to be done. We shall sit over our dinner to-day like four crows over a carcass. It's very good of you to stop."

"Oh! never mind me," I said. "I, too, can take care of myself. But has Adela no companions of her own age?"

"None but Percy. And I am afraid she has got tired of him. He's a good fellow, though a bit of a puppy. That'll wear off. I wish he would take a fancy to the army, now."

I made no reply, but I thought the more. It seemed to me that to get tired of Percy was the most natural proceeding that could be adopted with regard to him and all about him.

But men judge men—and women, women—hardly.

"I'll tell you what I will do," said the colonel. "I will ask Mr. Bloomfield, the schoolmaster, and his wife, to dine with us. It's no use asking anybody else that I can think of. But they have no family, and I dare say they can put off their own Christmas dinner till to-morrow. They have but one maid, and she can dine with our servants. They are very respectable people, I assure you."

The colonel always considered his plans thoroughly, and then acted on them at once. He rose.

"A capital idea!" I said, as he disappeared. I went up to look for Adela. She was not in the drawing-room. I went up again, and tapped at the door of her room.

"Come in," she said, in a listless voice.

I entered.

"How are you now, Adela?" I asked.

"Thank you, uncle," was all her reply.

"What is the matter with you, my child?" I said, and drew a chair near hers. She was half reclining, with a book lying upside down on her knee.

"I would tell you at once, uncle, if I knew," she answered very sweetly, but as sadly. "I believe I am dying; but of what I have not the smallest idea."

"Nonsense!" I said. "You're not dying."

"You need not think to comfort me that way, uncle; for I think I would rather die than not."

"Is there anything you would like?"

"Nothing. There is nothing worth liking, but sleep."

"Don't you sleep at night?"

"Not well.—I will tell you all I know about it.—Some six weeks ago, I woke suddenly one morning, very early—I think about three o'clock—with an overpowering sense of blackness and misery. Everything I thought of seemed to have a core of wretchedness in it. I fought with the feeling as well as I could, and got to sleep again. But the effect of it did not leave me next day. I said to myself: 'They say "morning thoughts are true." What if this should be the true way of looking at things?' And everything became grey and dismal about me. Next morning it was just the same. It was as if I had waked in the middle of some chaos over which God had never said: 'Let there be light.' And the next day was worse. I began to see the bad in everything—wrong motives—and self-love—and pretence, and everything mean and low. And so it has gone on ever since. I wake wretched every morning. I am crowded with wretched, if not wicked thoughts, all day. Nothing seems worth anything. I don't care for anything."

"But you love somebody?"

"I hope I love my father. I don't know. I don't feel as if I did."

"And there's your cousin Percy." I confess this was a feeler I put out.

"Percy's a fool!" she said, with some show of indignation, which I hailed, for more reasons than one.

"But you enjoyed the sermon this morning, did you not?"

"I don't know. I thought it very poetical and very pretty; but whether it was true—how could I tell? I didn't care. The baby he spoke about was nothing to me. I didn't love him, or want to hear about him. Don't you think me a brute, uncle?"

"No, I don't. I think you are ill. And I think we shall find something that will do you good; but I can't tell yet what. You will dine with us, won't you?"

"Oh! yes, if you and papa wish it."

"Of course we do. He is just gone to ask Mr. and Mrs. Bloomfield to dine with us."

"Oh!"

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Oh! no. They are nice people. I like them both."

"Well, I will leave you, my child. Sleep if you can. I will go and walk in the garden, and think what can be done for my little girl."

"Thank you, uncle. But you can't do me any good. What if this should be the true way of things? It is better to know it, if it is."

"Disease couldn't make a sun in the heavens. But it could make a man blind, that he could not see it."

"I don't understand you."

"Never mind. It's of no consequence whether you do or not. When you see light again, you will believe in it. For light compels faith."

"I believe in you, uncle; I do."

"Thank you, my dear. Good-bye."

I went round by the stables, and there found the colonel, talking to his groom. He had returned already from his call, and the Bloomfields were coming. I met Percy next, sauntering about, with a huge cigar in his mouth.

"The Bloomfields are coming to dinner, Mr. Percy," I said.

"Who are they?"

"The schoolmaster and his wife."

"Just like that precious old uncle of mine! Why the deuce did he ask *me* this Christmas? I tell you what, Mr. Smith—I can't stand it. There's nothing, not even cards, to amuse a fellow. And when my mother comes, it will be ten times worse. I'll cut and run for it."

"Oh! no, you won't," I said. But I heartily wished he would. I confess the insincerity, and am sorry for it.

"But what the devil does my mother want, coming here?"

"I haven't the pleasure of knowing your mother, so I cannot tell what the devil she can want, coming here."

"Humph!"

He walked away.

Chapter III

The Christmas dinner

Mr. and Mrs. Bloomfield arrived; the former a benevolent, grey-haired man, with a large nose and small mouth, yet with nothing of the foolish look which often accompanies such a malconformation; and the latter a nice-looking little body, middle-aged, rather more; with half-grey curls, and a cap with black ribbons. Indeed, they were both in mourning. Mr. Bloomfield bore himself with a kind of unworldly grace, and Mrs. Bloomfield with a kind of sweet primness. The schoolmaster was inclined to be talkative; nor was his wife behind him; and that was just what we wanted.

"I am sorry to see you in mourning," said the colonel to Mr. Bloomfield, during dessert. "I trust it is for no near relative."

"No relative at all, sir. But a boy of mine, to whom, through God's grace, I did a good turn once, and whom, as a consequence, I loved ever after."

"Tell Colonel Cathcart the story, James," said his wife. "It can do no harm to anybody now; and you needn't mention names, you know. You would like to hear it, wouldn't you, sir?"

"Very much indeed," answered the colonel.

"Well, sir," began the schoolmaster, "there's not much in it to you, I fear; though there was a good deal to him and me. I was usher in a school at Peckham once. I was but a lad, but I tried to do my duty; and the first part of my duty seemed to me, to take care of the characters of the boys. So I tried to understand them all, and their ways of looking at things, and thinking about them.

"One day, to the horror of the masters, it was discovered that a watch belonging to one of the boys had been stolen. The boy who had lost it was making a dreadful fuss about it, and declaring he would tell the police, and set them to find it. The moment I heard of it, my suspicion fell, half by knowledge, half by instinct, upon a certain boy. He was one of the most gentlemanly boys in the school; but there was a look of cunning in the corner of his eye, and a look of greed in the corner of his mouth, which now and then came out clear enough to me. Well, sir, I pondered for a few moments what I should do. I wanted to avoid calling any attention to him; so I contrived to make the worst of him in the Latin class—he was not a bad scholar—and so keep him in when the rest went to play. As soon as they were gone, I took him into my own room, and said to him, 'Fred, my boy, you knew your lesson well enough; but I wanted you here. You stole Simmons's watch.'"

"You had better mention no names, Mr. Bloomfield," interrupted his wife.

"I beg your pardon, my dear. But it doesn't matter. Simmons was eaten by a tiger, ten years ago. And I hope he agreed with him, for he never did with anybody else I ever heard of. He was the worst boy I ever knew.—'You stole Simmons's watch. Where is it?' He fell on his knees, as white as a sheet. 'I sold it,' he said, in a voice choked with terror. 'God help you, my boy!' I exclaimed. He burst out crying. 'Where did you sell it?' He told me. 'Where's the money you got for it?' 'That's all I have left,' he answered, pulling out a small handful of shillings and halfcrowns. 'Give it me,' I said. He gave it me at once. 'Now you go to your lesson, and hold your tongue.' I got a sovereign of my own to make up the sum—I could ill spare it, sir, but the boy could worse spare his character—and I hurried off to the place where he had sold the watch. To avoid scandal, I was forced to pay the man the whole price, though I daresay an older man would have managed better. At all events, I brought it home. I contrived to put it in the boy's own box, so that the whole affair should appear to have been only a trick, and then I gave the culprit a very serious talking-to. He never did anything of the sort again, and died an honourable man and a good officer, only three months ago, in India. A thousand

times over did he repay me the money I had spent for him, and he left me this gold watch in his will —a memorial, not so much of his fault, as of his deliverance from some of its natural consequences."

The schoolmaster pulled out the watch as he spoke, and we all looked at it with respect.

It was a simple story and simply told. But I was pleased to see that Adela took some interest in it. I remembered that, as a child, she had always liked better to be told a story than to have any other amusement whatever. And many a story I had had to coin on the spur of the moment for the satisfaction of her childish avidity for that kind of mental bull's-eye.

When we gentlemen were left alone, and the servants had withdrawn, Mr. Bloomfield said to our host:

"I am sorry to see Miss Cathcart looking so far from well, colonel. I hope you have good advice for her."

"Dr. Wade has been attending her for some time, but I don't think he's doing her any good."

"Don't you think it might be well to get the new doctor to see her? He's quite a remarkable man, I assure you."

"What! The young fellow that goes flying about the country in boots and breeches?"

"Well, I suppose that is the man I mean. He's not so very young though—he's thirty at least. And for the boots and breeches—I asked him once, in a joking way, whether he did not think them rather unprofessional. But he told me he saved ever so much time in open weather by going across the country. 'And,' said he, 'if I can see patients sooner, and more of them, in that way, I think it is quite professional. The other day,' he said, 'I was sent for, and I went straight as the crow flies, and I beat a little baby only by five minutes after all.' Of course after that there was nothing more to say."

"He has very queer notions, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he has, for a medical man. He goes to church, for instance."

"I don't count that a fault."

"Well, neither do I. Rather the contrary. But one of the profession here says it is for the sake of being called out in the middle of the service."

"Oh! that is stale. I don't think he would find that answer. But it is a pity he is not married."

"So it is. I wish he were. But that is a fault that may be remedied some day. One thing I know about him is, that when I called him in to see one of my boarders, he sat by his bedside half an hour, watching him, and then went away without giving him any medicine."

"I don't see the good of that. What do you make of that? I call it very odd."

"He said to me: 'I am not sure what is the matter with him. A wrong medicine would do him more harm than the right one would do him good. Meantime he is in no danger. I will come and see him to-morrow morning.' Now I liked that, because it showed me that he was thinking over the case. The boy was well in two days. Not that that indicates much. All I say is, he is not a common man."

"I don't like to dismiss Dr. Wade."

"No; but you must not stand on ceremony, if he is doing her no good. You are judge enough of that."

I thought it best to say nothing; but I heartily approved of all the honest gentleman said; and I meant to use my persuasion afterwards, if necessary, to the same end; for I liked all he told about the new doctor. I asked his name.

"Mr. Armstrong," answered the schoolmaster.

"Armstrong—" I repeated. "Is not that the name of the new curate?"

"To be sure. They are brothers. Henry, the doctor, is considerably younger than the curate."

"Did the curate seek the appointment because the doctor was here before him?"

"I suppose so. They are much attached to each other."

"If he is at all equal as a doctor to what I think his brother is as a preacher, Purleybridge is a happy place to possess two such healers," I said.

"Well, time will show," returned Mr. Bloomfield.

All this time Percy sat yawning, and drinking claret. When we joined the ladies, we found them engaged in a little gentle chat. There was something about Mrs. Bloomfield that was very pleasing. The chief ingredient in it was a certain quaint repose. She looked as if her heart were at rest; as if for her everything, was right; as if she had a little room of her own, just to her mind, and there her soul sat, looking out through the muslin curtains of modest charity, upon the world that went hurrying and seething past her windows. When we entered—

"I was just beginning to tell Miss Cathcart," she said, "a curious history that came under my notice once. I don't know if I ought though, for it is rather sad."

"Oh! I like sad stories," said Adela.

"Well, there isn't much of romance in it either, but I will cut it short now the gentlemen are come. I knew the lady. She had been married some years. And report said her husband was not overkind to her. All at once she disappeared, and her husband thought the worst of her. Knowing her as well as I did, I did not believe a word of it. Yet it was strange that she had left her baby, her only child, of a few months, as well as her husband. I went to see her mother directly I heard of it, and together we went to the police; and such a search as we had! We traced her to a wretched lodging, where she had been for two nights, but they did not know what had become of her. In fact, they had turned her out because she had no money. Some information that we had, made us go to a house near Hyde Park. We rang the bell. Who should open the door, in a neat cap and print-gown, but the poor lady herself! She fainted when she saw her mother. And then the whole story came out. Her husband was stingy, and only allowed her very small sum for housekeeping; and perhaps she was not a very good manager, for good management is a gift, and everybody has not got it. So she found that she could not clear off the butcher's bills on the sum allowed her; and she had let the debt gather and gather, till the thought of it, I believe, actually drove her out of her mind for the time. She dared not tell her husband; but she knew it must come out some day, and so at last, quite frantic with the thought of it, she ran away, and left her baby behind her."

"And what became of her?" asked Adela.

"Her husband would never hear a word in her favour. He laughed at her story in the most scornful way, and said he was too old a bird for that. In fact, I believe he never saw her again. She went to her mother's. She will have her child now, I suppose; for I hear that the wretch of a husband, who would not let her have him, is dead. I daresay she is happy at last. Poor thing! Some people would need stout hearts, and have not got them."

Adela sighed. This story, too, seemed to interest her.

"What a miserable life!" she said.

"Well, Miss Cathcart," said the schoolmaster, "no doubt it was. But every life that has to be lived, can be lived; and however impossible it may seem to the onlookers, it has its own consolations, or, at least, interests. And I always fancy the most indispensable thing to a life is, that it should be interesting to those who have it to live. My wife and I have come through a good deal, but the time when the life looked hardest to others, was not, probably, the least interesting to us. It is just like reading a book: anything will do if you are taken up with it."

"Very good philosophy! Isn't it, Adela?" said the colonel.

Adela cast her eyes down, as if with a despairing sense of rebuke, and did not reply.

"I wish you would tell Miss Cathcart," resumed the schoolmaster to his wife, "that little story about the foolish lad you met once. And you need not keep back the little of your own history that belongs to it. I am sure the colonel will excuse you."

"I insist on hearing the whole of it," said the colonel, with a smile.

And Mrs. Bloomfield began.

Let me say here once for all, that I cannot keep the tales I tell in this volume from partaking of my own peculiarities of style, any more than I could keep the sermon free of such; for of course I give them all at second hand; and sometimes, where a joint was missing, I have had to supply facts as

well as words. But I have kept as near to the originals as these necessities and a certain preparation for the press would permit me.

Mrs. Bloomfield, I say, began:

"A good many years ago, now, on a warm summer evening, a friend, whom I was visiting, asked me to take a drive with her through one of the London parks. I agreed to go, though I did not care much about it. I had not breathed the fresh air for some weeks; yet I felt it a great trouble to go. I had been ill, and my husband was ill, and we had nothing to do, and we did not know what would become of us. So I was anything but cheerful. I *knew* that all was for the best, as my good husband was always telling me, but my eyes were dim and my heart was troubled, and I could not feel sure that God cared quite so much for us as he did for the lilies.

"My friend was very cheerful, and seemed to enjoy everything; but a kind of dreariness came over me, and I began comparing the loveliness of the summer evening with the cold misty blank that seemed to make up my future. My wretchedness grew greater and greater. The very colours of the flowers, the blue of the sky, the sleep of the water, seemed to push us out of the happy world that God had made. And yet the children seemed as happy as if God were busy making, the things before their eyes, and holding out each thing, as he made it, for them to look at.

"I should have told you that we had two children then."

"I did not know you had any family," interposed the colonel.

"Yes, we had two then. One of them is now in India, and the other was not long out of heaven. —Well, I was glad when my friend stopped the carriage, and got out with the children, to take them close to the water's edge, and let them feed the swans. I liked better to sit in the carriage alone—an ungrateful creature, in the midst of causes for thankfulness. I did not care for the beautiful things about me; and I was not even pleased that other people should enjoy them. I listlessly watched the well-dressed ladies that passed, and hearkened contemptuously to the drawling way in which they spoke. So bad and proud was I, that I said in my heart, 'Thank God! I am not like them yet!' Then came nursemaids and children; and I did envy the servants, because they had work to do, and health to do it, and wages for it when it was done. The carriage was standing still all this time, you know. Then sickly-looking men passed, with still more sickly-looking wives, some of them leading a child between them. But even their faces told of wages, and the pleasure of an evenings walk in the park. And now I was able to thank God that they had the parks to walk in. Then came tottering by, an old man, apparently of eighty years, leaning on the arm of his grand-daughter, I supposed—a tidy, gentle-looking maiden. As they passed, I heard the old man say: 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters.' And his quiet face looked as if the fields were yet green to his eyes, and the still waters as pleasant as when he was a little child.

"At last I caught sight of a poor lad, who was walking along very slowly, looking at a gay-coloured handkerchief which he had spread out before him. His clothes were rather ragged, but not so ragged as old. On his head was what we now call a wide-awake. It was very limp and shapeless; but some one that loved him had trimmed it with a bit of blue ribbon, the ends of which hung down on his shoulder. This gave him an odd appearance even at a distance. When he came up and I could see his face, it explained everything. There was a constant smile about his mouth, which in itself was very sweet; but as it had nothing to do with the rest of the countenance, the chief impression it conveyed was of idiotcy. He came near the carriage, and stood there, watching some men who were repairing the fence which divided the road from the footpath. His hair was almost golden, and went waving about in the wind. His eye was very large and clear, and of a bright blue. But it had no meaning in it. He would have been very handsome, had there been mind in his face; but as it was, the very regularity of his unlighted features made the sight a sadder one. His figure was young; but his face might have belonged to a man of sixty.

"He opened his mouth, stuck out his under jaw, and stood staring and grinning at the men. At last one of them stopped to take breath, and, catching sight of the lad, called out:

"'Why, Davy! is that you?'

"'Ya-as, it be,' replied Davy, nodding his head.

"'Why, Davy, it's ever so long since I clapped eyes on ye!' said the man. 'Where ha' ye been?'

"'I 'aint been nowheres, as I knows on.'

"'Well, if ye 'aint been nowheres, what have ye been doing? Flying your kite?'

"Davy shook his head sorrowfully, and at the same time kept on grinning foolishly.

"'I 'aint got no kite; so I can't fly it.'

"'But you likes flyin' kites, don't ye?' said his friend, kindly.

"'Ya-as,' answered Davy, nodding his head, and rubbing his hands, and laughing out. 'Kites is such fun! I wish I'd got un.'

"Then he looked thoughtfully, almost moodily, at the man, and said:

"'Where's *your* kite? I likes kites. Kites is friends to me.'

"But by this time the man had turned again to his work, and was busy driving a post into the ground; so he paid no attention to the lad's question."

"Why, Mrs. Bloomfield," interrupted the colonel, "I should just like you to send out with a reconnoitring party, for you seem to see everything and forget nothing."

"You see best and remember best what most interests you, colonel; and besides that, I got a good rebuke to my ingratitude from that poor fellow. So you see I had reason to remember him. I hope I don't tire you, Miss Cathcart."

"Quite the contrary," answered our hostess.

"By this time," resumed Mrs. Bloomfield, "another man had come up. He had a coarse, hard-featured face; and he tried, or pretended to try, to wheel his barrow, which was full of gravel, over Davy's toes. The said toes were sticking quite bare through great holes in an old pair of woman's boots. Then he began to tease him rather roughly. But Davy took all his banter with just the same complacency and mirth with which he had received the kindliness of the other man.

"'How's yer sweetheart, Davy?' he said.

"'Quite well, thank ye,' answered Davy.

"'What's her name?'

"'Ha! ha! ha! I won't tell ye that.'

"'Come now, Davy, tell us her name.'

"'Noa.'

"'Don't be a fool.'

"'I aint a fool. But I won't tell you her name.'

"'I don't believe ye've got e'er a sweetheart. Come now.'

"'I have though.'

"'I don't believe ye.'

"'I have though. I was at church with her last Sunday.'

"Suddenly the man, looking hard at Davy, changed his tone to one of surprise, and exclaimed:

"'Why, boy, ye've got whiskers! Ye hadn't them the last time I see'd ye. Why, ye *are*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.