GEORGE MACDONALD

ADELA CATHCART, VOLUME 2

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
SONG

I confess I was a little dismayed to find what a solemn turn the club-stories had taken. But this dismay lasted for a moment only; for I saw that Adela was deeply interested, again wearing the look that indicates abstracted thought and feeling. I said to myself:

"This is very different mental fare from what you have been used to, Adela."

But she seemed able to mark, learn, and inwardly digest it, for she had the appearance of one who is stilled by the strange newness of her thoughts. I was sure that she was now experiencing a consciousness of existence quite different from anything she had known before. But it had a curious outcome.

For, when the silence began to grow painful, no one daring to ask a question, and Mrs. Cathcart had resumed her knitting, Adela suddenly rose, and going to the piano, struck a few chords, and began to sing. The song was one of Heine's strange, ghost-dreams, so unreal in everything but feeling, and therefore, as dreams, so true. Why did she choose such a song after what we

had been listening to? I accounted for it by the supposition that, being but poorly provided as far as variety in music went, this was the only thing suggested to her by the tone of the paper, and, therefore, the nearest she could come to it. It served, however, to make a change and a transition; which was, as I thought, very desirable, lest any of the company should be scared from attending the club; and I resolved that I would divert the current, next time, if I could.

This was what Adela sang; and the singing of it was evidently a relief to her:

I dreamt of the daughter of a king,
  With a cheek white, wet, and chill;
Under the limes we sat murmuring,
  And holding each other so still!

"Oh! not thy father's sceptre of gold,
  Nor yet his shining throne,
Nor his diamond crown that glitters cold—
  'Tis thyself I want, my own!"

"Oh! that is too good," she answered me;
  "I lie in the grave all day;
And only at night I come to thee,
  For I cannot keep away."

It was something that she had volunteered a song, whatever it was. But it is a misfortune that, in writing a book, one cannot give

the music of a song. Perhaps, by the time that music has its fair part in education, this may be done. But, meantime, we mention the fact of a song, and then give the words, as if that were the song. The music is the song, and the words are no more than the saddle on which the music sits, the singer being the horse, who could do without a saddle well enough.—May Adela forgive the comparison!—At the same time, a true-word song has music of its own, and is quite independent, for its music, both of that which it may beget, and of that with which it may be associated.

As she rose, she glanced towards the doctor, and said:

"Now it is your turn, Mr. Armstrong."

Harry did not wait for a second invitation; for to sing was to him evidently a pleasure too great to be put in jeopardy. He rose at once, and sitting down at the instrument, sang—I cannot say *as follows*, you see; I can only say *the following words*:

Autumn clouds are flying, flying,
  O'er the waste of blue;
Summer flowers are dying, dying,
  Late so lovely new.
Labouring wains are slowly rolling
  Home with winter grain;
Holy bells are slowly tolling
  Over buried men.

Goldener lights set noon a-sleeping
  Like an afternoon;

Colder airs come stealing, creeping
  After sun and moon;
And the leaves, all tired of blowing
  Cloudlike o'er the sun,
Change to sunset-colours, knowing
  That their day is done.

Autumn's sun is sinking, sinking
  Into Winter's night;
And our hearts are thinking, thinking
  Of the cold and blight.
Our life's sun is slowly going
  Down the hill of might;
Will our clouds shine golden-glowing
  On the slope of night?

But the vanished corn is lying
  In rich golden glooms.
In the churchyard, all the singing
  Is above the tombs.
Spring will come, slow-lingering,
  Opening buds of faith.
Man goes forth to meet his spring,
  Through the door of death.

So we love, with no less loving,
  Hair that turns to grey;
Or a step less lightly moving
  In life's autumn day.

And if thought, still-brooding, lingers
O'er each bygone thing,
'Tis because old Autumn's fingers
Paint in hues of Spring.

The whole tone of this song was practical and true, and so was fitted to correct the unhealthiness of imagination which might have been suspected in the choice of the preceding. "Words and music," I said to myself, "must here have come from the same hand; for they are one utterance. There is no setting of words to music here; but the words have brought their own music with them; and the music has brought its own words."

As Harry rose from the piano-forte, he said to me gaily:

"Now, Mr. Smith, it is your turn. I know when you sing, it will be something worth listening to."

"Indeed, I hope so," I answered. "But the song-hour has not yet come to me. How good you all ought to be who can sing! I feel as if my heart would break with delight, if I could sing; and yet there is not a sparrow on the housetop that cannot sing a better song than I."

"Your hour will come," said the clergyman, solemnly. "Then you will sing, and all we shall listen. There is no inborn longing that shall not be fulfilled. I think that is as certain as the forgiveness of sins. Meantime, while your singing-robes are making, I will take your place with my song, if Miss Cathcart will allow me."

"Do, please," said Adela, very heartily; "we shall all be

delighted."

The clergyman sang, and sang even better than his brother. And these were the words of his song:

The Mother Mary to the infant Jesus

'Tis time to sleep, my little boy;
  Why gaze they bright eyes so?
At night, earth's children, for new joy,
  Home to thy Father go.
But thou art wakeful. Sleep, my child;
  The moon and stars are gone;
The wind and snow they grow more wild,
  And thou art smiling on.

My child, thou hast immortal eyes,
  That see by their own light;
They see the innocent blood—it lies
  Red-glowing through the night.
Through wind and storm unto thine ear
  Cry after cry doth run;
And yet thou seemest not to hear,
  And only smilest on.

When first thou earnest to the earth,
  All sounds of strife were still;
A silence lay around thy birth,

And thou didst sleep thy fill.
Why sleep'st thou—nay, why weep'st thou not?
Thy earth is woe-begone;
Babies and mothers wail their lot,
And still thou smilest on.

I read thine eyes like holy book;
No strife is pictured there;
Upon thy face I see the look
Of one who answers prayer.
Ah, yes!—Thine eyes, beyond this wild,
Behold God's will well done;
Men's songs thine ears are hearing, child;
And so thou smilest on.

The prodigals arise and go,
And God goes forth to meet;
Thou seest them gather, weeping low,
About the Father's feet.
And for their brothers men must bear,
Till all are homeward gone.
O Eyes, ye see my answered prayer!
Smile, Son of God, smile on.

As soon as the vibrations of this song, I do not mean on the chords of the instrument, but in the echo-caves of our bosoms, had ceased, I turned to the doctor and said:

"Are you ready with your story yet, Mr. Henry?"

"Oh, dear no!" he answered—"not for days. I am not an idle man like you, Mr. Smith. I belong to the labouring class."

I knew that he could not have it ready.

"Well," I said, "if our friends have no objection, I will give you another myself next time."

"Oh! thank you, uncle," said Adela.—"Another fairy tale, please."

"I can't promise you another fairy-tale just yet, but I can promise you something equally absurd, if that will do."

"Oh yes! Anything you like, uncle. *I*, for one, am sure to like what you like."

"Thank you, my dear. Now I will go; for I see the doctor waiting to have a word with you."

The company took their leave, and the doctor was not two minutes behind them; for as I went up to my room, after asking the curate when I might call upon him, I saw him come out of the drawing-room and go down stairs.

"Monday evening, then," I had heard the colonel say, as he followed his guests to the hall.

CHAPTER II.
THE CURATE AND HIS WIFE

As I approached the door of the little house in which the curate had so lately taken up his abode, he saw me from the window, and before I had had time to knock, he had opened the door.

"Come in," he said. "I saw you coming. Come to my den, and we will have a pipe together."

"I have brought some of my favourite cigars," I said, "and I want you to try them."

"With all my heart."

The room to which he led me was small, but disfigured with no offensive tidiness. Not a spot of wall was to be seen for books, and yet there were not many books after all. We sat for some minutes enjoying the fragrance of the western incense, without other communion than that of the clouds we were blowing, and what I gathered from the walls. For I am old enough, as I have already confessed, to be getting long-sighted, and I made use of the gift in reading the names of the curate's books, as I had read those of his brother's. They were mostly books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with a large admixture from the nineteenth, and more than the usual proportion of the German classics; though, strange to say, not a single volume of German Theology could I discover. The curate was the first to

break the silence.

"I find this a very painful cigar," he said, with a half laugh.

"I am sorry you don't like it. Try another."

"The cigar is magnificent."

"Isn't it thoroughfare, then?"

"Oh yes! the cigar's all right. I haven't smoked such a cigar for more than ten years; and that's the reason."

"I wish I had known you seven years, Mr. Armstrong."

"You have known me a hundred and seven."

"Then I have a right to—"

"Poke my fire as much as you please."

And as Mr. Armstrong said so, he poked his own chest, to signify the symbolism of his words.

"Then I should like to know something of your early history—something to account for the fact that a man like you, at your time of life, is only a curate."

"I can do all that, and account for the pain your cigar gives me, in one and the same story."

I sat full of expectation.

"You won't find me long-winded, I hope."

"No fear of that. Begin directly. I adjure you by our friendship of a hundred years."

"My father was a clergyman before me; one of those simple-hearted men who think that to be good and kind is the first step towards doing God's work; but who are too modest, too ignorant, and sometimes too indolent to aspire to any second step, or even

to inquire what the second step may be. The poor in his parish loved him and preyed upon him. He gave and gave, even after he had no more that he had a right to give.

"He was not by any means a rich man, although he had a little property besides his benefice; but he managed to send me to Oxford. Inheriting, as I suspect, a little tendency to extravagance; having at least no love of money except for what it would bring; and seeing how easily money might be raised there for need true or false, I gradually learned to think less and less of the burdens grievous to be borne, which a subjection to Mammon will accumulate on the shoulders of the unsuspecting ass. I think the old man of the sea in *Sindbad the Sailor*, must personify debt. At least *I* have found reason to think so. At the same time I wish I had done nothing worse than run into debt. Yet by far the greater part of it was incurred for the sake of having works of art about me. Of course pictures were out of the question; but good engravings and casts were within the reach of a borrower. At least it was not for the sake of whip-handles and trowsers, that I fell into the clutches of Moses Melchizedek, for that was the name of the devil to whom I betrayed my soul for money. Emulation, however, mingled with the love of art; and I must confess too, that cigars costs me money as well as pictures; and as I have already hinted, there was worse behind. But some things we can only speak to God about.

"I shall never forget the oily face of the villain—may God save him, and then he'll be no villain!—as he first hinted that he would

lend me any money I might want, upon certain insignificant conditions, such as signing for a hundred and fifty, where I should receive only a hundred. The sunrise of the future glowed so golden, that it seemed to me the easiest thing in the world to pay my debts *there*. Here, there was what I wanted, cigars and all. There, there must be gold, else whence the hue? I could pay all my debts in the future, with the utmost ease. *How* was no matter. I borrowed and borrowed. I flattered myself, besides, that in the things I bought I held money's worth; which, in the main, would have been true, if I had been a dealer in such things; but a mere owner can seldom get the worth of what he possesses, especially when he cannot choose but sell, and has no choice of his market. So when, horrified at last with the filth of the refuge into which I had run to escape the bare walls of heaven, I sold off everything but a few of my pet books"—here he glanced lovingly round his humble study, where shone no glories of print or cast—"which I ought to have sold as well, I found myself still a thousand pounds in debt.

"Now although I had never had a thousand pounds from Melchizedek, I had known perfectly well what I was about. I had been deluded, but not cheated; and in my deep I saw yet a lower depth, into which I *would* not fall—for then I felt I should be lost indeed—that of in any way repudiating my debts. But what was to be done I had no idea.

"I had studied for the church, and I now took holy orders. I had a few pounds a year from my mother's property, which

all went in part-payment of the interest of my debt, I dared not trouble my father with any communication on the subject of my embarrassment, for I knew that he could not help me, and that the impossibility of doing so would make him more unhappy than the wrong I had done in involving myself. I seized the first offer of a curacy that presented itself. Its emoluments were just one hundred pounds a-year, of which I had *not* to return twenty pounds, as some curates have had to do. Out of this I had to pay one half, in interest for the thousand pounds. On the other half, and the trifle my mother allowed me, I contrived to live.

"But the debt continued undiminished. It lay upon me as a mountain might crush a little Titan. There was no cracking frost, no cutting stream, to wear away, by slowest trituration, that mountain of folly and wickedness. But what I suffered most from was the fact, that I must seem to the poor of my parish unsympathetic and unkind. For although I still managed to give away a little, it seemed to me such a small shabby sum, every time that I drew my hand from my pocket, in which perhaps I had left still less, that it was with a positive feeling of shame that I offered it. There was no high generosity in this. It was mostly selfish—the effect of the transmission of my father's blind benevolence, working as an impulse in me. But it made me wretched. Add to this a feeling of hypocrisy, in the knowledge that I, the dispenser of sacred things to the people, was myself the slave of a money-lending Jew, and you will easily see how my life could not be to me the reality which it must be, for any

true and healthy action, to every man. In a word, I felt that I was humbug. As to my preaching, that could not have had much reality in it of any kind, for I had no experience yet of the relation of Christian Faith to Christian Action. In fact, I regarded them as separable—not merely as distinguishable, in the necessity which our human nature, itself an analysis of the divine, has for analysing itself. I respected everything connected with my profession, which I regarded as in itself eminently respectable; but, then, it was only the profession I respected, and I was only *doing church* at best. I have since altered my opinion about the profession, as such; and while I love my work with all my heart, I do not care to think about its worldly relations at all. The honour is to be a servant of men, whom God thought worth making, worth allowing to sin, and worth helping out of it at such a cost. But as far as regards the *profession*, is it a manly kind of work, to put on a white gown once a week, and read out of a book; and then put on a black gown, and read out of a paper you bought or wrote; all about certain old time-honoured legends which have some influence in keeping the common people on their good behaviour, by promising them happiness after they are dead, if they are respectable, and everlasting torture if they are blackguards? Is it manly?"

"You are scarcely fair to the profession even as such, Mr. Armstrong," I said.

"That's what I *feel* about it," he answered. "Look here," he went on, holding out a brawny right arm, with muscles like a

prize-fighter's, "they may laugh at what, by a happy hit, they have called muscular christianity—I for one don't object to being laughed at—but I ask you, is that work fit for a man to whom God has given an arm like that? I declare to you, Smith, I would rather work in the docks, and leave the *churching* to the softs and dandies; for then I should be able to respect myself as giving work for my bread, instead of drawing so many pounds a-year for talking *goody* to old wives and sentimental young ladies;—for over men who are worth anything, such a man has no influence. God forbid that I should be disrespectful to old women, or even sentimental young ladies! They are worth *serving* with a man's whole heart, but not worth pampering. I am speaking of the profession as professed by a mere clergyman—one in whom the professional predominates."

"But you can't use those splendid muscles of yours in the church."

"But I can give up the use of them for something better and nobler. They indicate work; but if I can do real spiritual instead of corporeal work, I rise in the scale. I sacrifice my thews on the altar of my faith. But by the mere clergyman, there is no work done to correspond—I do not say to *his* capacity for work—but to the capacity for work indicated by such a frame as mine—work of some sort, if not of the higher poetic order, then of the lower porter-sort. But if there be a living God, who is doing all he can to save men, to make them pure and noble and high, humble and loving and true, to make them live the life he cares to live

himself; if he has revealed and is revealing this to men, and needs for his purpose the work of their fellow-men, who have already seen and known this purpose, surely there is no nobler office than that of a parson; for to him is committed the grand work of letting men see the thoughts of God, and the work of God—in a word, of telling the story of Jesus, so that men shall see how true it is for *now*, how beautiful it is for *ever*; and recognize it as in fact *the* story of God. Then a clergyman has simply to be more of a man than other men; whereas if he be but a clergyman, he is less of a man than any other man who does honestly the work he has to do, whether he be farm-labourer, shoemaker, or shopkeeper. For such a work, a man may well pine in a dungeon, or starve in a curacy; yea, for such a work, a man will endure the burden of having to dispense the wealth of a bishopric after a divine fashion."

"But your story?" I said at last, unwilling as I was to interrupt his eloquence.

"Yes. This brings me back to it. Here was I starving for no high principle, only for the common-place one of paying my debts; and paying my debts out of the church's money too, for which, scanty as it was, I gave wretched labour—reading prayers as neatly as I could, and preaching sermons half evangelical, half scholastic, of the most unreal and uninteresting sort; feeling all the time hypocritical, as I have already said; and without the farthest prospect of deliverance.

"Then I fell in love."

"Worse and worse!"

"So it seemed; but so it wasn't—like a great many things. At all events, she's down stairs now, busy at a baby's frock, I believe; God bless her! Lizzie is the daughter of a lieutenant in the army, who died before I knew her. She was living with her mother and elder sister, on a very scanty income, in the village where I had the good fortune to be the unhappy curate. I believe I was too unhappy to make myself agreeable to the few young ladies of my congregation, which is generally considered one of the first duties of a curate, in order, no doubt, to secure their co-operation in his charitable schemes; and certainly I do not think I received any great attention from them—certainly not from Lizzie. I thought she pitied and rather despised me. I don't know whether she did, but I still suspect it. I am thankful to say I have no ground for thinking she does now. But we have been through a kind of a moderate burning fiery furnace together, and that brings out the sense, and burns out the nonsense, in both men and women. Not that Lizzie had much nonsense to be burned out of her, as you will soon see.

"I had often been fool enough to wonder that, while she was most attentive and devout during the reading of the service, her face assumed, during the sermon, a far off look of abstraction, that indicated no reception of what I said, further than as an influence of soporific quality. I felt that there was re-proof in this. In fact, it roused my conscience yet more, and made me doubt whether there was anything genuine in me at all.

Sometimes I felt as if I really could not go on, but must shut up my poor manuscript, which was 'an ill-favoured thing, sir, but mine own,' and come down from the pulpit, and beg Miss Lizzie Payton's pardon for presuming to read it in her presence. At length that something, or rather want of something, in her quiet unregarding eyes, aroused a certain opposition, ambition, indignation in me. I strove to write better, and to do better generally. Every good sentence, I launched at her—I don't quite know whether I aimed at her heart or her head—I fear the latter; but I know that I looked after my arrow with a hurried glance, to see whether it had reached the mark. Seldom, however, did I find that my bow had had the strength to arouse Miss Lizzie from the somniculose condition which, in my bitterness, I attributed to her. Since then I have frequently tried to bring home to her the charge, and wring from her the confession that, occasionally, just occasionally, she was really overpowered by the weather. But she has never admitted more than one such lapse, which, happening in a hard frost, and the church being no warmer than condescension, she wickedly remarked must have been owing, not to the weight of the atmosphere, but the weight of something else. At length, in my anxiety for self-justification, I persuaded myself that her behaviour was a sign of spiritual insensibility; that she needed conversion; that she looked with contempt from the far-off table-lands of the Broad church, or the dizzy pinnacles of snow-clad Puseyism, upon the humble efforts of one who followed in the footsteps of the first fishers of men—for such I

tried, in my self-protection, to consider myself.

"One day, I happened to meet her in a retired lane near the village. She was carrying a jug in her hand.

"'How do you do, Miss Lizzie? A labour of love?' I said, ass that I was!

"'Yes,' she answered; 'I've been over to Farmer Dale's, to fetch some cream for mamma's tea.'

"She knew well enough I had meant a ministration to the poor.

"'Oh! I beg your pardon,' I rejoined; 'I thought you had been round your district.'

"This was wicked; for I knew quite well that she had no district.

"'No,' she answered, 'I leave that to my sister. Mamma is my district. And do you know, her headaches are as painful as any washerwoman's.'

"This shut me up rather; but I plucked up courage presently.

"'You don't seem to like going to church, Miss Lizzie.'

"Her face flushed.

"'Who dares to say so? I am very regular in my attendance.'

"'Not a doubt of it. But you don't enjoy being there.'

"'I do.'

"'Confess, now.—You don't like my sermons.'

"'Do you like them yourself, Mr. Armstrong?'

"Here was a floorer! Did I like them myself?—I really couldn't honestly say I did. I was not greatly interested in them, further than as they were my own, and my best attempts to say

something about something I knew nothing about. I was silent. She stood looking at me out of clear grey eyes.

"'Now you have begun this conversation, Mr. Armstrong, I will go on with it,' she said, at length. 'It was not of my seeking. —I do not think you believe what you say in the pulpit.'

"Not believe what I said! Did I believe what I said? Or did I only believe that it was to be believed? The tables were turned with a vengeance. Here was the lay lamb, attacked and about to be worried by the wolf clerical, turning and driving the said wolf to bay. I stood and felt like a convicted criminal before the grey eyes of my judge. And somehow or other I did not hate those clear pools of light. They were very beautiful. But not one word could I find to say for myself. I stood and looked at her, and I fear I began to twitch at my neck cloth, with a vague instinct that I had better go and hang myself. I stared and stared, and no doubt got as red as a turkey-cock—till it began to be very embarrassing indeed. What refuge could there be from one who spoke the truth so plainly? And how do you think I got out of it?" asked Mr. Armstrong of me, John Smith, who, as he told the story, felt almost in as great confusion and misery as the narrator must have been in at that time, although now he looked amazingly jolly, and breathed away at his cigar with the slow exhalations of an epicure.

"Mortal cannot tell," I answered.

"One mortal can," rejoined he, with a laugh.—"I fell on my knees, and made speechless love to her."

Here came a pause. The countenance of the broad-churchman changed as if a lovely summer cloud had passed over it. The jolly air vanished, and he looked very solemn for a little while.

"There was no coxcombry in it, Smith. I may say that for myself. It was the simplest and truest thing I ever did in my life. How was I to help it? There stood the visible truth before me, looking out of the woman's grey eyes. What was I to do? I thank God, I have never seen the truth plain before me, let it look ever so ghostly, without rushing at it. All my advances have been by a sudden act—to me like an inspiration;—an act done in terror, almost, lest I should stop and think about it, and fail to do it. And here was no ghost, but a woman-angel, whose *Thou art the man* was spoken out of profundities of sweetness and truth. Could I turn my back upon her? Could I parley with her?—with the Truth? No. I fell on my knees, weeping like a child; for all my misery, all my sense of bondage and untruth, broke from me in those tears.

"My hat had fallen off as I knelt. My head was bowed on my hands. I felt as if she could save me. I dared not look up. She tells me since that she was bewildered and frightened, but I discovered nothing of that. At length I felt a light pressure, a touch of healing, fall on my bended head. It was her hand. Still I hid my face, for I was ashamed before her.

"'Come,' she said, in a low voice, which I dare say she compelled to be firm; 'come with me into the Westland Woods. There we can talk. Some one may come this way.'

"She has told me since that a kind of revelation came to her at the moment; a sight not of the future but of the fact; and that this lifted her high above every feeling of mere propriety, substituting for it a conviction of right. She felt that God had given this man to her; and she no more hesitated to ask me to go with her into the woods, than she would hesitate to go with me now if I asked her. And indeed if she had not done so, I don't know what would have come of it—how the story would have ended. I believe I should be kneeling there now, a whitened skeleton, to the terror and warning of all false churchmen who should pass through the lonely lane.

"I rose at once, like an obedient child, and turned in the direction of the Westland Woods, feeling that she was by my side, but not yet daring to look at her.—Now there are few men to whom I would tell the trifle that followed. It was a trifle as to the outside of it; but it is amazing what *virtue*, in the old meaning of the word, may lie in a trifle. The recognition of virtue is at the root of all magical spells, and amulets, and talismans. Mind, I felt from the first that you and I would understand each other."

"You rejoice my heart," I said.

"Well, the first thing I had to do, as you may suppose, to make me fit to look at her, was to wipe my eyes. I put my hand in my pocket; then my first hand in the breast pocket; then the other hand in the other pocket; and the slow-dawning awful truth became apparent, that here was a great brute of a curate, who had been crying like a baby, and had no handkerchief. A

moment of keen despair followed—chased away by a vision of hope, in the shape of a little white cloud between me and the green grass. This cloud floated over a lady's hand, and was in fact a delicate handkerchief. I took it, and brought it to my eyes, which gratefully acknowledged the comfort. And the scent of the lavender—not lavender water, but the lavender itself, that puts you in mind of country churches, and old bibles, and dusky low-ceiled parlours on Sunday afternoons—the scent of the lavender was so pure and sweet, and lovely! It gave me courage.

"'May I keep it?' I asked

"'Yes. Keep it,' she answered.

"'Will you take my arm now?'

"For answer, she took my arm, and we entered the woods. It was a summer afternoon. The sun had outflanked the thick clouds of leaves that rendered the woods impregnable from overhead, and was now shining in, a little sideways, with that slumberous light belonging to summer afternoons, in which everything, mind and all, seems half asleep and all dreaming.

"'Let me carry the jug,' I said.

"'No,' she answered, with a light laugh; 'you would be sure to spill the cream, and spoil both your coat and mamma's tea.'

"'Then put it down in this hollow till we come back.'

"'It would be full of flies and beetles in a moment. Besides we won't come back this way, shall we? I can carry it quite well. Gentlemen don't like carrying things.'

"I feared lest the tone the conversation had assumed, might

lead me away from the resolution I had formed while kneeling in the lane. So, as usual with me, I rushed blindly on the performance.

"'Miss Lizzie, I am a hypocritical and unhappy wretch.'

"She looked up at me with a face full of compassionate sympathy. I could have lost myself in that gaze. But I would not be turned from my purpose, of which she had no design, though her look had almost the power; and, the floodgates of speech once opened, out it came, the whole confession I have made to you, in what form or manner, I found, the very first time I looked back upon the relation, that I had quite forgotten.

"All the time, the sun was sending ever so many sloping ladders of light down through the trees, for there was a little mist rising that afternoon; and I felt as if they were the same kind of ladder that Jacob saw, inviting a man to climb up to the light and peace of God. I felt as if upon them invisible angels were going up and down all through the summer wood, and that the angels must love our woods as we love their skies. And amidst the trees and the ladders of ether, we walked, and I talked, and Lizzie listened to all I had to say, without uttering a syllable till I had finished.

"At length, having disclosed my whole bondage and grief, I ended with the question:

"'Now, what is to be done?'

"She looked up in my face with those eyes of truth, and said:

"'That money must be paid, Mr. Armstrong.'

"'But how?' I responded, in despair.

"She did not seem to heed my question, but she really answered it.

"'And, if I were you, I would do no more duty till it was paid.'

"Here was decision with a vengeance. It was more than I had bargained for. I was dumb. A moment's reflection, however, showed me that she was perfectly right—that what I had called *decision with a vengeance*, was merely the utterance of a child's perception of the true way to walk in.

"Still I was silent; for long vistas of duty, and loss, and painful action and effort opened before me. At length I said:

"'You are quite right, Miss Lizzie.'

"'I wish I could pay it for you,' she rejoined, looking up in my face with an expression of still tenderness, while the tears clouded her eyes just as clouds of a deeper grey come over the grey depths of some summer skies.

"'But you can help me to pay it.'

"'How?'

"'Love me,' I said, and no more. I could not.

"The only answer she made, was to look up at me once more, then stop, and, turning towards me, draw herself gently against my side, as she held my arm. It was enough—was it not?

"*Love me*, I said, and she did love me; and she's down stairs, as I told you; and I think she is not unhappy."

"But you're not going to stop there," I said.

"No, I'm not.—That very evening I told the vicar that I must

go. He pressed for my reasons; but I managed to avoid giving a direct answer. I begged him to set me at liberty as soon as possible, meaning, when he should have provided himself with a substitute. But he took offence at last, and told me I might go when I pleased; for he was quite able to perform the duties himself. After this, I felt it would be unpleasant for him as well as for me, if I remained, and so I took him at his word. And right glad I was not to have to preach any more to Lizzie. It was time for me to act instead of talk.

"But what was I to do?—The moment the idea of ceasing to *do church* was entertained by me, the true notion of what I was to do instead presented itself. It was this. I would apply to my cousin, the accountant. He was an older man, considerably, than myself, and had already made a fortune in his profession. We had been on very good terms indeed, considering that he was a dissenter, and all but hated the church; while, I fear, I quite despised dissenters. I had often dined with him, and he had found out that I had a great turn for figures, as he called it. Having always been fond of mathematics, I had been able to assist him in arriving at a true conclusion on what had been to him a knotty point connected with life-insurance; and consequently he had a high opinion of my capacity in his department.

"I wrote to him, telling him I had resolved to go into business for a time. I did not choose to enlighten him further; and I fear I fared the better with him from his fancying that I must have begun to entertain doubts concerning church-establishments. I

had the cunning not to ask him to employ me; for I thought it very likely he would request my services, which would put me in a better position with him. And it fell out as I had anticipated. He replied at once, offering me one hundred and fifty pounds to begin, with the prospect of an annual advance of twenty pounds, if, upon further trial, we both found the arrangement to our minds. I knew him to be an honourable man, and accepted the proposal at once. And I cannot tell how light-hearted I felt as I folded up my canonicals, and put them in a box to be left, for the meantime, in the charge of my landlady.

"I was troubled with no hesitation as to the propriety of the proceeding. Of course I felt that if it had been mere money-making, a clergyman ought to have had nothing to do with it; but I felt now, on the other hand, that if any man was bound to pay his debts, a clergyman was; in fact, that he could not do his duty till he had paid his debts; and that the wrong was not in turning to business now, but in having undertaken the office with a weight of filthy lucre on my back and my conscience, which my pocket could never relieve them of. Any scruple about the matter, I felt would be only superstition; that, in fact, it was a course of action worthy of a man, and therefore of a clergyman. I thought well enough of the church, too, to believe that every man of any manliness in it, would say that I had done right. And, to tell the truth, so long as Lizzie was satisfied with me, I did not care for archdeacon, or bishop. I meant just to drop out of the ranks of the clergy without sign, and keep my very existence

as secret as possible, until the moment I had achieved my end, when I would go to my bishop, and tell him all, requesting to be reinstated in my sacred office. There was only one puzzle in the affair, and that was how the act towards Mrs. Payton in regard to her daughter's engagement to me. The old lady was not gifted with much common sense, I knew; and I feared both that she would be shocked at the idea, and that she would not keep my secret. Of course I consulted Lizzie about it. She had been thinking about it already, and had concluded that the best way would be for her to tell her mother the fact of our engagement, and for me to write to her from London that I did not intend taking a second charge for some time yet; and so leave Lizzie to act for the rest as occasion might demand. All this was very easily managed, and in the course of another week, chiefly devoted to the Westland Woods, I found myself at a desk in Cannon Street.

"And now began a real experience of life. I had resolved to regard the money I earned as the ransom-money of the church, paid by her for the redemption of an erring servant from the power of Mammon: I would therefore spend upon myself not one penny more than could be helped. With this view, and perhaps with a lurking notion of penance in some corner of my stupid brain, I betook myself to a lodging house in Hatton Garden, where I paid just three shillings a week for a bedroom, if that could be called a room which was rather a box, divided from a dozen others by partitions of seven or eight feet in height. I had, besides, the use of a common room, with light and fire,

and the use of a kitchen for cooking my own victuals, if I required any, presided over by an old man, who was rather dirtier than necessity could justify, or the amount of assistance he rendered could excuse. But I managed to avoid this region of the establishment, by both breakfasting and dining in eating-houses, of which I soon found out the best and cheapest. It is amazing upon how little a man with a good constitution, a good conscience, and an object, can live in London. I lived and throve. My bedroom, though as small as it could possibly have been, was clean, with all its appointments; and for a penny a week additional, I had the use of a few newspapers. The only luxuries I indulged in, besides one pipe of bird's-eye a day, were writing verses, and teaching myself German. This last led to some little extravagance, for I soon came to buy German books at the bookstalls; but I thought the church would get the advantage of it by and by; and so I justified myself in it. I translated a great many German songs. Now and then you will hear my brother sing one of them. He was the only one of my family who knew where I lived. The others addressed their letters to my cousin's place of business. My father was dreadfully cut up at my desertion of the church, as he considered it. But I told my brother the whole story, and he went home, as he declared, prouder of his big brother than if he had been made a bishop of. I believe he soon comforted the dear old man, by helping him to see the matter in its true light; and not one word of reproach did I ever receive from his lips or his pen. He did his best likewise to keep the whole affair a secret.

"But a thousand pounds with interest, was a dreadful sum. However, I paid the interest and more than fifty pounds of the principal the first year. One good thing was, I had plenty of clothes, and so could go a long time without becoming too shabby for business. I repaired them myself. I brushed my own boots. Occasionally I washed my own collars.

"But it was rather dreadful to think of the years that must pass before I could be clear, before I could marry Lizzie, before I could open my mouth again to utter truths which I now began to *see*, and which grew dearer to me than existence itself. As to Lizzie, I comforted myself by thinking that it did not matter much whether we were married or not—we loved each other; and that was all that made marriage itself a good thing, and we had the good thing as it was. We corresponded regularly, and I need not say that this took a great many hours from German and other luxuries, and made the things I did not like, much easier to bear.

"I am not stoic enough to be able to say that the baseness and meanness of things about me gave me no discomfort. In my father's house, I had been used to a little simple luxury, for he liked to be comfortable himself, and could not be so, unless he saw every one comfortable about him as well. At college, likewise, I had not thwarted the tendency to self-indulgence, as my condition now but too plainly testified. It will be clear enough to you, Mr. Smith, that there must have been things connected with such a mode of life, exceedingly distasteful to one who had the habits of a gentleman; but it was not the

circumstances so much as the companions of my location, that bred me discomfort. The people who shared the same roof with me, I felt bound to acknowledge as so sharing, although at first it was difficult to know how to behave to them, and their conduct sometimes caused me excessive annoyance. They were of all births and breedings, but almost all of them, like myself, under a cloud. It was not much that I had to associate with them; but even while glancing at a paper before going up to my room, for I allowed myself no time for that at the office, I could not help occasionally hearing language which disgusted me to the back-bone, and made me say to myself, as I went slowly up the stairs, 'My sins have found me out, and I am in hell for them.' Then, as I sat on the side of my bed in my stall, the vision of the past would come before me in all its beauty—the Westland Woods, the open country, the comfortable abode, and above all, the homely gracious old church, with its atmosphere of ripe sacredness and age-long belief; for now I looked upon that reading-desk, and that pulpit, with new eyes and new thoughts, as I will presently try to show you. I had not really lost them, in the sense in which I regarded them now, as types of a region of possibly noble work; but even with their old aspect, they would have seemed more honourable than this constant labour in figures from morning to night, till I thought sometimes that the depth of punishment would be to have to reckon to all eternity. But, as I have said, I had my consolations—Lizzie's letters, my books, a walk to Hampstead Heath on a holiday, an occasional peep into Goethe

or Schiller on a bright day in St. Lawrence Pountney churchyard, to which I managed to get admittance; and, will you believe it? going to a city church on Sundays. More of this anon. So that, if I was in hell for my sins, it was at least not one of Swedenborg's hells. Never before did I understand what yet I had always considered one of the most exquisite sonnets I knew:

"Mourner, that dost deserve thy mournfulness,
Call thyself punished, call the earth thy hell;
Say, 'God is angry, and I earned it well;
'I would not have him smile and not redress.'
Say this, and straightway all thy grief grows less.
'God rules at least, I find, as prophets tell,
'And proves it in this prison.' Straight thy cell
Smiles with an unsuspected loveliness.
—'A prison—and yet from door and window-bar,
'I catch a thousand breaths of his sweet air;
'Even to me, his days and nights are fair;
'He shows me many a flower, and many a star;
'And though I mourn, and he is very far,
'He does not kill the hope that reaches there.'"

"Where did you get that wonderful sonnet?" I cried, hardly interrupting him, for when he came to the end of it, he paused with a solemn pause.

"It is one of the stars of the higher heavens which I spied through my prison-bars."

"Will you give me a copy of it?"

"With all my heart. It has never been in print."

"Then your star reminds me of that quaint simile of Henry Vaughan,

> 'If a star were confined into a tomb,
> Her captive flames must needs burn there;
> But when the hand that locked her up gives room,
> She'll shine through all the sphere.'"

"Ah yes; I know the poem. That is about the worst verse in it, though."

"Quite true."

"What a number of verses you know!"

"They stick to me somehow."

"Is the sonnet your own?"

"My dear fellow, how could I speak in praise of it as I do, if it were my own? I would say 'I wish it were!' only that would be worse selfishness than coveting a man's purse. No. It is not mine."

"Well, will you go on with your story—if you will yet oblige me."

"I will. But I fear you will think it strange that I should be so communicative to one whose friendship I have so lately gained."

"I believe there is a fate in such things," I answered.

"Well, I yield to it—if I do not weary you?"

"Go on. There is positively not the least danger of that."

"Well, it was not to hell I was really sent, but to school—and

that not a fashionable boarding, or expensive public school, but a day-school like a Scotch parish school—to learn the conditions and ways and thoughts of my brothers and sisters.

"I soon got over the disgust I felt at the coarseness of the men I met. Indeed I found amongst business-gentlemen what affected me with the same kind of feeling—only perhaps more profoundly—a coarseness not of the social so much as of the spiritual nature—in a word, genuine selfishness; whereas this quality was rather less remarkable in those who had less to be selfish about. I do not say therefore that they had less of it.—I soon saw that their profanity had chiefly a negative significance; but it was long before I could get sufficiently accustomed to their vileness, their beastliness—I beg the beast's pardon!—to keep from leaving the room when a vein of that sort was opened. But I succeeded in schooling myself to bear it. 'For,' thought I, 'there must be some bond—some ascertainable and recognizable bond between these men and me; I mean some bond that might show itself as such to them and me.' I found out, before long, that there was a tolerably broad and visible one—nothing less than our human nature, recognized as such. For by degrees I came to give myself to know them. I sat and talked to them, smoked with them, gave them tobacco, lent them small moneys, made them an occasional trifling present of some article of dress, of which I had more than I wanted; in short, gained their confidence. It was strange, but without any reproof from me, nothing more direct than simple silence, they soon ceased to utter a word that

could offend me; and before long, I had heard many of their histories. And what stories they were! Set any one to talk about himself, instead of about other people, and you will have a seam of the precious mental metal opened up to you at once; only ore, most likely, that needs much smelting and refining; or it may be, not gold at all, but a metal which your mental alchemy may turn into gold. The one thing I learned was, that they and I were one, that our hearts were the same. How often I exclaimed inwardly, as some new trait came to light, in the words, though without the generalizing scorn, of Shakspere's Timon—"More man!" Sometimes I was seized with a kind of horror, beholding my own visage in the mirror which some poor wretch's story held up to me—distorted perhaps by the flaws in the glass, but still mine: I saw myself in other circumstances and under other influences, and felt sometimes for a moment, as if I had been guilty of the very deeds—more often of the very neglects that had brought my companion to misery. I felt in the most solemn moods of reflection, that I might have done all that, and become all that. I saw but myself, over and over again, with wondrous variations, none sufficient to destroy the identity. And I said to myself that, if I was so like them in all that was undesirable, it must be possible for them to become like me in all, whatever it was, that rendered me in any way superior to them.

"But wherein did this superiority consist? I saw that whatever it was, I had little praise in it. I said, 'What have I done to be better than I found myself? If Lizzie had not taken me in hand,

I should not have done even this. What an effort it would need for one of these really to begin to rouse and raise himself! And what have I done to rouse and raise myself, to whom it would surely be easier? And how can I hope to help them to rise till I have risen myself? It is not enough to be above them: only by the strength of my own rising can I help to raise them, for we are bound together by one cord. Then how shall I rise? Whose uprising shall lift me? On what cords shall I lay hold to be heaved out of the pit?' And then I thought of the story of the Lord of men, who arose by his own might, not alone from the body-tomb, but from all the death and despair of humanity, and lifted with him our race, placing their tomb beneath their feet, and them in the sunny hope that belongs to them, and for which they were created—the air of their own freedom. 'But,' I said to myself, 'this is ideal, and belongs to the race. Before it comes true for the race, it must be done in the individual. If it be true for the race, it can only be through its being attainable by the individual. There must be something in the story belonging to the individual. I will look at the individual Christ, and see how he arose.'

"And then I saw that the Lord himself was clasped in the love of the Father; that it was in the power of mighty communion that the daily obedience was done; that besides the outward story of his devotion to men, there was the inward story—actually revealed to us men, marvellous as that is—the inward story of his devotion to his father; of his speech to him; of his upward look; of his delight in giving up to Him. And the answer to his

prayers comes out in his deeds. As Novalis says: 'In solitude the heavenly heart unfolded itself to a flower-chalice of almighty love, turned towards the high face of the Father.' I saw that it was in virtue of this, that, again to use the words of Novalis, 'the mystery was unsealed. Heavenly spirits heaved the aged stone from the gloomy grave; angels sat by the slumberer, bodied forth, in delicate forms, from his dreams. Waking in new God-glories, he clomb the height of the new-born world; buried with his own hand the old corpse in the forsaken cavern, and laid thereon, with almighty arm, the stone which no might raises again. Yet weep thy beloved, tears of joy, and of boundless thanks at thy grave; still ever, with fearful gladness, behold thee arisen, and themselves with thee.' If then he is the captain of our salvation, the head of the body of the human church, I must rise by partaking in my degree of his food, by doing in my degree his work. I fell on my knees and I prayed to the Father. I rose, and bethinking me of the words of the Son, I went and tried to do them. I need say no more to you. A new life awoke in me from that hour, feeble and dim, but yet life; and often as it has stopped growing, that has always been my own fault. Where it will end, thank God! I cannot tell. But existence is an awful grandeur and delight.

"Then I understood the state of my fellowmen, with all their ignorance, and hate, and revenge; some misled by passion, some blinded by dulness, some turned monomaniacs from a fierce sense of injustice done them; and I said, 'There is no way of

helping them but by being good to them, and making them trust me. But in every one of them there lies a secret chamber, to which God has access from behind by a hidden door; while they know nothing of this chamber; and the other door towards their own consciousness, is hidden by darkness and wrong, and ruin of all kinds. Sometimes they become dimly aware that there must be such a door. Some of us search for it, find it, turn back aghast; while God is standing behind the door waiting to be found, and ready to hold forth the arms of eternal tenderness to him who will open and look. Some of us have torn the door open, and, lo! there is the Father, at the heart of us, at the heart of all things.' I saw that he was leading these men through dark ways of disappointment and misery, the cure of their own wrong-doing, to find this door and find him. But could nothing be done to help them—to lead them? They, too, must learn of Christ. Could they not be led to him? If He leads to the Father, could not man lead to Him? True, he says that it is the leading of the Father that brings to Him; for the Father is all in all; He fills and rounds the cycle. But He leads by the hand of man. Then I said, 'Is not this *the* work of the church?'

"And with this new test, I went to one church after another. And the prayers were beautiful. And my soul was comforted by them. And the troubles of the week sank back into the far distance, and God ruled in London city. But how could such as I thought of, love these prayers, or understand them? For them the voice of living man was needed. And surely the spirit that

dwelt in the Church never intended to make less of the voice of a living man pleading with his fellow-men in his own voice, than the voice of many people pleading with God in the words which those who had gone to Him had left behind them. If the Spirit be in the church, does it only pray? Yet almost as often as a man stood up to preach, I knew again why Lizzie had paid no heed to me. All he said had nothing to do with me or my wants. And if not with these, how could they have any influence on the all but outcasts of the social order? I justified Lizzie to the very full now; and I took refuge from the inanity of the sermon in thinking about her faithfulness. And that faithfulness was far beyond anything I knew yet.

"And now there awoke in me an earnest longing after the office I had forsaken. Thoughts began to burn in me, and words to come unbidden, till sometimes I had almost to restrain myself from rising from the pew where I was seated, ascending the pulpit stairs, and requesting the man who had nothing to say, to walk down, and allow me, who had something to say, to take his place. Was this conceit? Considering what I was listening to, it could not have been *great* conceit at least. But I did restrain myself, for I thought an encounter with the police would be unseemly, and my motives scarcely of weight in the court to which they would lead me."

Here Mr. Armstrong relieved himself and me with a good laugh. I say relieved me, for his speech had held me in a state of tension such as to be almost painful.

"But I looked to the future in hope," he went on,—"if ever I might be counted worthy to resume the labour I had righteously abandoned; having had the rightness confirmed by the light I had received in carrying out the deed."

His voice here sank as to a natural pause, and I thought he was going to end his story.

"Tell me something more," I said.

"Oh!" returned he, "as far as story is concerned, the best of it is to come yet.—About six months after I was fairly settled in London, I was riding in an omnibus, a rare enough accommodation with me, in the dusk of an afternoon. I was going out to Fulham to dine with my cousin, as I was sometimes forced to do. He was a good-hearted man, but—in short, I did not find him interesting. I would have preferred talking to a man who had barely escaped the gallows or the hulks. My cousin never did anything plainly wicked, and consequently never repented of anything. He thought no harm of being petty and unfair. He would not have taken a farthing that was not his own, but if he could get the better of you in an argument, he did not care by what means. He would put a wrong meaning on your words, that he might triumph over you, knowing all the time it was not what you meant. He would say: 'Words are words. I have nothing to do with your meanings. You may say you mean anything you like.' I wish it had been his dissent that made him such. But I won't say more about him, for I believe it is my chief fault, as to my profession, that I find common-place people dreadfully

uninteresting; and I am afraid I don't always give them quite fair play.—I had to dine with him, and so I got into an omnibus going along the Strand. And I had not been long in it, before I began thinking about Lizzie. That was not very surprising.

"Next to me, nearer the top of the omnibus, sat a young woman, with a large brown paper parcel on her lap. She dropt it, and I picked it up for her; but seeing that it incommoded her considerably, I offered to hold it for her. She gave a kind of start when I addressed her, but allowed me to take the parcel. I could not see her face, because she was close to my side. But a strange feeling came over me, as if I was sitting next to Lizzie. I indulged in the fancy not from any belief in it, only for the pleasure of it. But it grew to a great desire to see the young woman's face, and find whether or not she was at all like Lizzie. I could not, however, succeed in getting a peep within her bonnet; and so strong did the desire become, that, when the omnibus stopped at the circus, and she rose to get out, I got out first, without restoring the parcel, and stood to hand her out, and then give it back. Not yet could I see her face; but she accepted my hand, and with a thrill of amazement, I felt a pressure on mine, which surely could be nobody's but Lizzie's. And it was Lizzie sure enough! I kept the parcel; she put her arm in mine, and we crossed the street together, without a word spoken.

"'Lizzie!' I said, when we got into a quieter part.

"'Ralph!' she said, and pressed closer to my side.

"'How did you come here?'

"'Ah! I couldn't escape you.'

"'How did you come here?' I repeated.

"'You did not think,' she answered, with a low musical laugh, 'that I was going to send you away to work, and take no share in it myself!'

"And then out came the whole truth. As soon as I had left, she set about finding a situation, for she was very clever with her needle and scissors. Her mother could easily do without her, as her elder sister was at home; and her absence would relieve their scanty means. She had been more fortunate than she could have hoped, and had found a good situation with a dressmaker in Bond Street. Her salary was not large, but it was likely to increase, and she had nothing to pay for food or lodging; while, like myself, she was well provided with clothes, and had, besides, facilities for procuring more. And to make a long story as short as now may be, there she remained in her situation as long as I remained in mine; and every quarter she brought me all she could spare of her salary for the Jew to gorge upon."

"And you took it?" I said, rather inadvertently.

"Took it! Yes. I took it—thankfully as I would the blessing of heaven. To have refused it would have argued me unworthy of *her*. We understood each other too well for anything else. She shortened my purgatory by a whole year—my Lizzie! It is over now; but none of it will be over to all eternity. She made a man of me."

A pause followed, as was natural, and neither spoke for some

moments. The ends of our cigars had been thrown away long ago, but I did not think of offering another. At length I said, for the sake of saying something:

"And you met pretty often, I daresay?"

"Every Sunday at church."

"Of all places, the place where you ought to have met."

"It was. We met in a quiet old city church, where there was nothing to attract us but the loneliness, the service, and the bones of Milton."

"And when you had achieved your end—"

"It was but a means to an end. I went at once to a certain bishop; told him the whole story, not in quite such a lengthy shape as I have told it to you; and begged him to reinstate me in my office."

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing. The good man did not venture upon many words. He held out his hand to me; shook mine warmly; and here I am, you see, curate of St. Thomas's, Purleybridge, and husband of Lizzie Payton. Am I not a fortunate fellow?"

"You are," I said, with emphasis, rising to take my leave. "But it is too bad of me to occupy so much of your time on a Saturday."

"Don't be uneasy about that. I shall preach all the better for it."

As I passed the parlour door, it was open, and Lizzie was busy with a baby's frock. I think I should have known it for one, even if I had not been put on the scent. She nodded kindly to me as I passed out. I knew she was not one of the demonstrative sort,

else I should have been troubled that she did not speak to me. I thought afterwards that she suspected, from the sustained sound of her husband's voice, that he had been telling his own story; and that therefore she preferred letting me go away without speaking to me that morning.

"What a story for our club!" thought I. "Surely that would do Adela good now."

But of course I saw at once that it would not do. I could not for a moment wish that the curate should tell it. Yet I did wish that Adela could know it. So I have written it now; and there it is, as nearly as he told it, as I could manage to record it.

The next day was Sunday. And here is a part of the curate's sermon.

"My friends, I will give you a likeness, or a parable, which I think will help you to understand what is the matter with you all. For you all have something the matter with you; and most of you know this to be the case; though you may not know what is the matter. And those of you that feel nothing amiss are far the worst off. Indeed you are; for how are things to be set right if you do not even know that there is anything to be set right? There is the greatest danger of everything growing much worse, before you find out that anything is wrong.

"But now for my parable.

"It is a cold winter forenoon, with the snow upon everything out of doors. The mother has gone out for the day, and the children are amusing themselves in the nursery—pretending to

make such things as men make. But there is one among them who joins in their amusement only by fits and starts. He is pale and restless, yet inactive.—His mother is away. True, he is not well. But he is not very unwell; and if she were at home, he would take his share in everything that was going on, with as much enjoyment as any of them. But as it is, his fretfulness and pettishness make no allowance for the wilfulness of his brothers and sisters; and so the confusions they make in the room, carry confusion into his heart and brain; till at length a brighter noon entices the others out into the snow.

"Glad to be left alone, he seats himself by the fire and tries to read. But the book he was so delighted with yesterday, is dull today. He looks up at the clock and sighs, and wishes his mother would come home. Again he betakes himself to his book, and the story transports his imagination to the great icebergs on the polar sea. But the sunlight has left them, and they no longer gleam and glitter and sparkle, as if spangled with all the jewels of the hot tropics, but shine cold and threatening as they tower over the ice-bound ship. He lays down the tale, and takes up a poem. But it too is frozen. The rhythm will not flow. And the sad feeling arises in his heart, that it is not so very beautiful, after all, as he had used to think it.

"'Is there anything beautiful?' says the poor boy at length, and wanders to the window. But the sun is under a cloud; cold, white, and cheerless, like death, lies the wide world out of doors; and the prints of his mother's feet in the snow, all point towards the

village, and away from home. His head aches; and he cannot eat his dinner. He creeps up stairs to his mother's room. There the fire burns bright, and through the window falls a ray of sunlight. But the fire and the very sunlight are wintry and sad. 'Oh, when will mother be home?' He lays himself in a corner amongst soft pillows, and rests his head; but it is no nest for him, for the covering wings are not there. The bright-coloured curtains look dull and grey; and the clock on the chimney-piece will not hasten its pace one second, but is very monotonous and unfeeling. Poor child! Is there any joy in the world? Oh yes; but it always clings to the mother, and follows her about like a radiance, and she has taken it with her. Oh, when will she be home? The clock strikes as if it meant something, and then straightway goes on again with the old wearisome tic-tac.

"He can hardly bear it. The fire burns up within, daylight goes down without; the near world fades into darkness; the far-off worlds brighten and come forth, and look from the cold sky into the warm room; and the boy stares at them from the couch, and watches the motion of one of them, like the flight of a great golden beetle, against the divisions of the window-frame. Of this, too, he grows weary. Everything around him has lost its interest. Even the fire, which is like the soul of the room, within whose depths he had so often watched for strange forms and images of beauty and terror, has ceased to attract his tired eyes. He turns his back to it, and sees only its flickerings on the walls. To any one else, looking in from the cold frosty night, the room

would appear the very picture of afternoon comfort and warmth; and he, if he were descried thus nestling in its softest, warmest nook, would be counted a blessed child, without care, without fear, made for enjoyment, and knowing only fruition. But the mother is gone; and as that flame-lighted room would appear to the passing eye, without the fire, and with but a single candle to thaw the surrounding darkness and cold, so its that child's heart without the presence of the mother.

"Worn out at length with loneliness and mental want, he closes his eyes, and after the slow lapse of a few more empty moments, re-opens them on the dusky ceiling, and the grey twilight window; no—on two eyes near above him, and beaming upon him, the stars of a higher and holier heaven than that which still looks in through the unshaded windows. They are the eyes of the mother, looking closely and anxiously on her sick boy. 'Mother, mother!' His arms cling around her neck, and pull down her face to his.

"His head aches still, but the heart-ache is gone. When candles are brought, and the chill night is shut out of doors and windows, and the children are all gathered around the tea-table, laughing and happy, no one is happier, though he does not laugh, than the sick child, who lies on the couch and looks at his mother. Everything around is full of interest and use, glorified by the radiation of her presence. Nothing can go wrong. The splendour returns to the tale and the poem. Sickness cannot make him wretched. Now when he closes his eyes, his spirit dares to go

forth wandering under the shining stars and above the sparkling snow; and nothing is any more dull and unbeautiful. When night draws on, and he is laid in his bed, her voice sings him, and her hand soothes him, to sleep; nor do her influences vanish when he forgets everything in sleep; for he wakes in the morning well and happy, made whole by his faith in his mother. A power has gone forth from her love to heal and restore him.

"Brothers, sisters! do I not know your hearts from my own?—sick hearts, which nothing can restore to health and joy but the presence of Him who is Father and Mother both in one. Sunshine is not gladness, because you see him not. The stars are far away, because He is not near; and the flowers, the smiles of old Earth, do not make you smile, because, although, thank God! you cannot get rid of the child's need, you have forgotten what it is the need of. The winter is dreary and dull, because, although you have the homeliest of homes, the warmest of shelters, the safest of nests to creep into and rest—though the most cheerful of fires is blazing for you, and a table is spread, waiting to refresh your frozen and weary hearts—you have forgot the way thither, and will not be troubled to ask the way; you shiver with the cold and the hunger, rather than arise you say, 'I will go to my Father;' you will die in the storm rather than fight the storm; you will lie down in the snow rather than tread it under foot. The heart within you cries out for something, and you let it cry. It is crying for its God—for its father and mother and home. And all the world will look dull and grey—and it if does not look so now, the day

will come when it must look so—till your heart is satisfied and quieted with the known presence of Him in whom we live and move and have our being."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.